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INSTITUT CANADIEN DES AFFAIRES MONDIALES

Afghanistan: Looking Back to Move Forward

by Joseph Ingram
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POLICY PERSPECTIVE

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In 2005, a group of senior political leaders from conflict-affected and post-conflict countries met at the Greentree Estates on Long Island to analyze the policy measures taken to bring about security and stability, and their links to economic and social development. Co-organized by the World Bank, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the Institute for State Effectiveness (ISE), the meeting's goal was to try to identify what had succeeded, what had failed and why, and whether there were policy elements common to success or failure across countries that governments and the donor community could apply in future post-conflict situations. Among the participants were José Ramos-Horta, the first president of East Timor, Joaquim Chissano, the former president of Mozambique, Jessie Duarte, deputy chair of South Africa's African National Congress, Lord Paddy Ashdown, the former high representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BIH) and Ashraf Ghani, the current president of Afghanistan. Hanan Ashrawi, then the principal spokesperson for the Palestinian Authority, was not present, but as one of the event's organizers, I was able to consult with her by phone.

Among the key success factors common to all the countries represented, though in different combinations depending on the local context, were:

- A broad acceptance of the need for a strategic, long-term end-state for the country with the national political process and the international community carefully taking regional implications into account;
- Recognition by the country's national and local governments that security needs to be addressed as a military and police responsibility protecting citizens' political and civil rights. There must also be security from economic and social deprivation and extreme poverty;
- The formulation of a national development/poverty reduction program based on broad consultation with civil society, local political and religious authorities, and importantly, led by local experts and officials;
- The creation of a unified command structure for the international community within the country, including both military and economic organizations. The command structure would meet regularly, speak with one voice and work towards a common set of goals based on the host government's own national development program;
- The appointment to leadership of the international community of individuals with previous leadership success, first-hand knowledge of the country and the regional context, and strong convening power. These people would appreciate the complementarity of both military and development imperatives, and would not be perceived as representing the narrow interests of only one or two donor governments or particular groups in the host country; and



- Recognition of the development process's long-term nature, accompanied by the acceptance that an international presence would be sustained (at least until a new generation of local leaders would emerge) and robust in terms of security and development personnel.

Critical in all the country cases analyzed was a recognition that international support needs to help internal actors build a core set of governance institutions and systems that would be able to mobilize and effectively spend state revenue in accordance with accountability systems and transparency requirements, thereby reducing corruption and state capture while diminishing the state's reliance on foreign aid. ISE president Clare Lockhart, a former advisor to the Afghan finance minister, emphasized that this focus on core institutions of governance is critical in "... building the legitimacy of the state over time, winning the trust, and meeting the needs of the people ... and contributing to the resolution of conflicts before they become violent."¹ Indeed, these lessons are very much consistent with the 2005 Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness,² the High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness held in Busan, South Korea in 2011 and more recent evaluations conducted by the Center for Global Development.³

Unfortunately, rather than mirroring a picture of development policy implementation as that 2005 meeting recommended, the Biden administration's recent decision (initiated by former president Donald Trump) to withdraw all U.S. military forces from Afghanistan reveals just how tone-deaf America and allied administrations have been to development priorities and lessons learned since their arrival in the country. The decision is the result of a policy by successive U.S. and NATO member governments that, with the exception of a brief period from 2001-2006, put the primary emphasis on regime change and killing or capturing Osama bin Laden, rather than transforming – through lessons learned empirically – the economic and social conditions throughout the country that for decades had produced Taliban-like movements and recurring civil conflict. Much like the failure of too many policy-makers to listen to scientific expertise with respect to both COVID-19 and global warming, the failure in foreign policy we are witnessing today in Afghanistan is the inevitable result of giving only lip service to the policy advice of development experts on what it would take to bring security and steady economic and social development to the country.

