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Afghanistan: The Long and Winding Roads

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In late 2008, Andrew Wilder set out on a hunt for answers in Afghanistan. For years, Wilder, a former development worker who had recently settled into a post at Tufts University, had watched with dismay as billions of American assistance dollars poured into programs in Afghanistan designed to help win "hearts and minds," and bring stability to the troubled nation.

New highways stretched hundreds of miles across the country, gleaming hospitals and schools sprang up in remote villages and just about everyone seemed to have a cell phone.

The "hearts and minds" strategy, known as counterinsurgency, or COIN, called for a delicate balance of military pressures and civil incentives: military action against the enemy, combined with generous programs designed to win over the gratitude and trust of the people. If U.S. forces could free volatile regions from the Taliban's grasp, policymakers in Washington believed, then, together with development experts, they could earn the support of local Afghans by keeping them safe and building a lasting economy and reliable government institutions.

But something wasn't working. Afghanistan remained as volatile as ever. President Hamid Karzai's government was in disarray, the nascent Afghan army and police force continued to buckle under the weight of their responsibilities, and a resurgent Taliban attacked seemingly at will.

Within Washington policy circles, it had become clear that development plans had not done their part to improve stability, but planners couldn't agree on what to change. Some thought the projects had to get bigger and bolder. Others, including many in the U.S. military, believed the answer lay in more discreet efforts — improving water and electricity reliability, or empowering ground-level commanders to dispense funds on smaller initiatives.

Through $25,000 "quick-impact projects," like providing work for military-aged males digging irrigation canals, the thinking went, money could be deployed "as a weapons system," in the words of one 2009 U.S. commanders manual.

Wilder led a small team of other researchers as they fanned out across the country over several years, inspecting development projects in five provinces and conducting long, one-on-one meetings with tribal leaders. They looked at survey responses and analyzed data from military and civilian officials on the ground.

It was "a debate which had become quite polemic," said Stuart Gordon, a British researcher who worked with Wilder on part of the study. "Development practitioners didn't like the military being involved in the quick-impact projects, and the military thought the development community had failed to deliver, and lives were being lost as a consequence." Gordon and Wilder had set out for Afghanistan with a simple goal, Gordon said. "We just wanted to provide some evidence."

Their conclusions were as stark as they were unsettling: The entire strategy — whether on a grand scale or more intimate — was flawed.

"Rather than generating good will and positive perceptions," Wilder wrote with the Tufts Professor Paul Fishstein in the final report, which was published in January of this year, the development projects "were consistently described negatively by Afghans."

The researchers had found no evidence that the development projects — the big ones or the little ones, the schools or the canals — were creating the goodwill that the counterinsurgency strategy required. In some cases they actually seemed to leave the locals more disenchanted.

"If anything surprised me, it was the extent to which, especially in the south, our resources were seen to be *creating* the distance between the people and the government," Wilder said, during an interview at his new office at the U.S. Institute of Peace, a congressionally funded think tank that promotes non-violent conflict resolution. "I just thought, maybe we should be spending *less* money."

For years, military leaders and policymakers in Washington had been operating under the assumption that reconstruction was an essential part of the counterinsurgency strategy in Afghanistan, and if they could just get the projects right, stability would soon follow. So far, the U.S. has plowed nearly $90 billion into the effort — including spending on infrastructure, combating narcotics and training Afghan security forces — and spent hundreds of billions more on warfighting.

There's no doubt that the people of Afghanistan harbor deep resentment toward some actions of the American military, such as the night raids and unlawful detentions that broke apart families and the drone and airstrikes that killed civilians. "Airstrikes have long been one of the biggest grievances of the Afghan public," says Erica Gaston, a longtime Afghanistan researcher.

But in Wilder's eyes, it wouldn't have mattered whether the military had made mistakes or not in terms of how effective the softer side of the war has been. For him, development was destined to fail from the start, at least as a campaign to win over the loyalties and affections of the Afghan public. In other words, the problem wasn't just the military, it was the development strategy itself that was ineffective—and few in Washington seemed to have noticed. If money was, indeed, supposed to be a weapons system, Wilder's findings were like discovering, 10 years too late, that the West had been firing blanks.

