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AusAID stabilisation

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When thinking about Australia's role in Afghanistan, most automatically gravitate towards the work of the Army in particular, and the Air Force and Navy in support. The last few chapters have made clear that Australia's engagement, while constrained, was multifaceted. Yet another facet of that engagement concerned the provision of support to the local people through aid and development projects.

This chapter presents a snapshot of the role that officials from the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) undertook in Uruzgan Province, Afghanistan, as part of Australia's whole-of-government effort.

The chapter focuses largely on my personal experiences as a stabilisation adviser (STABAD), and on impressions of Australia's response, including the challenges faced, what worked and what did not, and why. The details and achievements hereafter are those up to the withdrawal of Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and AusAID personnel in late 2013.

Background

Australia's mission in Afghanistan was one of foreign policy, and the DFAT is the department primarily responsible for setting Australia's foreign policy. The then Australian Agency for International Development¹ had responsibility for Australia's aid budget globally, and of course this included in Afghanistan.

1 In November 2013, AusAID formally became part of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

Australia has been committed to international operations in Afghanistan since 2001 in the areas of military operations, diplomacy and development. Since 2006, Australia has been operating a diplomatic mission in Kabul with a small DFAT staff and representatives from other government agencies. With the return of the ADF, and Australian operations focusing on Uruzgan in 2009, we identified that it was necessary to have the relevant civilian arms of the government also operating in Uruzgan. The United States already had a joint civilian–military approach in Afghanistan, and the Dutch, who had primacy in Uruzgan at that time, also had a combined civilian–military team.

Australia had previous experience in civilian–military operations in the non-warlike operations undertaken in Bougainville² and in Solomon Islands.³ However, in the high-risk conflict zone of Afghanistan, Australia was presented with a new challenge, and one that had not been envisaged.

The ADF force elements that deployed were well trained, well equipped, focused and highly effective in fighting the insurgency and building the capacity of Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). However, as we know, winning wars in the 21st century requires more than a purely military approach. The military alone cannot ensure the defeat of the insurgency; it is a complex political, ethnic and tribal issue requiring an equally complex, measured and wide-ranging response to it.

To be fully effective in nation-building and strengthening fundamental elements of the fabric of society required a holistic approach, with diplomats working alongside, mentoring and supporting their Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) counterparts in all aspects of governance, accountability and human rights. It required AusAID working in partnership with the Afghan government line directors and implementing partners on development and capacity-building of Afghan government employees and institutions. The view was taken that only by adopting this approach could military gains be made enduring and the reach of GIROA in the province and with the people be strengthened.

The road to transforming Afghanistan from a fractured, war-ravaged country, where institutions were either broken or non-existent, to a functioning self-governing democracy, is strewn with many obstacles. To have any hope of

2 The Truce Monitoring Groups and subsequent Peace Monitoring Groups after the cessation of hostilities in the civil war.

3 International Peace Monitoring Team and then Regional Assistance Mission Solomon Islands (RAMSI).

effective and sustainable development, several key ingredients had to be present. This was especially critical in a multi-donor and multi-mission environment.⁴ These key factors included early intervention, long-term government commitment,⁵ and donor coordination. However, all three of these factors were absent in whole or in part from all contributing nations.

Diplomacy and overseas development assistance is difficult even in the most permissive of environments; however, operating in the warlike setting of Afghanistan was undoubtedly the most difficult environment faced by the Australian Government in recent memory.

With the ADF focused on its area of operation, most ADF reporting and analysis was based on supporting their activities. Australia needed to have an overall vision of what was happening, especially politically, economically and in terms of the rule of law. We needed an understanding of the complex tribal dynamics that affected everything occurring within the province and beyond, including nationally and internationally. With the right tone and vision, this would enable Australia to form a strategic view for short-, medium- and long-term goals.

DFAT was and remains the most appropriate source of that reporting, as this is their ‘bread and butter’. AusAID played a crucial role in support, identifying how to assist the community and overseeing project delivery, ensuring that Australia’s and GIROA’s best interests were served.