In making this case, this paper will build on the common-sense maxim that "peace is not just the absence of war, but also the presence of social justice", a lesson as elementary to the development process as the greenhouse gas effect is to global warming. It will also argue that subordinating established development lessons to the short-term transactional priorities of career politicians and diplomats has been a key contributing factor to the policy failure in Afghanistan and in other conflict-ridden societies. This includes the zero-sum instincts of military leaders – as reflected in

¹ Clare Lockhart, "Sovereignty Strategies: Enhancing Core Governance Functions as a Post-Conflict and Conflict Prevention Measure," *Daedalus*, 147(1), Winter 2018.

² Robert Picciotto, "Testimony to the UK House of Lords Select Committee on Economic Affairs," Economic Impact and Effectiveness of Development Aid, July 14, 2011.

³ "Revisiting Aid Effectiveness: A New Framework and Set of Measures for Assessing Aid Quality," Center for Global Development, Working Paper 524, January 2020.



the effective neutering of foreign aid agencies in the U.S. (especially under Trump), Canada and the U.K. As *The Economist* recently concluded, for all its wealth and military might, America failed not only to create a strong self-sufficient state in Afghanistan, but also failed to defeat a determined insurgency.⁴

Falling Short in the Application of Lessons Learned

Although our knowledge and understanding of the development process and the role of foreign assistance in that process is evolving and needs to be nuanced in accordance with local circumstances, the core principles articulated by the post-conflict leaders at Greentree Estates and in the Paris Declaration in 2005 continue to be embedded in today's United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Identifying the extent to which they have been adhered to in Afghanistan since the demise of the Taliban government in 2001 will therefore go a long way in explaining the failure of U.S. and allied foreign policy in the country and hopefully help in avoiding similar mistakes in the future.⁵

Between 2001 and 2005 a considerable degree of stability was established in Afghanistan, thereby securing the population's trust in government institutions' ability to mobilize revenues locally and internationally and to address poverty and exclusion. A series of "loya jirga" and other consultations with the population and local leaders led to the creation of numerous national programs, including the highly successful National Solidarity Program (NSP). Through transparent mechanisms, the NSP delivered block grants for local improvements in some 28,000 villages, which resulted in the effective use of micro-financing and improved health-care delivery in rural areas. "Central to the success of those years was a recognition that development ... involves citizens improving their own lives and creating opportunities through economic, social and institutional reform."⁶

A co-ordination framework including both governments and the donor community was critical to this success. The central government's job was to propose policies and budgets for each sector. Under World Bank management, the government established the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF), which consolidated and disbursed donor funds to cover recurrent expenditures and national programs with strict accountability requirements and in accordance with the Afghan government's priorities.

In 2005, however, because of a shift in the Bush administration's strategic priorities to the Middle East, donor support began to wane. The Afghan Assistance Coordination Authority, staffed with

⁴ Staff, "America's War in Afghanistan is Ending in Crushing Defeat," *The Economist*, July 10, 2021.

⁵ Governments deploy foreign aid as one of several foreign policy tools that also include diplomacy, foreign trade and military/security resources. In recent years, a number of key donor countries have consolidated their aid agencies into their diplomatic administrations, effectively subordinating them to diplomatic imperatives as was done in Canada and recently in the U.K., or they have subordinated and reduced financial resources allocated to foreign aid as the Trump administration did. We have yet to see whether and how the Biden administration will change this approach.

⁶ Joseph Ingram and Clare Lockhart, "Afghanistan: It's About Development Stupid," *The World Today*, Chatham House, Vol. 6, No. 2, February 2010.



Afghans and foreign specialists designing and helping to implement programs – in accordance with core development lessons – shut down, as did the World Bank-led Consultative Group process. The overall responsibility for co-ordination instead passed to the UN, which has found it difficult to effectively co-ordinate its own numerous and often independently minded specialized development agencies, let alone so many others both civil and security related.⁷

