International Assistance to Afghanistan, 2008 – 2018

Part 2: Summary Report of Eleven Bilateral Country-Level Evaluations

March 2020 | Maryam Musharaf Shah, Ella Sylvester and Christoph Zürcher
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<th>Definition</th>
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<td>ADB</td>
<td>Asian Development Bank</td>
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<tr>
<td>ARAP</td>
<td>Afghanistan Rural Access Program</td>
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<td>ARTF</td>
<td>Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund</td>
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<td>ASGP</td>
<td>Afghanistan Sub-National Governance Project</td>
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<tr>
<td>BMZ</td>
<td>Bundesministerium für wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung/ The Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, Germany</td>
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<tr>
<td>CERP</td>
<td>Commanders Emergency Response Program</td>
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<tr>
<td>COIN</td>
<td>Counterinsurgency</td>
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<tr>
<td>DDA</td>
<td>District Development Assemblies</td>
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<tr>
<td>EQUIP</td>
<td>Education Quality Improvement Program</td>
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<tr>
<td>EVAW</td>
<td>Eliminating violence against women</td>
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<tr>
<td>IDLG</td>
<td>Independent Directorate of Local Governance</td>
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<tr>
<td>IEC</td>
<td>Independent Electoral Commission of Afghanistan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IRDP</td>
<td>Irrigation Restoration and Development Project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LOTFA</td>
<td>Law and Order Trust Fund</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MBAW</td>
<td>Making Budgets and Aid Work</td>
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<tr>
<td>NDPG</td>
<td>National State Governance Project</td>
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<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-Governmental Organization</td>
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<td>NIBP</td>
<td>National Institution Building Project</td>
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<td>NSP</td>
<td>National Solidarity Program</td>
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<tr>
<td>SIGAR</td>
<td>Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNDP</td>
<td>United Nations Development Program</td>
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<td>TA</td>
<td>Technical Assistance</td>
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1 Executive Summary

This report summarizes the findings of 11 country-level evaluations of development aid to Afghanistan, published between 2007 and 2018. The report focuses on findings related to the following aid sectors: governance, stabilization, gender, education, health, and sustainable economic development.

All evaluations highlight the very challenging context. A lack of security in the country negatively affected programs and made it difficult or impossible to monitor and evaluate outcomes. Endemic political instability and widespread corruption – in part driven by aid flows – added to the challenging environment. Cultural norms also had an adverse effect on programs, especially when they concerned gender equality and human rights.

All evaluations stress that Afghan structures lacked capacity to deal with the aid flows in a productive way. Unfortunately, donors constantly overestimated Afghan capacity and designed programs based on largely imagined absorptive and administrative capacity. Even worse, capacity-building measures at the level of the central government largely failed. In the few instances where progress was made, it remained confined to small silos and did not translate to more overall state capacity.

Most donors saw multi-donor trust funds (the most important of which is ARTF, the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund) as efficient channels for allocating and distributing aid money. But the evaluations also suggest that it is unclear to what extent, if at all, the capacity of the Afghan government has actually improved as a result of ARTF. Donors also criticized the weak monitoring of ARTF by the World Bank.

The National Solidarity Program (NSP) was the flagship project of ARTF. NSP did contribute to an increase in services and infrastructure to rural areas but had little impact on economic growth and limited effect on local governance and gender equality.

Donors agreed that substantial progress has been made regarding better access for boys and girls to primary education, but the quality of education remains problematic and there is still demand for infrastructure.

The evaluations suggest that improvements in access to services for women and girls – mainly in health and education – have been made. This progress, however, resulted from the rehabilitation of infrastructure and the end of the Taliban rule rather than the success of the gender projects themselves. Progress in the field of gender equality has been elusive.

Most reports note that poverty rates have not decreased, despite all efforts, though partial success has been achieved. Development aid has helped to build a large amount of infrastructure, has helped alleviating threats to livelihoods, and has created many labour days, but all of this has not led to sustainable job creation and income.

The UK, US, Denmark, and Canada had all specifically earmarked stabilization programs, the assessed results of which were generally negative. There is no evidence that these stabilization projects actually led to more stability.
All evaluations mentioned that the monitoring systems of the donor community were weak. It is therefore not surprising that evaluation reports were rarely based on solid data. What is more surprising is that donors (bilateral, multilateral, and NGOs alike) have apparently made very little progress in establishing better monitoring and evaluation systems since 2002. The few available robust project and program evaluations have usually been produced by independent scholars, or by scholars cooperating with aid organizations.