A report of the Australian Civil-Military Centre (ACMC) stated that other coalition partners such as Canada and the Netherlands have long since used this combined team approach ‘in together-out together’:

Civilian and military personnel participated in mission preparation activities together, including security and safety training, as well as headquarters-level exercises and simulations designed to strengthen relationships and understanding between participating agencies.⁶

4 Donors included the United States, European Union and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development as well as local and international non-government organisations. Missions covered included the work of the NATO, the UNAMA and the ISAF.

5 Commitment needs to be in tranches of five to 10 years, not the frequent maximum of one to three years. As we have seen, it takes generations to repair decades of war, corruption and neglect.

6 Australian Civil-Military Centre, *Afghanistan: Lessons from Australia’s Whole of Government Mission*, ACMC, Queanbeyan, 2016, p. 40.

As the ADF and government agencies have distinctive cultures and can be somewhat insular, training and preparation together breaks down these internal constraints so that they can work together for the same goal. I hope that this will be the approach adopted for future missions.

The rest of this chapter sets out to examine how this approach was implemented.

Mission

DFAT's policy advisers, or POLADs, were responsible for offering advice to their military counterparts on matters ranging from governance, detainee visits, human rights and the rule of law. In Afghanistan, AusAID's mission statement for the development advisers was building resilience and supporting at-risk populations, empowering women and girls by addressing barriers to their social, political and economic participation, and supporting the Afghan Government to maintain economic growth and institute more effective and accountable governance.

Often enough, the provision of aid is the easiest part. The real challenge is ensuring that the aid is what is really required, is compatible with the mission, is not supporting the insurgency, and is both viable and sustainable over time. Indeed, aid that is poorly delivered can often be worse than no aid at all, as it can create or exacerbate tribal or community conflicts and power imbalances and even ruin economies.

Before going further, it is important to note that AusAID itself does not implement aid. Instead, AusAID focuses on institutional strengthening, so that development is sustainable and enduring. In Afghanistan, AusAID identified community needs in concert with GIRoA and communities. It identified the implementing partners required to construct infrastructure and to deliver and fund projects either independently or in partnerships. These partner organisations ranged from UN agencies, international non-government organisations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), and non-government organisations (NGOs) such as Red Crescent, Save the Children, World Vision and other national NGOs.

In line with the mission, the projects in Afghanistan ranged from vaccinating children against preventable diseases, water, sanitation and health (WASH) training and distribution of sanitation packs, construction of schools and health facilities, the training of nurses and midwives,

agriculture, rural development, governance and capacity-building, to name a few. These projects were designed to support the coalition's counter-insurgency focus, by extending the reach of GIRoA into the community and encouraging the community to support GIRoA and distance of themselves from the insurgents.

Challenges

It will not surprise the reader to know that implementing these projects had their challenges. International interventions and support requirements do not end when the conflict ends; they need to continue to strengthen government and institutions, building capacity to make it resilient to challenges, and to prevent it reverting to its previous state. In the post-conflict environment, there are several schools of thought that seek to benchmark when a country can operate largely independently, although with a level of continuing support from the international community. Often the benchmark is successful free and fair democratic elections. However, the assessment of what constitutes 'free and fair' can be rather subjective, and of course can be used as a convenient metric for donors seeking justification to withdraw. Another approach is suspicious of the electoral benchmark and focuses more on economic factors as being indicative of community confidence and stability. These factors include economic growth, flow of currency into or out of the country, good governance, transparency, anti-corruption strategies and adherence to the rule of law. Going by these realistic measures, progress becomes more difficult to discern.

The reality

The reality faced was that Afghanistan was a country that was still at war, had a highly dubious electoral process, and was performing poorly against other benchmarks. Out of 180 countries on the Transparency International scale of corruption, it rated 179th.⁷ This made it clear that a resolution to any of the governance or development challenges was never going to be quick or easy. Afghanistan required a long-term, scalable commitment.

⁷ Civil-Military Fusion Centre, *Corruption and Anti-Corruption Issues in Afghanistan*, Civil-Military Fusion Centre, Norfolk, VA, 2012, p. 6.