Lesson 1: Afghanistan's Strategic Vision and its Regional Implications

In assessing U.S., allied and Afghan performance, one must ask whether a strategically devised end-state was publicly articulated – including to key regional neighbours – and systematically pursued by national and local governments and by allies, especially the U.S. The 2001 Bonn Agreement sketched out the establishment of a “broad-based, gender sensitive, multi-ethnic and fully representative government” which would minimize corruption and bring armed groups under government control. However, while some political groups were represented, broader civic constituencies were not invited to the table; nor were representatives of the Taliban, who were then in hiding, imprisoned or had fled the country. Moreover, though nominally endorsing the agreement, Pakistan provided a safe haven for the Taliban, allowing them to reconstitute their military forces, which led to a steady increase in violence from 2005-2006. With the exception of bin Laden's killing in 2011, the U.S. and NATO did little at the time, or since, to prevent Pakistan from providing sustenance and cover to these fundamentalist forces. Indeed, this absence of regional consensus was made worse following the Bush administration's decision to label Iran as part of the “axis of evil” and subordinate development and institution building to the military priority of fighting a “war on terror”.

As for the national vision and strategy, as this paper will show, they too proved non-applicable as the military-dominated counterinsurgency sucked development resources disproportionately into urban areas and into non-development related expenditures. The result, to quote a former Afghan deputy defence minister, was that: “We see history repeating itself in this country: A proxy insurgency is coming from rural areas to take power.”⁸ As Thomas Ruttig of the Afghanistan Analysts Network has described it: “The legitimacy of government institutions was undercut by factional capture ... unopposed by the US and by the fact that the US manipulated institutions and elections in favour of their favourites ... (which) produced an inflexible presidential system that does not reflect the diversity of political and ethnic forces in the country and was unable to deal with political crises.” Essentially, the “free pass to Pakistan (and) the tolerance of re-emergent war lords (both attributable to some extent to diplomatic failings) contributed substantially to the conditions that allowed the insurgency to regroup.”⁹

⁷ In saying this, I speak from personal experience, having served as a World Bank Group manager in several countries where poor co-ordination by the UN was a chronic problem. Indeed, as World Bank special representative to the UN and WTO in Geneva, one of my priorities was to assist the UN system, especially the ILO and the UNDP, in creating a “policy coherence initiative” focused very much on developing consensus among the specialized agencies of the UN development system, as well as with the Bretton Woods institutions. At the behest of the high representative in BIH, Paddy Ashdown, I played a similar role in my capacity as director of the World Bank office in Sarajevo.

⁸ Adam Nossiter, “Anxiety and an Air of Unreality in Afghanistan,” *New York Times*, July 5, 2021.

⁹ Thomas Ruttig, “Another Bonn Style Conference,” Afghanistan Analysts Network, March 7, 2021.



Lesson 2: Security as a Multi-dimensional Development Component

Post-conflict leaders articulated a key lesson about the multi-dimensional nature of security; specifically, that unless people, especially young men, were provided with social services and decent work, they would be ripe recruits for the appeals of extremist insurgent groups, such as the Taliban. The U.S.'s change in strategic focus in 2005 saw a rapid shift in the pattern of spending in Afghanistan. In 2008 the U.S. military was spending close to US\$100 million daily, in stark contrast to spending by all development donors combined of only US\$7 million daily, with over two-thirds of it bypassing the Afghan government and an estimated 40 per cent going back to donor countries in corporate profits and consultant salaries.¹⁰

More significant, however, was the fact that substantially larger proportions of development money went to Afghanistan's better-off urban areas. For example, Afghanistan has one of the lowest rates of electricity access globally. In 2014, of the 28 per cent of the population with access, only 10 per cent were in rural areas despite the fact that those areas contained 75 per cent of the country's population and produced 67 per cent of its GDP.¹¹ Similar asymmetries in aid distribution existed in water supply, health services, economic and productive infrastructure and in education, all operating in the absence of a comprehensive legal framework and major donors' wink-and-nod tolerance of endemic corruption. To quote a 2012 World Bank report: "Because of donors' choices and the prominent role of stabilization and military spending, conflict affected provinces had much higher per capita aid than more peaceful (and often poorer) provinces."¹² Such regional distortions, combined with the tolerance for corruption and poor governance, often by warlords, not only failed to improve the conditions of the large majority of Afghan rural dwellers but also produced fertile ground for today's rural-based Taliban. Also, as others observed, the U.S.'s war on drugs effectively cut off many rural farmers' income without adequately supporting the substitution of other crops and pushed many of them "for both security and sales networks" into the Taliban's arms.¹³