All reports stress that the sustainability of achieved results is very much in question. This appears to be the case for all types of aid programs.

Most donors pointed out that in order to achieve meaningful and sustainable development results, predictable aid flow over more time is necessary. However, we are not convinced that “more of the same, but for longer” would lead to better results. The international aid community has been engaged in Afghanistan for 17 years now, and there are no signs of increased effectiveness. Without fundamental change on the ground – and a political settlement with an end to violence – aid will remain largely ineffective and unsustainable.

2 About this Report

This report summarizes the findings of 11 bilateral country-level evaluations of development aid to Afghanistan, published between 2007 and 2018. Nine countries produced or commissioned these 11 evaluations: Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Norway, New Zealand, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States. This report focuses on the following sectors: governance, stabilization, gender, education, health, and sustainable economic development. The majority of all development aid to Afghanistan was dedicated to these sectors. In addition, the selection of these sectors is in line with the priorities of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ).

2.1 Criteria for Including Evaluations

We included all country-level evaluations of aid to Afghanistan by bilateral donors published in English between 2008–2018. Germany conducted two forward-looking reviews of the BMZ aid portfolio. These reviews were not included in the meta-analysis since they did not meet all of the inclusion criteria, but we report the main results in the textbox on the next page.
2.2 Methodologies Used by Included Evaluations

Generally, the evaluations are based on a desk studies and interviews with stakeholders and aid recipients.

Most evaluation reports acknowledged the lack of reliable data. Canada noted that its evaluation team found several “methodological challenges” including “missing documents and incomplete files, rapid staff turnover and lack of institutional memory” (Canada, 2015, p. 10). Finland’s report spoke of “the absence of outcome and impact monitoring systems, and the dearth of evaluative analysis of options taken in Afghanistan” (Finland, 2007, p. 76). The UK report stated that there is a “paucity of good, reliable data on Afghanistan” (United Kingdom, 2009, pp. 2, 69). Norway’s report notes that “the weakness of monitoring and evaluation systems is the main reason why there is so little good quality information about outcomes” (Norway, 2012, p. 119). The US report mentions concerns about the lack of on-site
monitoring due to security concerns (United States, 2011, p. 16). The Danish evaluation stated that “security and time did not permit direct observation or statistical sampling of program results” (Denmark, 2012, p. 10). It is therefore not surprising that none of the evaluations use baseline data, or other quantitative data.

Some evaluations attempt to employ counterfactual thinking, but most don’t. Also, while some evaluations try to discuss possible impacts – which, in the absence of reliable data, is mainly an exercise in hypothetical thinking – others mainly report outputs.

The 2018 Norwegian report – in our view, the most thoughtful and detailed of all the evaluations we reviewed – mentions the many challenges faced by evaluators. Among them is the already-noted lack of sound pre-analyses, robust baselines, and good indicators of achievement of objectives. A second challenge is the dire security situation in Afghanistan, which often made site access impossible and therefore crippled any efforts at data collection. Third, all donors allocated much of their aid via multi-donor trust funds. These funds, and their recipients, set their own priorities, thus, it is not possible to distinguish the impacts of one specific donor’s funding. Furthermore, the management of these funds clearly did not prioritize the evaluation of outcomes and impacts, and bilateral donors did not sufficiently push for better evaluations. As a result, we know very little about the outcomes and impacts of aid channelled through multi-donor trust funds.

Sweden, Denmark, and to some extent Canada based their reports partly on theories of change (ToC), but remained cautious about the value of doing so. Sweden’s report stated that ToC “tend to be generic and carry multiple untested assumptions about pathways of change limiting their plausibility” (Sweden, 2018, p. 25). Canada and the US both mentioned the hearts-and-minds approach in their discussions on the effects of stabilization efforts, but do not provide strong evidence that this approach worked.

All reports discuss at least some of the five OECD DAC evaluation criteria (relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability, and impact), but only Norway, Denmark, Finland, and the United Kingdom discussed all of them. All reports found that the aid was relevant for Afghanistan. This is not particularly surprising, given that Afghanistan has dire needs across all sectors, which makes it difficult to find a type of aid that would not be relevant to some extent. Many reports also concluded that the aid programs were effective. It should be noted, however, that the evaluations were rarely able to comment on outcomes and impacts, hence “effectiveness,” in this case, mostly refers to the provision of outputs. No evaluation claimed that aid was efficient – a testimony to how difficult and costly it is to implement aid programs in Afghanistan – and all reports cautioned that aid results were most likely not sustainable.