For more than 30 years Afghanistan has barely been able to draw breath between conflicts, and an estimated 9 million of its people are illiterate. In the largely Pashtun, highly conservative and less progressive province of Uruzgan, the literacy rates were estimated to be as low as 2 per cent. Illiteracy and lack of formal education fed into the insurgency and made the community vulnerable to misinformation and recruitment; hence the Taliban opposed education except in places where they could control the content. When the coalition moved into the province, few schools existed, and almost no female students were able to attend those schools that did exist. Infant and maternal mortality was high, medical facilities, midwives, clinics and so on were either not available or not operating. Knowledge and understanding of basic principles of WASH were largely absent. Agriculture was primitive and undertaken in the same manner as it had for centuries, and opium production was the major cash-crop. The continuing war, complicated by political, tribal and ethnic conflicts, made the delivery of aid risky.

Just as with a doctor, the first principle of delivery of overseas development assistance is 'Do no harm'. It is easy to trigger jealousies, increase divisions between communities, inflame conflict, encourage corruption and create unrealistic community expectations. This not only affects the community and aid deliverers but can also undermine the coalition and GIRoA. The risk and impact in Australia of poor overseas development assistance can be about both loss of reputation and loss of trust, which in turn can affect funding.

The situation on the ground was all the more complicated as the insurgents were operating a parallel government in order to legitimise their standing and to undermine GIRoA and the coalition. They created doubt in the mind of the community as to the legitimacy of the central government and the long-term commitment of the coalition, resulting in a reduction of community support for the ANSF.

We strove to counter this by mentoring and encouraging GIRoA officials to leave the security of their blast walls and razor-wired office compounds and go out into the community to extend the reach of GIRoA, not just from outside Tarin Kowt, the provincial capital, but also to the district centres and beyond into villages. We encouraged district government representatives to interact with the community and improve their standing by having aid delivered through the prism of GIRoA, rather than through the donors.

Just as it was critical for security, counterinsurgency and development to spread out from Kabul into the countryside and into the provinces, it was just as critical that it spread out from provincial capitals into the districts and smaller villages. These were the areas that were either supporting insurgents or were vulnerable to joining their support base if they doubted the capacity of GIROA to support them. In short, development and security goals sat side by side in Uruzgan, and they were not incompatible.⁸

Effective aid delivery needs to be coordinated at both the national and provincial levels. Cooperation between donors is necessary to prevent duplication, competition and gaps. However, even in Afghanistan the aid world is crowded, often with various donors working to their own agendas and mission statements to the detriment of the overall objective; in this case, the provision of assistance to the Afghan people. The lack of coordination at national and provincial levels severely hampered aid delivery and effectiveness, with duplicate, overlapping and inefficient application of uncoordinated efforts often leaving little in terms of a long-standing legacy.

In 2008 there was still some hope that such coordination could be put into effect. That was when the Afghan Government approved the Afghanistan National Development Strategy for security, governance, economic growth and poverty reduction.⁹ It expressed a strong preference for aid to be channelled through the central government. While it was understandable for a sovereign nation to want ownership of development and to coordinate development assistance to its people, the reality is that GIROA did not possess the necessary capacity to do so. Nor were effective systems in place to enable funding from a national level to reach projects, or even line ministries. In addition, there was a distinct shortage of the experience needed to understand the basic principles of aid delivery.

Whether unintended or by design, this level of dysfunction promoted and enabled large-scale corruption and diversion of critical funds from projects and the people of Afghanistan into the hands of individuals. Doubtless, some of those funds would have found their way into the very hands of the insurgents our forces were fighting.

⁸ APMC, *Afghanistan*, Chapter 3.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

Implementation

Notwithstanding these concerns, considerable effort was made in an attempt to pursue the government's national development strategy. The civilian contribution was based within the PRT in the Multi-National Base — Tarin Kowt. Effective overseas development aid and diplomacy cannot be conducted behind the wire. Face-to-face meetings between provincial government line directors were critical to build relationships, engender trust and identify common goals. Consultation with communities was necessary to determine what kind of assistance was required, along with requirements for due diligence and the mentoring of partners for the implementation of this program. To achieve this level of interaction with the provincial government, the coalition military had to support all civilian movements. The ADF formed the Other Government Agency (OGA) Platoon to provide security for 'outside the wire' missions in and around Tarin Kowt. In other districts where either AusAID or Australian Civilian Corps members were working, security was undertaken by US members of the PRT.