Lesson 3: National Development Strategy

Support for national ownership of both a country's national development plan and its implementation are central to the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness and the post-conflict leaders in 2005 highlighted these as key elements in their successes. Unfortunately, as a 2008 Oxfam report revealed, "little ownership of development exists at the local level, especially in insecure areas ..." and the situation was not much better at the national level. At that time, of the US\$15 billion provided in development aid since 2001, less than a third had gone to the government. The balance was directed to donor-established priorities, thereby constraining the institutional development process and limiting government's ability to recruit and retain qualified

¹⁰ Matt Waldeman, "Falling Short: Aid Effectiveness in Afghanistan," OXFAM ACBAR Advocacy Series, March 2008.

¹¹ Staff, ATR Consulting, "Aid Effectiveness in Afghanistan," OXFAM and Swedish Committee for Afghanistan, March 2018.

¹² Staff, "Afghanistan in Transition: Looking Beyond 2014," The World Bank, May 2012.

¹³ Andy Hira, "The Utterly Predictable Demise of Nation-Building in Afghanistan: Lessons for the Future," The Canadian Global Affairs Institute, June 2021.



staff as they opted instead for better paying donor-funded projects. Indeed, USAID spent the bulk of its assistance outside the government's core budget with most of it going to U.S.-based contractors and consultants, thereby eroding the very idea of building local capacity and effective state institutions.¹⁴

Canadian aid was guilty of much the same, when in 2009 the Harper government redirected CIDA funding away from the budget and the national trust funds to areas where Canadian troops were deployed, a violation of both the Paris Declaration and the Accra Agenda for Action.¹⁵ Unfortunately, in the years since, despite some efforts, not much has changed; the first recommendation of the 2018 Oxfam/ATR Consulting report on aid effectiveness urged the government to "... take a harder stance with donors ... as development strategies need more Afghan ownership."¹⁶ Indeed, a recent Department of Global Affairs review of Canadian aid effectiveness from 2014-2020 has highlighted serious failures in its development assistance program in Afghanistan, citing the absence of a strategy for its presence, and a focus often inconsistent with local priorities and needs.¹⁷

Lesson 4: The Need for a Unified Donor Command Structure

Related to the failure to build local ownership of policies and implementation capacity has been the chronic absence of a unified command structure for the international community – both military and developmental – working towards a complementary set of goals based on an Afghan national development plan. In a recent televised interview with CNN, Gen. David Petraeus acknowledged as much when affirming that the U.S. and NATO could not “win” a counterinsurgency war in Afghanistan¹⁸ and that unlike sports, there is no zero-sum outcome to the conflict. While regretting the U.S. decision to withdraw military forces from the country at this stage, he emphasized the need for a whole-of-government approach in which the military and developmental priorities are complementary and given equal weight by government and the donor community. In effect, he acknowledged that the concept of “full spectrum operations” which he and Gen. Stanley McChrystal promoted in 2010, and which had been incorporated into the U.S. Army field manual in 2012, was not effectively applied during NATO's military presence in the country. The concept sought to capture and apply past lessons learned by military and non-military actors, both U.S. and non-U.S.¹⁹

When combined with the presence of over 30 international donors and an absence of effective donor co-ordination,²⁰ the result today is “major issues of fragmentation and donors bypassing

¹⁴ Staff, “2006 Survey on Monitoring the Paris Declaration and Afghanistan,” OECD, 6.

¹⁵ Personal email to the author from the economic advisor to the Afghan minister of finance, April 2, 2009.

¹⁶ ATR Consulting, 38.

¹⁷ Lee Berthiaume, “Canada's Foreign Aid to Afghanistan Had Some Success but Many Failures,” *The Canadian Press*, January 13, 2021.

¹⁸ David Petraeus, interview with Fareed Zakaria GPS, CNN, July 19, 2021.