YOU NEVER KNOW

This past May, I traveled to Helmand Province to see for myself how these development projects had gone so awry. A heavily Pashtun province (the Taliban is Pashtun), and with a long border with Pakistan, Helmand and its immediate neighbor to the east, Kandahar, have been some of the most combustible areas in Afghanistan since the beginning of the war.

They have also drawn a disproportionate amount of America's development spending. The U.S. Agency for International Development, the main civilian body that oversees government development programs, says that until recently it spent

about three quarters of its budget in the southern provinces, including Helmand and Kandahar.

My destination was a small, isolated base in the town of Lashkar Gah, in the center of the province. The short helicopter ride from Camp Bastion, to the north, lasted 30 minutes, but took almost 24 hours to arrange. A sandstorm had snarled air traffic for the entire region. "Welcome to every day of our lives," a British officer at the base later joked.

From regional bases like these, small provincial reconstruction teams (PRTs) coordinate and distribute funds for projects that they consider most valuable to the citizens around them. The PRTs are the most ambitious component of the development plan — and also its greatest weakness.

Creating small teams that can engage with local residents would seem like an effective way to win hearts and minds. But upon arriving on the base, it was easy to see how that proximity could feel like an illusion. Situated right in the middle of the town, the base was nevertheless an alien world from whatever went on in Lashkar Gah. There were lad mags for sale at the military PX, movie nights on Thursdays, three meals a day, and the occasional Heineken or two (as a British base, beer was not banned like it is on U.S. bases).

One of the consequences of living in such circumstances was that it became virtually impossible to measure the long-term effects of development projects. State Department and other officials there insisted that they left the base as much as they needed to, but the trips tended to be rigidly

planned and heavily armed. In the parking bay, a row of white armored vehicles used by civilians were pockmarked, and most of the thick-paned windows were cracked — the result of rocks being chucked at them, I was assured, not bullets. It was not unheard of for reconstruction teams in particularly volatile areas to survey their projects — a newly constructed schoolhouse, for instance — by taking a ride over it in a helicopter.

"It was a ridiculous situation," said Sonia Pinto, a young researcher who spent more than a year evaluating Western development projects in turbulent regions of Afghanistan for a non-governmental organization. "A lot of the time, the people who do evaluations just go to the base, but they don't go to the actual project. Instead, you send Afghan interviewers into the field and they will fill out questionnaires for the locals. It's not proper research."

Aid workers in Kabul tell horror stories about Afghan employees who falsify data, or visit the wrong sites. "At the end of the day, you just have to trust them," said Pinto. "You never know."

Even if they could see more, they rarely have enough time. Civilian officials do rotations of a year, or a year and a half — at one point in 2009, 40 percent of the government civilians who were based in Helmand didn't make it six months. Many military tours are even shorter.

In December 2009, President Barack Obama announced that he was dispatching 30,000 extra ground troops to Afghanistan, along with a "civilian surge" that included hundreds of fresh experts in development and governance — and lots more money. The idea, at its heart, was that the solution to Afghanistan's various crises was more of everything: more troops, and more development funds. At the urging of Gen. Stanley McChrystal, then the commander of U.S. troops in Afghanistan and a determined advocate for counterinsurgency, and the veteran diplomat Richard Holbrooke, this meant a significant boost in America's development and reconstruction budget.

Already at $2 billion per year when Obama assumed office, the Afghan development budget rose swiftly to $2.7 billion, and then, by 2010, to $4.6 billion, according to the Pentagon's Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), which audits the spending. (The budget has since dropped back to $2.9 billion.)

Obama believed that civilian expenditures in particular were "far cheaper," and ultimately more enduring, as he said in a speech in early 2009 — and there was no reason to hold back. "It all came down to money," writes Rajiv Chandrasekaran in his recent book, Little America, of the mindset of Obama's top Afghanistan advisers at the time. Holbrooke, Chandrasekaran writes, "believed the United States needed to spend big if it wanted quick results."