Regular meetings took place in Tarin Kowt at either the governor's office or PRT House between DFAT and AusAID officials and their Afghan counterparts. This ensured the development of relatively strong working relationships and productive partnerships. This also made certain that provincial officials knew that they were getting the necessary support, and allowed us to have a good view of what was occurring within the government in order to structure our responses accordingly.

During the next few years, the civilian contingent grew in number as the aid projects increased. This formed a key component of the PRT, in both the provision of their projects and in supporting military reconstruction projects with technical and other advice.

In early 2011, the Australian Civilian Corps was created as a branch within AusAID by the then prime minister Kevin Rudd. I was selected for the first Australian Civilian Corps deployment to Afghanistan as a stabilisation adviser. There were six stability advisers deployed in two rotations. One deployed to Tarin Kowt, another to nearby Deh Rawud, and I was based in Forward Operating Base Mirwais, in the neighbouring Chora District. My colleagues and I arrived in early September 2011, and we were due to finish our deployment at the end of October 2012.

Unfortunately, the decision to deploy stability advisers to Uruzgan coincided with the announcement by US President Obama of the drawdown or end date of the US mission in Afghanistan.¹⁰ Without the military to provide security, there were questions as to how civilians could undertake institutional strengthening, development and anti-corruption roles.¹¹ Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard also announced that Australia would be withdrawing from Uruzgan between 2012 and 2014.

The announcement of the coalition forces' withdrawal from Uruzgan (and Afghanistan) worked directly against our goals, one of which was to persuade the community to support the Afghan Government instead of the insurgents. The community, especially in contested areas, were going to support whoever they believed would be in control of their village, district and province when the coalition forces withdrew and, at best, were understandably going to have a bet each way.

As stabilisation advisers, our new role was largely undefined, and identifying how we worked with the PRT was not clear. We came from the Australian Civilian Corps roster. The Australian Civilian Corps members came from a wide range of backgrounds, which included NGOs, the United Nations, consultants, contractors, police and military. I was the only civilian who came from either DFAT or AusAID, although most of my career had been with the United Nations, NGOs and the AFP. The stabilisation adviser role had a multitude of responsibilities: part diplomat, part development and mentoring, and an advising, training and trouble-shooting role within the Afghan communities. Although civilians had been at forward operating bases previously, it was the first time that they were permanently based there.

After a brief induction at Al-Minhad Air Base in Dubai on the way to Afghanistan, my colleagues and I arrived in Multi-National Base — Tarin Kowt. My concerns, first raised in Dubai, that the ADF did not quite understand that civilians were *really* being deployed outside the base at Tarin Kowt to forward operating bases and all that this entailed, were confirmed in Tarin Kowt. After only a day and a half in Tarin Kowt,

10 CNN Wire Staff, 'Obama announces Afghanistan troop withdrawal plan', CNN Politics, 23 June 2011.

11 J. Dougherty, 'What happens to "civilian surge" as military surge ends', CNN, 22 June 2011.

I was deployed to Forward Operating Base Mirwais in the Chora Valley. It was clear that civilians were tolerated, but war-fighting was what it was all about, and assets for civilians were pretty much last on the priority list.

I was set down at the flight line unaccompanied by security, awaiting my flight on a Chinook helicopter. When it arrived, I struggled across to it with my (excess) luggage and managed to climb aboard. The flight was soon full of soldiers, and as no one else was heading to Forward Operating Base Mirwais, I asked the loadmaster to let me know when I arrived, so that I could know when to get out. We soon lifted off and began flying from base to base. The soldiers alighted at the various bases, until I was the last passenger left on the flight. The loadmaster then came up to me and yelled in my ear: 'We are just pulling up now. The base is uphill. When we stop, get out and run like hell.' He then emphasised: 'This is Injun country!'