¹⁹ Jonathan Brown, Joseph Ingram, Ayse Kudat and Michael Gillette, “Integrating Economic and Social Aspects into Military Operations,” *Military Review*, January-February 2010.

²⁰ The unwillingness of many donors, though especially the U.S., to use the trust funds as co-ordinating mechanisms for their aid, has contributed to the fragmentation and the absence of an effective and unified command structure.



government systems in multiple areas of the development sector, and it is this fragmentation that leads to ineffective aid.”²¹

Lesson 5: The International Community’s Leadership

Perhaps none of the lessons identified was as important as the qualities of the individual appointed to lead the international community in assisting in the development of the host country and containing any incipient insurgency. Many believe that the U.S. presence in Afghanistan was driven primarily by its desire to avenge 9/11 and kill or capture Osama bin Laden, rather than any long-term commitment to the country’s development. America’s presence for the decade following bin Laden’s death in 2011 suggests that for geostrategic reasons they believed the insurgency should and could be quelled, that economic and social development could be nurtured and a democratic government installed, friendly to the U.S. and its allies. To effectively do so, however, would have required, as in the case of BIH, appointing a UN/U.S.-backed special representative with previous leadership success in a post-conflict context and with the credibility and force of personality to influence and render mutually compatible the country’s military/security and development needs.

Lord Paddy Ashdown, a former politician, diplomat and military officer, succeeded in maximizing the international community’s impact by ensuring a coherent, co-ordinated approach that understood the long-term nature of institutional development, the rule of law and state building (as opposed to the rather inappropriate notion of “nation-building”) in a complex and ethnically divided society. Through this approach, the high representative in BIH minimized the prospect of independently minded organizations such as the World Bank, the IMF, the UN, the EC and bilateral donors from straying off onto their own support paths and allowing local politicians to play off one agency’s priorities against another. This was not the case in Afghanistan.

The Karzai government announced Ashdown’s appointment as UN Special Representative to Afghanistan in 2008. However, with the Bush administration’s compliance and apparently at the urging of then-U.S. ambassador to the UN Zalmay Khalilzad, the government reversed its decision and appointed a series of special representatives who were former diplomats or politicians with little or no development or military experience.²² Due to the nature of their training and experience, which largely focused on transactional success and short-term electoral priorities, they were for the most part ill-suited to the long-term institutional and policy needs of economic and social development. Some, including the former diplomat appointed in Ashdown’s stead, lasted as little as two years, and were unable in most cases to exercise a strong and effective

²¹ ATR Consulting, 8.

²² It was rumoured that Kalilzad, a joint U.S.-Afghan citizen, had designs on succeeding Hamid Karzai as president, thereby ensuring both the continued presence of a Pashtun as president, in the absence of the pro-active oversight of a Paddy Ashdown.



leadership role that produced balanced and complementary development and military interventions.²³

Lesson 6: Sustaining a Robust Foreign Assistance

The final lesson from former leaders was that an international presence would need to be robust in financial and technical support, and long-term, possibly to the point of a new generation replacing the combatant leadership. Although the U.S., allied political circles and the general public widely believe that Afghanistan has received exceptionally large aid volumes, in the first two years following the Taliban government's ouster the country received US\$57 per capita per annum. In stark contrast, BiH received US\$679 per capita and Kosovo US\$526 per capita during the two years following cessation of their conflicts. Aid flows to Afghanistan did, however, increase following that initial period. They reached a peak of about US\$16 billion in 2011, which was equivalent to about US\$400 per capita, still well below what the Balkans received. Military spending during that same year was estimated at about US\$118.6 billion. The bulk of the development aid, however, was not spent in Afghanistan but rather on "... imports, the expatriated profits of contractors, and outward remittances."²⁴

Moreover, as of 2011, when bin Laden was killed, development aid from the donor community began a critical decline, falling from a high of US\$8 billion in 2011 to US\$4.2 billion in 2016. A substantial drop in American aid flows led this decline, adding credence to the view that American and NATO involvement in Afghanistan was more about the short-term military objective of getting bin Laden and eliminating a terrorist haven, than about the country's long-term economic and social development. To quote Petraeus from a recent conference discussion on America's engagement in the country: "What we could do though was to continue to achieve the objective that we were staying in Afghanistan to accomplish, which is to prevent Al Qaeda and the Islamic State from re-establishing sanctuaries on Afghan soil under this very Islamist regime, the Taliban ..."²⁵

