



BACKGROUND

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Security Through Development: Saving the National Solidarity Program in Afghanistan

Frankie Sturm, Truman National Security Project
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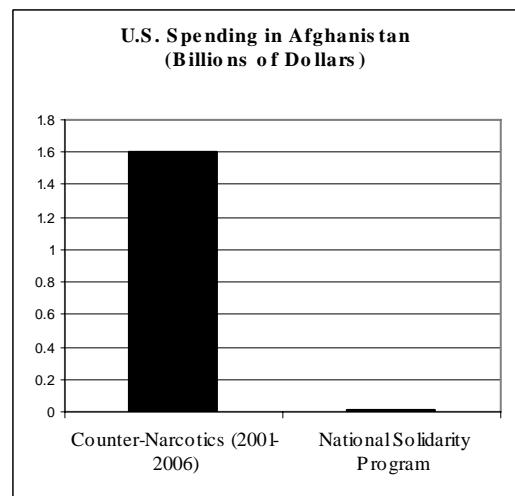
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With violence mounting in Afghanistan, global attention has focused almost exclusively on military questions and troop shortages. Issues such as development and good government have been sidelined. This is unfortunate: development and security are not separate activities. Done right, development can bolster security by isolating the Taliban, fostering democracy, and creating a sense of legitimacy between Afghan citizens and their government.

The National Solidarity Program (NSP) has done just that, but it is in danger of having its funds cut by the United States. Facing persistent troop shortages for at least another year, it is in America's best interest to increase funding for non-military programs that have boosted the security situation in Afghanistan. Adding additional troops is necessary, but until we have the manpower, we ought to invest in programs that can help keep the Taliban at bay in the interim. The NSP has passed that test. But to understand how programs such as the NSP can fight terror as well as hunger, we must first understand how poorly designed development policies undercut both prosperity and security.

Traditional Development – Give a Man a Fish

The international community has spent approximately \$15 billion on aid in Afghanistan.¹ Unfortunately, the aid money is not always well spent. Instead of going to di-



rectly to the Afghan people, much of the money goes to government agencies in donor countries, consultants, humanitarian groups, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Many of these organizations do excellent work. However, as aid professionals know too well, these groups all have different rules and regulations, making it difficult for a new government to create a coherent system for dealing with foreign aid.

Even worse, projects designed in the capitals of wealthy countries often respond to donors' needs instead of recipients' needs. In 2003, for example, Afghanistan recorded a bumper crop in wheat and resisted the World Food Programme's desire to distribute food aid. Yet the food aid went on, depressing wheat prices and prompting struggling farmers to stop growing wheat and start growing opium.² This gave the drug



trade a shot in the arm and provided an enhanced source of income for the Taliban. Afghans knew better, but the well-intentioned donors did not.

These circumstances make it nearly impossible for Afghanistan's government to develop a solid administration and a predictable rule of law – there are simply too many interests and too many programs to juggle. It also encourages corruption. Since a functioning government is unable to solidify in such an atmosphere, many elites choose to follow the money by pushing pet projects and flattering foreign donors. As for regular Afghan citizens, they see this for what it is: corruption. Stories of wasted development aid and overpaid consultants are commonplace, which feeds cynicism among the Afghan people.³ Faith in the government decreases, and the Taliban's message – that the government is a tool of the West, designed to oppress Muslims – begins to take root.

The National Solidarity Program – Teach a Man to Fish

Fortunately, not all aid programs are created equal. We can break the cycle of division and corruption by taking a new approach to foreign aid. The National Solidarity Program is a model for what this approach should look like.⁴ The NSP provides bloc grants to local communities that compete for funds by designing their own projects. This creates transparency and accountability in the central government, because money from donors is kept in a single fund that is governed by clear rules. It promotes democracy and development at the local level, because individual communities elect councils to create and oversee their projects. Lastly, it gives Afghans a reason to believe in their own government and the international community that claims to support it.

The results speak for themselves. The NSP has financed more than 30,000 projects in 20,000 communities, touching the lives of 13 million people.⁵ By helping Afghans build schools, expand irrigation, and gain greater access to electricity, the program has gained widespread support and popularity. But more important than any single development project, the greatest success the NSP has registered to date is its ability to undercut the Taliban.⁶

When foreigners build schools, the Taliban burns them down. When Afghans build schools, Taliban fighters think twice. Local citizens feel a sense of ownership towards projects they have designed and built themselves. By attacking the products of Afghans' labor, the Taliban wins nothing but anger and

animosity. In areas of the country where the insurgency is at its strongest, many NSP projects remain untouched by violence. When they are attacked, citizens react. For instance, after insurgents set fire to a NSP school in a Kandahar village, it was promptly rebuilt. Four hundred and fifty boys and girls were then enrolled.⁷ The lesson is clear. When Afghans are able to secure their own development, they acquire the ability to develop their own security.