As instructed, this unarmed civilian jumped out and grabbed all of his gear for the next year. The loadmaster pointed up a steep incline to a small HESCO'ed base (i.e. surrounded by HESCO walls) with a metal door about 80 metres away. I started running uphill towards the base in the oxygen-deprived air, in my PPE, and dragging enough jack rations to last me 14 months.¹² I bashed on the metal door, and after a few moments it was opened by a soldier who just looked at me.

I said, 'Hi, I am the new STABAD [stabilisation adviser] from AusAID.' Answering in a strong southern US drawl after a rather pregnant pause, the man at the door said: 'OrzAID? Never heard of 'em, but get in here real quick.' Yes, I was not at Mirwais but a small combat outpost. After the mistake was realised, I was quickly collected and taken to the more substantial Mirwais. My departure from Afghanistan was also rather different from what I would have liked.

12 PPE: Personal Protective Equipment—ballistic vest, helmet and glasses. Jack rations are civilian food taken to the field to enliven standard issue rations.



Lieutenant Christian Johnston, Afghan mentor team leader for Combat Team B, 5th Battalion, the Royal Australian Regiment, looks on as his Afghan National Army counterpart speaks with an Afghan community member near Patrol Base Mohammed, Uruzgan province, Afghanistan, 2010.

Source: Courtesy of the Department of Defence.

I think it is fair to say that the in-country civilians from DFAT and AusAID did not see the need for stabilisation advisers to be deployed. Initially they were not as enthusiastic about our deployment as one might have expected. I put it down to concern that we were encroaching on their patch, but in reality, there was much for all of us to do and scope to assist each other. However, when I arrived at Mirwais I was warmly welcomed by the ADF, perhaps since I had served with several of them on previous peacekeeping missions. Although many did not know or understand what I could add to the mission, I was housed in a tent along with the US PRT members and National Guard Security Detachment. I then decided that I would invite a different soldier into each of my meetings with the community and district officials, so that they could see and understand what they were risking their lives for.

The challenges were something I had not confronted in more than 20 years of working in developing countries, including in the north of Afghanistan in 2009. It was not just the security issues. There were tribal rivalries; communities lacked the fundamentals of basic hygiene and education;

and, in the words of the famous Fred Smith song, ‘And the Education Minister can neither read nor write, and the Minister for Women runs the knock shop there at night’.¹³ It truly was another world.

Security

The greatest impediment to undertaking my role was the lack of security. Not only could I not move outside the base without a security detachment, but it also took enormous planning, and approvals had to be sought. This meant that ad hoc movements or meetings were almost impossible. The result was that our ability to respond to issues in real time was severely hampered. Owing to security concerns, we could not inform either government or tribal leaders of our intentions to meet them, which meant that we would arrive at offices only to find them vacant. It was very frustrating for all of us.

I also found that I was not granted permission to travel to villages where it was important to show the flag due to security concerns. This meant that those villages that were vulnerable to Taliban influence often did not receive the support from the coalition or GIRoA officials that might have helped them resist the insurgency. It was a vexed issue, as failing to assist these villages could have reinforced their view that the government did not care about them or favoured other villages over them.

Achievements

Although the challenges were enormous, there were equally numerous achievements of which Australia, the coalition and the PRT can be justifiably proud, improving the quality of life for a significant portion of the Uruzgan population. These include:

- A functioning hospital in Tarin Kowt, with a women’s wing and surgery unit.
- Health facilities increased from nine in 2006 to 29 facilities in 2013, and 322 health posts in operation throughout the province, staffed by 106 healthcare professionals and 493 volunteer community health workers.

¹³ See www.asiaeducation.edu.au/docs/default-source/curriculum-resources-pdf/dust-of-uruzgan.pdf?sfvrsn=4.