A TSUNAMI OF MONEY

The results, from a purely developmental point of view, have been impressive. Hundreds of miles of new highways crisscross the nation, including a $2 billion Ring Road that forms an essential lifeline connecting Afghanistan's major cities. Infant mortality rates have dropped, and the average life expectancy is up nearly 20 years. Millions of girls now study at hundreds of

newly constructed schools, and 3G cell phone service has arrived in the major cities. (Residents of Kabul still remember having to drive to Pakistan to make international calls before 2001.)

But as researchers and journalists began to notice, the influx of funds also exacerbated some of Afghanistan's worst problems. Afghanistan's weak economy couldn't handle the vast sums of money — in one district in the South, Nawa, U.S. development funding amounted to $400 for every man, woman and child living there. Afghanistan's per capita income is only $300. The result was often a spike in corruption, and other unforeseen consequences.

One of the most withering examples of these side effects was an agriculture project run by USAID. Started around the time of the surge, the plan had been to spend $150 million on an obscure agriculture and employment program in Helmand and Kandahar. But, as Chandrasekaran writes, when Holbrooke heard about it, his response was quick and unequivocal: "Double it."

"It was a tsunami of money," writes Chandrasekaran, who followed the funds as they were dispersed in Helmand. One day in the fall of 2010, he discovered, teachers in Nawa had stopped showing up at schools across the district. At $5 a day, it turned out, digging ditches for the agriculture project was far more lucrative.

Earlier this year, SIGAR, the internal auditor, took a closer look at some of the apparent success stories of development, including a 2011 road construction project between the towns of Lashkar Gah and Nawa. The road should have made everybody happy, by helping farmers in Nawa reach the markets of Lashkar Gah. ("Roads pave the way to stability," USAID declared in a brochure for another road-building project this year.)

But when SIGAR examined it, the project was over budget and behind schedule, particularly since the Afghan government had failed to negotiate land rights with property owners whose land would be destroyed.

"The local population expressed ongoing frustration with the project," the SIGAR report stated. Projects like this, the report went on, "may result in adverse COIN effects because they create an expectations gap among the affected population or lack citizen support."

In a formal response to the report, David Sedney, the deputy assistant secretary of defense for Afghanistan and Pakistan, wrote that false hopes were better than none at all. "Clearly, if dashed hopes can produce adverse effects, then that very hope produces positive COIN effects in advance of project implementation," Sedney said.

Another particularly calamitous road project in the South was cancelled late last year, the Wall Street Journal reported, after just 100 miles had been built, far short of the 1,200 miles that had been planned. Nearly $300 million had been spent on the project, and 125 civilians had died from insurgent attacks.

But one of Gordon and Wilder's key findings was that if the goal was stability, it often didn't matter if the project was on schedule and wildly successful.

When contractors arrive to build a road, Wilder explained, they have to make a series of seemingly innocuous choices. Some of these are straightforward: which type of gravel to use, how steep of an angle to take up an incline. But others can be deceptively treacherous.

"When you build roads in mountainous areas, you have to decide which side of the river you will go up," Wilder explained. "That makes a huge difference, and it often ends up being decided along tribal lines. It can end up being very dangerous, especially in areas where there is already instability."

A road that benefited one tribe — and even earned their goodwill toward the central government — risked alienating another tribe who was left out, Wilder and his associates found. The cumulative benefit, in terms of winning hearts and minds, would be none — or worse.

"In these zero-sum societies, one person's gain is someone else's loss," Wilder told me. "Winners and losers are perceived to be much bigger with roads. There is lots of demand for roads, and lots of money. It's not that they are not valued. It is the very fact that they are so valued that drives the instability."

WE BUILT TOO MUCH

One afternoon shortly after I arrived in Lashkar Gah, I sat at a wooden picnic table on the base with a young American official to talk about the ultimate question that hovers over the development scheme in Afghanistan: What will happen when the Americans finally leave?

Years of bloated development budgets have resulted in a spending free-for-all, but very little consideration for what would happen when the U.S. pulled the plug on the funding. As a result, many observers in Washington, and many Afghans as well, worry about how they could possibly sustain all of the projects that had begun under the Americans. In 2011, an internal audit of a major USAID stabilization project in Helmand concluded that any gains from the work were at risk because there were "no comprehensive transition plans."