Overview of Methodologies Used in Each Evaluation within this Report:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evaluation</th>
<th>Data and Methods</th>
<th>Interviews/Number of Interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Two years of “staff research and travel” (p. 1)</td>
<td>Conversations with senior Kabul embassy staff listed (p. 1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Essentially a desk study</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Includes SIGAR reports (p. 26)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>Data and Methods</td>
<td>Interviews/Number of Interviews</td>
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<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
| Canada Synthesis Report: Summative Evaluation of Canada’s Afghanistan Development Program 2004–2013 | • Sample of projects covering 55% of program portfolio  
• Multi-method approach for quantitative and qualitative data  
• 2,000+ documents  
• Field visits to Kabul, Kandahar, Herat, and Jalalabad (p. 1)  
• Difficulty of having no baselines is noted (p. 103) | 220+ interviews with Canadians engaged in Afghanistan (p. 1) |
| UK Evaluation of DFID’s Country Programmes: Afghanistan 2002–2007         | • Document review and interviews in the UK, with a one-week field visit to Kabul by independent consultants (pp. 1–2)  
• The evaluation used “DFID’s own criteria of ‘success’ of programs and projects, citing the reviews and PRISM scores obtained throughout the period” (p. 2) | Yes, an undetermined number through a one-week field visit |
| New Zealand Achievements from 10 Years of Development Assistance in Bamyan, Afghanistan | • Based on “reviews, reports, the Activity Management System (AMS) and discussions with those involved in development work in Bamyan” (p. 1) | Yes, but unclear how many discussions on the ground |
| Australia Aid Program Performance Report 2016–2017, Afghanistan           | • Document review                                                                 | Unclear                         |
| Finland Evaluation: Finnish Aid to Afghanistan                            | • Literature review, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions in Helsinki, Brussels, Kabul, and Faryab provinces (p. 24) | 48+ interviews in Afghanistan (p. 92) |
| Sweden Summary of the Report of the Inquiry on Sweden’s Engagement in Afghanistan 2002–2014 | • Document review, interviews, and meetings with around 250 people in Afghanistan, Sweden, and other places (pp. 1–2) | Yes, but unclear how many |
| Sweden Review of Sida’s Support to Afghanistan: Lessons and Conclusions from 7 Evaluations | • Desk review including past evaluations (p. 7) | No |
### Evaluation

**Denmark**
Evaluation of Danish Development Support to Afghanistan

- Desk review and field work (p. 5)
- Yes, but unclear how many in Afghanistan

**Norway**
Evaluation of Norwegian Development Cooperation with Afghanistan 2001–2011

- Documents, interviews in Oslo, and field visits to Kabul and Faryab
- Yes, but unclear how many in Afghanistan

**Norway**

- Documents, interviews in Oslo, and field visits to Afghanistan
- Around 250 interviews with Afghans, Norwegians, and international experts

### 2.3 Evidence Base / Included Reports

We identified 11 bilateral country level evaluations which were all included. These are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title / Source</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Publication date</th>
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### About this Report

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title / Source</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Publication date</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>support in Afghanistan. Ministry of Foreign Affairs,</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
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<tr>
<td>development cooperation with Afghanistan 2001–2011.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation</td>
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<td>foreign assistance to Afghanistan. A majority staff</td>
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<td>report, prepared for the use of the committee on</td>
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<td>foreign relations. United States Senate</td>
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<td>Kingdom, Department for International Development</td>
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<td>to Afghanistan. Ministry for Foreign Affairs of</td>
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<tr>
<td>Finland, Department for Development Policy</td>
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### Details of the Reviewed Evaluation Reports