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Small Investment, Big Payoff

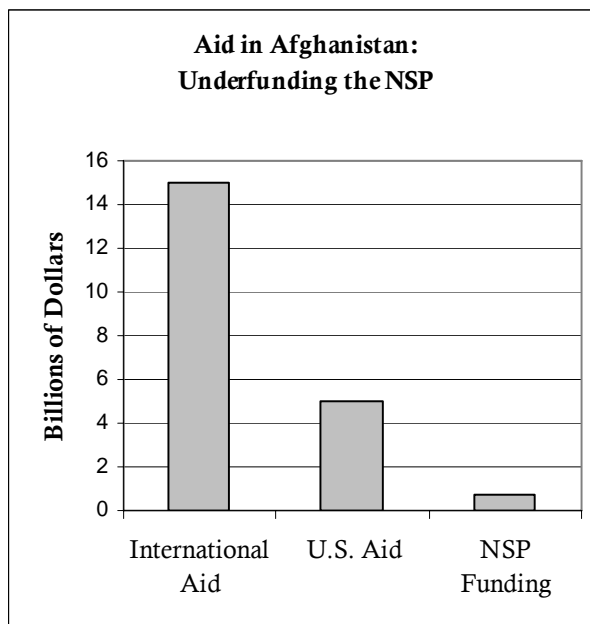
Not only is the NSP successful, it is also cost effective. Its impressive accomplishments have taken place at a total cost of only \$750 million.⁸ To put this in perspective, the United States spends more on Iraq in one week than the entire international community has spent on the NSP in six years. In terms of total aid to Afghanistan, only one half of one percent has been devoted to the NSP, making its gains all the more remarkable. Part of the reason the NSP has accomplished so much with so little is due to its high level of efficiency. According to the Institute for State Effectiveness, NSP projects are on average 30 percent cheaper than those built by foreign NGOs.⁹

Our allies in the United Kingdom, Canada, and Germany have recognized the promise of the NSP and have increased funding accordingly.¹⁰ American contributions to the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF) – the pool from which the NSP draws its funding – dropped from \$74 million in 2006 to \$50 million in 2007.¹¹ Of all the money the United States has invested in the ARTF, only \$13 million has gone to funding the NSP.¹² Contrast this to U.S. spending on counter-narcotics efforts in Afghanistan. From 2001-2006, the U.S. spent \$1.6 billion on counter-narcotics.¹³ Spending on interdiction alone cost \$343 million in 2007.¹⁴ The results? Opium exports surpassed \$3 billion in 2006 and Afghanistan produces approximately 95% of the



world's heroin.¹⁵ Counter-narcotics efforts are crucial, but in terms of return on investment, our money seems to be going much further with the NSP.

Yet the program is currently facing a \$160 million budget shortfall, and is struggling to reach into new villages and fund ongoing projects.¹⁶ Instead of cutting funding, elected officials in the U.S. should act to reverse this budget shortfall. The United States is already spending far more than any other country on aid to Afghanistan – but it is quality, just as much as quantity, that counts. For the sake of security, it is time to put our money where it can have the greatest impact: in a proven, quality program that has a track record of diminishing Taliban strength.



Funding the Future

If we invest in programs that bring local communities together with the central government, we can lay the groundwork for a future where a functioning state inspires the loyalty of its citizens. If we pour the bulk of our development dollars into ill-advised projects that bypass and divide Afghanistan's already fragile government, the Taliban will continue to find a ready-made political vacuum to step in to. Given the military challenges we face, there is no excuse for cutting a non-military program that has proven its ability to weaken the Taliban and strengthen security for Americans and Afghans alike. We must expand funding for the NSP now.

End Notes

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- 5.) "Afghanistan: National Solidarity Program," World Bank, 2008: <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/SOUTHASI-AEXT/0,,contentMDK:21166174~pagePK:146736~piPK:146830~theSitePK:223547,00.html>; Caroline Wadhams, Colin Cookman and Ben Dear, "Afghanistan Needs More Than Money: Greater U.S. Leadership Is Needed to Fix Development Problems," 11 June 2008.
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- 7.) "Lessons in Terror: Attacks on Education in Afghanistan," Human Rights Watch, Volume 18, Number 6 (C), July 2006.
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1420 K Street NW, Suite 250

Washington, DC 20005

Telephone: 202-216-9723

info@trumanproject.org

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