"It probably took until this year that we got someone to really pay attention to it," Charles M. Johnson, the director for the international affairs division of the Government Accountability Office, told me in August. "And frankly I'm still not sure they are focused enough on it."

Now, with the drawdown firmly in sight, the Americans and Brits say they are scrambling to make up for lost time.

Sitting near to the base's beach-volleyball court, where a team of Afghan interpreters were handily defeating some British soldiers, the American official, who, under tight embassy restrictions, could only speak about his work anonymously, tried to assure me that his agency had the transition firmly under control. In recent years, the PRTs say they have shifted their tactics, recognizing much of what outside experts had been clamoring about for years: Local populations in volatile areas want security and fair government more than they want dams and roads. "We've still got 12 to 18 months with boots on the ground," the official said. "This is the time to transition, while we're still here."

This particular official's task was to oversee the drawdown of a program that supported locally run radio stations. With the help of USAID, Afghans in Lashkar Gah had managed to establish five stations, each with their own programming mix and, in some cases, advertising. The stations offered local jobs and messages that competed with the Taliban for influence, and had accumulated a sizeable audience. PRT officials considered the program a wild success.

But the stations also largely depended on funding from the west, and with the provincial reconstruction team preparing to close up shop at the end of 2014, there was no way that all five could afford to continue operating. "They don't have a sustainable business model," he said. "In the absence of coalition funding, it's hard to see how they will survive."

Now the PRT had to find a way to close at least three of the stations. This had recently resulted in a series of frank and rather uncomfortable meetings with the owners of the stations that had to go.

In a perverse way, the PRT's problem was not that their projects had failed, but that they had succeeded too much. It was a problem that was plaguing development projects across the country. The looming failure of beloved western-funded projects was something the SIGAR report had specifically cited as endangering counterinsurgency hopes.

USAID officials don't dispute that sustainability has been a shortcoming of theirs, but they insist that it was never neglected. "I won't lie and say that there's always been as robust a focus on sustainability as we would like," said Larry Sampler, the top USAID deputy assistant for Afghanistan, in an interview. "But it's always been there. Sustainability is a core value of development."

Last month, the Guardian reported that the Brits in Helmand faced an identical, if more unsettling, situation: They were planning to close numerous schools and clinics that they has spent millions of dollars building, because they had determined the Afghan government couldn't afford to keep them open.

"Of course we built too much," a British official told the Guardian. "We didn't think about how the Afghans would pay for it. But it was understandable. Nobody is blaming the military. We wanted to show them what we could do for them, but without regard for sustainability."

A DIFFICULT BUSINESS

In the 1980s, Andrew Wilder worked as an aid worker with Save the Children in Afghanistan. At the time, Wilder had seen that the most effective programs — in, for instance, health care — tended by their nature to be the least promotable. Efforts that emphasized education and prevention (like instructing villagers to wash their hands after using the bathroom) had a far greater impact on infection rates than more attractive and press-ready projects like building hospitals and clinics.

Afghan children run to school in a village near the French army base. (JEFF PACHOUD/AFP/GettyImages)

But as national security objectives increasingly came into play, money and attention kept shifting away from the projects that worked, and toward the ones that supposedly helped "isolate the Taliban."

It's a problem, he says, that has plagued development spending ever since: No one's ever held a ribbon-cutting ceremony for washing hands.

"Development is not a business you should get into to become popular," Wilder said, when we met in his sun-filled office this fall.

"I'm a very strong believer in the importance of development aid — by far the biggest concern I have is that the U.S. gives too little of its budget to foreign aid," Wilder said. "My worry is that foreign aid now only gets legitimized on the basis of it promoting our national interest. Good development as a good in and of itself is no longer priority. Alleviating poverty is no longer a good — only having COIN impact or national security impact is what matters now."

Obama's surge was supposed to be the turning point in the Afghanistan war. But its development strategy remained locked in many of the same, stale assumptions: If you build it, goodwill will come.

"The best that can be said in their defense is that you had a lot of people who didn't know what they didn't know," said Jeremy Pam, a former State and Treasury Department official who spent several years working on development issues in Iraq and Afghanistan. "They had this narrative

that one of the problems was that the war was under-resourced, therefore, if we provide proper resources, the sky's the limit. There was no reality constraint. One rarely heard somebody say, 'Is that feasible? Is that overambitious? Should we aim for something more moderate?'"