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Donor Country</th>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Publication Year</th>
<th>Time Period and Aid Volume Covered</th>
<th>Major Aid Channels</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs</td>
<td>Aid Program Performance Report 2016–17: Afghanistan</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>2016–2017 US $86.9 million</td>
<td>▪ 97% bilateral aid&lt;br&gt;▪ 69% on-budget, mainly through multi-donor trust funds such as ARTF and LOTFA</td>
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<td></td>
<td>and Trade</td>
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<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development</td>
<td>Synthesis Report: Summative Evaluation of Canada’s Afghanistan</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>2004–2013 CAD $1546 million</td>
<td>▪ Mainly multilateral aid and through NGOs&lt;br&gt;▪ Until 2009, most aid was disbursed multilaterally; after 2009, NGOs became more important; by 2012, around 40% was disbursed through NGOs&lt;br&gt;▪ 12% of aid was spent in Kandahar&lt;br&gt;▪ On-budget aid varied between 19% and 34%</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>Development Program 2004–2013</td>
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<td>Donor Country</td>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Publication Year</td>
<td>Time Period and Aid Volume Covered</td>
<td>Major Aid Channels</td>
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- State-building: Mostly through multi donor trust funds, such as ARTF and LOTFA  
- Livelihood: 60% through NSP; 20% through NGOs, 20% through various bi- and multilateral programs |
| Finland       | Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, Department for Development Policy | Evaluation: Finnish Aid to Afghanistan | 2007 | 2001–2007 €61 million (US $68 million) | - 50% in multi-donor trust funds (ARTF, LOTFA) |
| New Zealand   | New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (NZ MFAT) | New Zealand’s Achievements from 10 Years of Development Assistance in Bamyan, Afghanistan | 2013 | 2000–2013 NZ $80.36 million (US $53.3 million) | - Mainly bilateral |
- 23% international NGOs  
- 12% Norwegian NGOs |
- 22% UN agencies  
- 49% bilateral (many NGOs) |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Donor Country</th>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Publication Year</th>
<th>Time Period and Aid Volume Covered</th>
<th>Major Aid Channels</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
Around 15% spent for the Provincial Reconstruction Team in Balkh |
| **Sweden**    | Sweden, Sida, Afghanistan Unit at the Department for Asia, North Africa and Humanitarian Assistance | Review of Sida’s Support to Afghanistan: Lessons and Conclusions from 7 Evaluations | 2015 | 2007–2015 Amount of total funding unclear. | 5 bilateral programs  
2 multilateral programs |
 Majority of funding went to ARTF, which by early 2008 accounted for 46% of DFID’s Afghanistan budget |
| **US**        | The US State Department/USAID | Evaluating U.S. Foreign Assistance to Afghanistan: A Majority Staff Report, prepared for the use of the committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, June 8, 2011 | June 2011 | 2002–2010 US $103.6 billion ($18.8 billion in development assistance; $84.8 billion in support for the Afghan security forces) | Predominately bilateral  
On-budget around 38% |
3 Governance

3.1 Objectives and Types of Projects

Most country-level evaluations reported a strong focus on governance and a desire to reduce corruption and build the capacity of the Afghan government. Objectives ranged from combating corruption and building state capacity to supporting elections, human rights, rule of law, and judicial reform. Several evaluations (New Zealand, Finland, the US, and the UK) highlighted their efforts regarding the NSP, which the UK highlighted as having "contributed to enhancing state legitimacy" (United Kingdom, 2009, p. xvi).

Projects largely fell under the following umbrellas: improving governance and elections, fighting corruption, training law and order officials, and increasing local accountability. Almost every evaluation reported contributing to anti-corruption projects through either payroll reform for the policing sector or through more informal means such as complaint boxes.

3.1.1 Multi-Donor Trust Funds: ARTF and LOTFA

Multilateral donor trust fund mechanisms such as the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF) and the Law and Order Trust Fund for Afghanistan (LOTFA) received a major share of the funding. The UK was the first to sign on to support the ARTF (United Kingdom, 2009, p. 61). Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland, Australia, and Canada also contributed to the ARTF. Australia delivered its funding largely through the ARTF (Australia, 2017, p. 5). Sweden mentioned that contributing to the ARTF was a means for improving donor coordination, but it did not review the fund in its own evaluation (Sweden, 2018, p. 7). Evaluations by Finland, Australia, Denmark, and Norway specifically reviewed their support of LOTFA, noting that it did reduce corruption related to payroll processes.

3.1.2 National Solidarity Program (NSP)

Most reports mention the NSP, a large community-driven development program financed via the ARTF. An early funder for the NSP was the UK’s DFID, eventually giving it £56 million by 2008 (United Kingdom, 2009, pp. A7–1). The US evaluation noted that they are the largest donor to the NSP, giving over half a billion dollars between 2002 and 2010 (United States, 2011, p. 26). New Zealand also helped fund the NSP in Bamyan province (New Zealand, 2013, p. 15). Finland and Canada also provided funding.