- Improved maternal health care—up to 80 per cent of women received at least one antenatal visit, up from 50 per cent in 2007, and 24 new midwives and 26 nurses were trained.
- Lessons in hygiene and health were delivered to 4,400 children.
- Between January and June 2013, 12,470 health consultations were provided.
- More than 8,700 children under five screened for malnutrition, and more than 300 children with severe malnutrition were referred to treatment centres and counselling.
- The number of schools increased from 34 in 2006 to around 200 active schools in 2013, including 26 girls-only schools and 19 co-ed schools.
- An all-year, commercially capable civil airfield was opened.
- More than 320 kilometres of roads were improved, including 200 kilometres of paved roads across the province.
- Several government buildings were constructed.
- Agriculture production slowly improved and passed pre-conflict levels.
- Rural infrastructure was improved to protect against floods, droughts and other disasters.

Although we were supposed to give prior warning of our intention to visit schools, we often took the opportunity when nearby to see if they were being utilised. Some schools were not but many more were, and it was heartening to visit a school in a remote area and to see a classroom crammed with young girls embracing the opportunity to learn.

Challenges

It would be disingenuous of me to pretend that our programs were delivered without problems or that we were not taken advantage of, and we found ourselves often in the middle of tribal disputes, delivering aid to areas that did not need it and failing others that did.

Communities like those in the Chora Valley have been through extended periods of war, and in the absence of the rule of law, they become survivors, trusting no one, and understandably willing to try to get anything they could to assist their family and community. Promises by GIRoA and foreigners are easily made and often broken, and those who make them are soon gone, either rotated out or the mission completely

withdrawn. In this environment, achieving effective aid delivery requires strong cooperation between all donors and implementing partners, showing a unified face to the community to avoid governments, NGOs, the United Nations and so on from being played off against each other. It is often the case that many problems were already entrenched before Australia's arrival, the situation being no different in Uruzgan.

With the need for quick results, it became clear that little or no due diligence had been undertaken, and mistakes were made. This was also in part due to the military trying to get quick runs on the board with the community, with quick impact projects and the US Commanders Emergency Reserve Program (CERP) funding.¹⁴ Joint pre-deployment training between ADF, PRT and civilian members could have mitigated these issues, resulting in a more coordinated approach between the military and civilian elements from the pre-deployment phase throughout the mission.

When I arrived in Chora, there was no district governor and the head of the 2nd Kandak of the Afghan National Army¹⁵ was acting in the role. This was problematic, as several suspect tribal leaders whom he had dealings with in the security context were hostile to him, and this was having a negative influence on community trust in his role representing the Afghan government. I was tasked with finding a suitable successor, but no one wanted the job. Although a salary was attached, it was very rarely paid, so the only way of supporting oneself, it appeared, was through graft and corruption. The position also came with a target on one's head, as the Taliban regularly executed GIROA officials.

The first thing I had to do was negotiate a number of problems created by the well-meaning US PRT members. They had paid for a tube well, taking assurances from a village leader on face value, so they had not undertaken any due diligence. The tube well was sunk on private property, which was then walled off. The owner then commenced charging the community for water. This angered the villagers and had the potential to provoke animosity towards the PRT. As a solution, the PRT agreed to pay for three additional tube wells in the village at \$5,000 each. However, being paid in advance, the contractor was never seen again, and neither were the

14 The purpose of the CERP program is to enable commanders to respond to urgent humanitarian relief and reconstruction requirements within their area of responsibility by carrying out programs that will immediately assist the indigenous population.

15 Kandak is equivalent to an Afghan brigade. Lieutenant Colonel Gul Agha acted in both roles.

tube wells. Basic understanding of contracting practices, using AusAID civilians as a resource, and working through government officials might have prevented this.

The actual cost of goods and services in the community was not known to the PRT. This made it difficult to ensure due diligence when awarding contracts even for projects as simple as a tube well, and this problem was multiplied exponentially for major constructions. Tube wells that should have cost between US\$800 and US\$1,000 were often charged US\$5,000 to coalition forces, and on occasion several times more. Once precedence of prices had been set, very few Afghan contractors were willing to do work for a lower price, thereby reducing the number of projects that could be implemented and communities assisted, and decreasing the effectiveness of the mission. Often quotes had to factor in illicit payments to various government, police and tribal leaders to allow projects to proceed.