Since Wilder first started discussing his findings, two years before his final report was published, other studies have reached the same conclusions. A 2011 report by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee described the evidence to support using development to promote stability as "limited." That same year, Mark Moyar, a former Pentagon adviser and counterinsurgency theorist, produced an independent report calling for the U.S. to vastly scale back its development projects in Afghanistan, because they were not helping to bring stability. "A lot of times, just pouring money into these projects has actually made things worse," Moyar told me.

In an interview, USAID's Sampler suggested that the debate over the value of development for stability had become academic, and said that there is a tendency of these reports to focus on negative stories to the exclusion of positive ones.

"It would be naive of us to believe that stabilization programs are going to instantaneously sprout stability," he said. "But neither would I suggest that we should stop doing stabilization programs just because there are examples where there is still instability after the programs."

Wilder and Gordon don't discount the possibility that development could theoretically help stabilize a country — under the right circumstances.

"In the context of good institutions, of effective security, of checks and balances on the way that money is spent, of clear limits, there is the potential to do something good with development," Gordon told me. "But none of those preconditions have really ever existed in Afghanistan."

It also didn't help American stabilization efforts that they were consistently undermined by Western military activity. In recent years, civilian casualties caused by Americans have gone down, but deaths and disruptions from night raids, airstrikes and drones have remained a constant source of disaffection for Afghans. Last year, Nato aerial strikes accounted for 187 deaths, or nearly half of the civilian casualties attributed to pro-government forces, according to the UN. (The Taliban is thought to be responsible for 10 times as many civilian deaths.) At one point last year, a sequence of events including the burning of Qurans at a U.S. military base and an errant airstrike that killed 16 civilians prompted President Karzai to describe the Americans as "demons."

"International forces eventually realized the devastating impact this public blowback was having for broader strategic goals," says Erica Gaston, a longtime Afghanistan researcher who studied civilian casualties for the Open Society Foundations. "But at that point it was hard to turn back years of brewing resentment and mistrust bred by what was largely viewed by the population as reckless, to the point of deliberate, carelessness for Afghan civilian life."

For development work itself, Gordon continued, "The bigger problem was it was very difficult to find evidence of how effectively these things worked. You'll be talking to a development official, and you find yourself thinking, 'Well, this is a well-meaning individual who risked his

life, has done brave and incredible things, but to suggest that this was somehow going to solve these great political problems was naive.' In a sense, that was the great tragedy of the project."

Wilder agrees. "A lot of our aid has had a very positive impact, and in terms of promoting development objectives, there's a lot of evidence that aid spent smartly can do a lot of good," he said. "But if your assumption is that it's going to have stability impact, then you're setting yourself up to fail."

Today, even as they worry about what will happen when the U.S. withdraws, Afghans remain deeply skeptical about the Western effort in their country. Karzai's government remains as corrupt as ever. Only Myanmar, North Korea and Somalia rank lower on Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index. A $6 billion effort to combat narcotics growth and trade has had virtually no measurable effect. The army and police forces are still struggling with basic skills and competence, and the Taliban shows few signs of fading. An internal Pentagon analysis published recently by Wired found that three years after the surge, the rate of attacks by insurgents had barely budged.

More than 2,000 American service members have lost their lives fighting the Taliban and its improvised explosive devices. Many thousands more have been permanently disfigured. Tens of thousands of Afghan civilians are also thought to have been killed. All of the surge troops have now come home, but there are still 68,000 U.S. troops left in Afghanistan, and they continue to die at a rate of about one per day. Eleven years after a small contingent of American special operatives and northern tribesmen routed the Taliban from Kabul, it's hard to escape the impression that the U.S. is slinking out of town.

Obama once called Afghanistan "the good war," and invested billions in reconstruction to help turn it around. Instead, 11 years after a small contingent of American special operatives and northern tribesmen routed the Taliban from Kabul, it's hard to escape the impression that the U.S. is slinking out of town. And when it comes to winning hearts and minds, and bringing about peace and stability, all that well-intentioned development work may have come to naught.