The Afghan government disputed the level of development aid actually received, suggesting that for the period 2012-2014 they received not US\$16.8 billion, but rather US\$12.9 billion, well short of commitments made by the donor community. Thus, the effectiveness of aid and the Afghan authorities' capacity to quell the source of insurgency and instability was further inhibited. But if nothing else, these substantially different numbers demonstrate a "... lack of transparency and uniformity when it comes to financial reporting of international aid."²⁶ It also reflects a policy uncertainty as to the real reason for the presence of America and its NATO allies in Afghanistan – a recipe for failure.

²³ The final press conference as special representative to Afghanistan of former Norwegian diplomat Kai Eide reveals both the frustration and preoccupation with transitional short-term issues he was seemingly focused on. See UN AMA, March 4, 2010.

²⁴ World Bank, "Afghan in Transition..."

²⁵ David Petraeus, "Hindsight Upfront," The Wilson Center, July 28, 2021.

²⁶ World Bank, "Afghan in Transition..."



Conclusion

Combined with the unwillingness of international institutions to deal resolutely with corruption and poor governance, to refocus assistance on the poor rural areas of the country (the prime recruiting ground for young male insurgents) and to ensure greater budget support for strengthening the country's public-sector institutions, the donors have not only failed to help improve conditions in key regions of Afghanistan, but may have contributed to a deterioration in the economic, social and ethnic inequalities that have fuelled the conflict.

As for the U.S. position specifically, President Joe Biden's foreign policy schizophrenia must be resolved. On the one hand, Biden declares that "America is back" and will lead a global coalition of democracies against a growing number of authoritarians, while on the other hand, he declares that there will be no support for "nation building" and "forever wars". Not doing so will only lead to the non- or misapplication of lessons history has taught us about the development process – especially those highlighted in this paper – and to more policy failures as in Afghanistan. The lessons are there and America and its allies need to follow them and exercise the patience and understanding required to succeed in their application.

► About the Author

Joseph Ingram currently serves as Chairman of Greentech Labs, South African\UK-based bio-tech group. He is also an Expert-Advisor with the Global Growth Dialogue, a U.S.-based group of prominent economists and senior public officials dedicated to identifying best-policy options to sustain more inclusive and sustainable growth. He has advised the Government of Canada on a number of policy initiatives related to the western Balkans.

In 2006 Mr. Ingram retired from a thirty year career at the World Bank, where he served in a variety of senior management positions in Nigeria, Cameroon, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Washington DC, and from 2003-2006 as The World Bank Special Representative to the UN and the World Trade Organization (WTO) in Geneva. During this period, Mr. Ingram represented the Bank on the UN Human Rights Council and was a member of the Global Task Force on the Right to Development. For a number of years he also served as Deputy Director of The World Bank Institute.

From 2010-2013, Mr. Ingram served as President/CEO of The North-South Institute (NSI) in Ottawa. Prior to joining NSI Mr. Ingram worked on behalf of CIDA and the World Trade Organisation as Senior Advisor to the Integrated Framework Program on Trade Facilitation in Francophone Africa and the Middle East. During the same period he also served as a consultant on human rights issues for the World Bank and for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. His work has focused on international trade, growth and employment issues, natural resource management, fragile states and structural reform, post-conflict reconstruction and development, human rights and public health. He has published numerous articles, scholarly papers and book chapters on issues relating to post conflict development and counter insurgency in Afghanistan, as well as on global development and Canadian foreign and development policy. He has testified before the United States Senate Committee dealing with international development and U.S. commerce and before Canada's House of Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Development. Mr. Ingram was recently named a 2020 Fellow of the Canadian Global Affairs Institute. He is a regular contributor to iPolitics and to The Hill Times.

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