We were travelling ‘outside the wire’ five to six days per week, visiting community and tribal leaders and district government officials. However, they were rarely in the district governor’s office, and we could not forewarn that we were visiting owing to security concerns, leading to lots of wasted time. However, it became clear that, as most government employees, including teachers and police, rarely received any salary, they had an understandably relaxed attitude to work.

The issue could not be resolved at district or provincial level because donors would contribute funding to the government or specific ministries at the national level. However, by the time funds trickled down from government ministers, to ministries, to provincial and then to district level, with each taking a share, there was little or, on many occasions, nothing left for the actual employees to receive.

Eventually a new district governor was appointed. He came from another district in Uruzgan after being removed from his previous role ... yes, for graft and corruption. He quickly aligned himself with a powerful warlord, and I spent a great deal of my time trying to prevent the two of them from taking control of a large AusAID-funded flood mitigation project, which was designed to provide employment to representatives of each tribe.

Members of other tribes and villages marched in protest against them. Without the intervention of the ANSF and the coalition, it would have resulted in a violent confrontation. After some tense mediation, the original work-sharing agreement was upheld and the status quo was maintained—

for a while. I spent a considerable amount of time mentoring the district governor on basic principles of good governance, and for the rest of my deployment he was relatively cooperative. Emblematic of the lack of stability in government, the district governor was later removed, and the tribal leader disappeared after being linked to the insurgents. The lack of continuity in positions, owing to corruption or political interference, continually undermined the effectiveness of our capacity-building and institutional-strengthening efforts.

When Australia took control of the province and the PRT, we inherited several large, incomplete projects from the Dutch. AusAID had to oversee the final implementation phases of these projects, in concert with Kabul-based Dutch representatives. One of these was the much-lauded Tarin Kowt–Chora road. Initial planning had been for no culverts along the route, because we knew that insurgents would use them to deploy improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Where watercourses intersected the road, there were to be dips or wash-aways instead. However, owing to the failure in ensuring oversight of the project, the 30-kilometre roadway had some 120 culverts constructed by the time we took control. Several days before the road's opening, the security contractor withdrew his services and sought increased funding to re-secure the road. This was not forthcoming, leaving the length of the road vulnerable to insurgents or others.

Within an hour of the official opening of the road in Chora by the Dutch ambassador and minister, the first insurgent-placed IED blew a culvert. As a result, the official party had to be flown back to Tarin Kowt, as it was deemed too dangerous for them to travel back along the newly opened road. This, of course, resulted in a major embarrassment and loss of face for the ANSF, which could not maintain security, and for the coalition, even though the Dutch had built it.

Nearby communities knew that insurgents were placing IEDs; however, they decided, on the basis of their long-term survival prospects, not to inform on them to the ANSF or coalition. Within five months, most of the 120 culverts along the road had been blown, usually as coalition or ANSF vehicles passed. The result was that no Afghans would use the road, choosing to travel through the *dasht* (desert) instead.

Construction of projects that communities did not want was also problematic. In Chora, for instance, the Dutch constructed a new commercial hub of shops and a market, known as the Caravanserai, opposite the district government buildings. The only problem was that none of the shopkeepers wanted to move their businesses from the newly sealed road in the centre of town to the Caravanserai, especially when they found out that they would have to pay rent for the privilege. As a result, the Caravanserai was never inhabited, and its shoddy construction meant that within six months of opening, it was already falling apart.

In an area where two villages coexisted amicably, side by side, the construction of a dam almost brought them into conflict. Awi 1 and Awi 2 were two villages that shared a common water supply, which had never dried in living memory. Someone decided that the construction of a dam to capture this water would be of benefit to the community. Both villages agreed, and construction had taken place by the time I arrived in country. I was tasked with finalising the contract between donor and contractor. The villagers were refusing to allow the dam to be filled, yet without ensuring that it worked we could not make the final payments. With many visits backwards and forwards taking up a huge number of soldiers and assets, we finally identified the problem. The villagers did not actually understand what a dam was. They had never seen one, and it had never been discussed with them during the planning. By this time, they were using the dam as a public lavatory and did not understand the nexus between this and the fouling of their drinking water. We finally managed to persuade them to divert the water to fill the dam, which thankfully held. The contractor was paid; however, on our next visit the dam had been drained, and to my knowledge was never used again.

Nevertheless, we then received many requests from villages for dams, and we subsequently identified that each village was hoping for the same pay-off as Awi from the contractor, which was some US\$20,000, and a similar amount to the district police chief to allow construction workers safe passage along the road. We could not instigate any action against the police chief, as he was killed shortly after by an insurgent IED.

In another instance, an Afghan police officer requested us to provide a dam to drought-proof the water supply of his remote village. We travelled to the village to undertake an assessment; however, after a community meeting, we discovered that the land where the dam was to be located was owned by the head of the Afghan National Police (ANP) in the area,

which he had failed to disclose. The dam would have meant he controlled the village water supply, which could have resulted in instability and the village turning against the police. We declined to fund the dam, and instead funded the extension and construction of the existing concrete holding tanks situated on communal land in the centre of the village. Attending these locations is the only effective way of ensuring that appropriate aid that does not destabilise communities, but this came at a cost in resources and time.

Investigating the cause of a mobile phone tower being non-operational after 5 pm every day until sunrise, we discovered that the operators had been coerced by insurgents to limit hours to daylight only, preventing the population from reporting the insurgents operating at night in the district. The operators had complained to the local police post only some 500 metres away. The ANP replied that as they did not receive any salary, they had essentially made a non-aggression pact with the Taliban. So, to prevent the Taliban attacking them, they would allow the Taliban to control the towers' transmission hours.

These few examples are symptomatic of the challenges confronted by the coalition, ANSF and, provincial and district governments when there is limited support from the central government.

The civilian–military coordination in the province improved when Australia took the lead, and many of the problems between the ADF and civilian actors were mitigated by joint training, exercises and coordinated deployments. In these circumstances, the joint leadership model worked well.

What this review has shown is that, in all probability, there will always be challenges with deployments to environments like Afghanistan given the low base level of education, transport and communications. Developing people and infrastructure requires a long-term commitment in order to overcome generations of neglect. Once the announcement was made that the coalition was withdrawing, it was an uphill battle to persuade the population to reject the insurgents and support the ANSF, especially in areas where they had not received significant development assistance.

The real risk with short-term engagements such as in Uruzgan is that instead of strengthening institutions, we develop and strengthen individuals. In the case of Afghanistan, this often leads to an imbalance of power, corruption and even further conflict. We saw examples of this in the

coalition's interactions in Uruzgan. The other side effect of concentrating power in individuals is that it creates a target for both insurgents and their rivals. Removing the individual by undermining them or, in the Afghan scenario, by killing them was a common and effective practice in Uruzgan. On 26 March 2011, while returning from a meeting with the district governor, my PRT patrol was attacked by a 12-year-old child suicide bomber and as a result I and three US soldiers were critically wounded, effectively ending the work of the PRT in Chora.

In closing, the unique nature and circumstances of the commitment to Uruzgan limited a long-term and sustainable approach to assist the Afghan Government to develop and strengthen the institutions. The need to deliver aid to assist securing community support and to assist coalition forces resulted in short-term gains, with some possible longer-term benefits being drawn from individuals who received training and education from Australian official development assistance. There was little long-term benefit in the capacity-building of individuals versus institutions, as many of those individuals were targeted and killed or subsequently left their positions. The increased spread of the insurgency throughout the province after the withdrawal of coalition forces had deleterious effect on many of the completed projects. Insurgents gained control of most of Uruzgan.

On balance, I do not think that we can judge the effectiveness of our intervention at the time of our departure. Instead, the sustainability of our efforts needs to be evaluated several years after our withdrawal. This would identify whether or not the seeds sown have been allowed to grow, mature and bear fruit.

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