3.1.3 Other programs

Sweden’s programs, created with the goal of increasing a sense of accountability from the local government to the citizens of Afghanistan, were aimed at anti-corruption efforts and strengthening local ownership. The open dialogue format provided by radio sessions, public hearings, and other means fostered temporary accountability (Sweden, 2018, p. 19). Governance has also been at the forefront of Norwegian development aid projects since 2001 with the priority of restoring public administration in Afghanistan. The focus was mainly on capacity building, elections, policing, justice sector reform, the implementation...
of policies adopted by democratic institutions, and an emphasis on promoting fundamental human rights (Norway, 2012, p. 67). Denmark had similar goals, divided into three themes, one of which encompassed governance, democracy, and human rights, with the objective of making the institutional capacities of state and civil society actors stronger (Denmark, n.d., p. 2).

The first two years after 2001 saw the UK’s DFID support capacity building for the interim and transitional government; the interim strategy in 2005–2006 continued this focus on public administration. The objective was to support proper financial management of government resources by providing technical assistance to the Ministry of Finance, as well as better overall public administration and local government reform. DFID focused on funding recurring payments such as public servant salaries (for instance, for teachers) through the ARTF (United Kingdom, 2009, p. 20). DFID also supported counter-narcotics operations through partnerships within the Afghan Drugs Inter-Departmental Unit (ADIDU). This unit received £130 million between 2005 and 2008 (United Kingdom, 2009, p. 49).

Sweden partially funded three specific programs, which contributed to the improvement of governance in Afghanistan: the Afghanistan Analysts Network (AAN), the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU), and the UNDP’s Afghanistan Sub-National Governance Program (ASGP) Phase II (Sweden, 2018, p. 18).

Norway contributed approximately NOK 729 million to development assistance in the governance sector. Donations went to the following sub-sectors: elections, policing, justice, the rule of law, subnational governance, institution building, human rights, and anti-corruption. Of the NOK 729 million, NOK 206 million (28%) was spent on democratic participation and elections, which included supporting the Independent Elections Commission (IEC), increasing female voter turnout by addressing access and security concerns, conducting election observations, and supporting the UNDP’s ELECT (Enhancing Legal and Electoral Capacity for Tomorrow) program (Norway, 2012, p. 69). Norway also spent NOK 265.5 million (37%) through multinational projects – the ARTF Justice National Priority Program, UNDP’s LOTFA, and the EUPOL police training program – on efforts related to policing, justice, and the rule of law (Norway, 2012, p. 69). NOK 188 million (26%) was spent on government administration including subnational governance. These include, at the provincial and district levels, public administrative reforms and, at the national level, specific capacity-development projects such as the National Area Based Development Program (NABDP) and Afghanistan Sub-National Governance Program (ASGP; Norway, 2012, p. 69).

More specifically, ASGP focuses on training for government officials and workshops on policy development (Norway, 2012, p. 71). Human rights and anti-corruption have also been consistent themes in Norwegian development policy since 2001 but were provided with less money: NOK 70 million (10%; Norway, 2012, p. 69). These contributions supported Norway’s engagement through various meetings with Afghan authorities on human rights issues contributed to LOFTA’s efforts on enhancing police pay, and supported ELECT’s fraud-reduction campaign (Norway, 2012, p. 70).

Similarly, Denmark contributed DDK 231 million from 2015 to 2017 to projects including the ARTF’s Public Financial Management Reform Project (PFMR) and Capacity Building for Results Facility (CBR; Denmark, n.d., Annex D). The former was designed to tackle corruption by letting Afghans report possible misuse of funds (Denmark, n.d., p. 8). The latter aimed to develop line ministries by improving their budget execution rates, ministerial processes, and service delivery (Denmark, n.d., p. 13). Denmark also contributed DDK 30 million over three years – and financed it since 2002 – to the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), devoted to “the promotion, protection and monitoring of human rights and the investigation of human rights abuses” (Denmark, n.d., p. 15).
Other smaller contributions – ranging from DDK 6.5 million to 27 million – went to projects such as the following:

- Independent Joint Anti-Corruption Monitoring and Evaluation Committee (MEC; Denmark, n.d., Annex D)
- Tawanmandi (Civil Society Trust Fund; Denmark, n.d., Annex B)
- Free and Fair Election Foundation of Afghanistan (FEFA), the only domestic project focusing on free and fair elections in Afghanistan (Denmark, n.d., p. 16)
- UNDP’s Enhancing Legal and Electoral Capacity for Tomorrow (ELECT) Phase II (Denmark, n.d., Annex D)

New Zealand spent NZ $16,652,541 on governance, justice, and rule of law projects over 10 years. New Zealand police had a local police training operation called Operation Highland and financially supported building new stations and a human rights commission (New Zealand, 2013, p. 12). New Zealand funded professional development – for civil servants, NGOs, young professionals, and media – through the Aga Khan Foundation between 2006 and 2012, as well as the National Solidarity Program (NSP) run by the Afghan Ministry for Rural Rehabilitation and Development (New Zealand, 2013, p. 15).

Finland financially supported elections, a household census, anti-narcotics, and governance programs through the UNDP, UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund), UNODC (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime), ARTF, LOTFA, and AIHRC (Finland, 2007, p. 33). Finland also helped prison improvement through the PRT Maimana, where their efforts were focused on supporting police, local government, and the local Maimana prison (Finland, 2007, pp. 63–64).

### 3.2 Findings

#### 3.2.1 ARTF

Many donors, including the US, observed that since ARTF is World Bank-administered, bilateral donors do not have the authority to audit its programs directly. There were many calls for better monitoring and evaluation. The UK’s report noted that the impact of the ARTF on the government’s legitimacy and ability to deliver, particularly outside of Kabul, remains open to question, that its capacity to deliver services in the provinces was weak, and that budget execution was highly variable. Australia’s report notes that bilateral donors had to rely on the World Bank’s self-assessment, which “provides comprehensive output reporting but lacks an overall sense of performance of the ARTF as a whole” (emphasis by authors; Australia, 2017, p. 5). The Australian report also noted that the lack of capacity of the Afghan Government capacity resulted in weak performance of ARTF-funded development projects.

Finland found that multi-donor trust funds were an efficient channel for aid contributions with ARTF seen as a good instrument for aid coordination, resource mobilization, and policy dialogue. However, the Finnish evaluation also noted a lack of long-term evidence to prove how effective ARTF is, and that ARTF could create parallel structures – where the delivery mechanism is not fully integrated into national systems – that could undermine this state building process. Most importantly, it was noted that
ARTF is, by design, not sustainable and needs to be complemented by a gradual phase-in of Afghan fiscal responsibility. Thus, ARTF was seen as an “interim” solution (Finland, 2007, p. 72). And while cost-effective, “it is difficult to assess its impact at all levels” (Finland, 2007, p. 43).

The Norwegian evaluation reached similar conclusions. It noted that ARTF improved harmonization and aid coordination, but also cautioned that it was unclear to what extent the capacity of the Afghan government actually improved as a result of ARTF, especially in light of limited Afghan ownership of development priorities, weak governance, limited capacity in ministries, and endemic corruption. The report stated that line ministries lacked the capacity to design and implement projects and programs, and, once funding was obtained, budget execution remained a perennial problem. Norway also observed that there were limited indications of positive impacts, since no outputs or outcomes could be assessed in many districts for security reasons. Finally, the report warned that long-term sustainability was unlikely because donor financing might be reduced, and because donors were essentially creating an unsustainable parallel administration: “So while on the one hand ARTF supports national implementation by making Ministries responsible for project implementation and accounting for results, the weak administrative capacity is by-passed by hiring a plethora of international and national advisers and staff, at enhanced pay scales, to do the job that the Ministry should be doing. In fact, the projects are creating a parallel structure within the structure. This is an inherently unsustainable situation, especially when overall donor funding is expected to decline” (Norway, 2012, p. 60).

3.2.2 LOTFA

Australia’s 2017 report was critical of LOTFA, noting unsatisfactory effectiveness due to poor disbursement and implementation progress, and lack of evidence for achievements, despite improvements in the coverage of electronic funds transfers of police salaries in 2016.

The Norwegian report noted that LOTFA, while successful in terms of outputs, could not, for a number of reasons, bring about the desired outcome of an effective and accepted police force. These reasons included a lack of agreement between international donors (for example, the German/EU civilian policing approach contrasted with the US militarized approach) and a lack of clarity from Afghan authorities about whether the orientation of the Afghan National Police (ANP) should be on community policing or counterinsurgency. LOTFA’s main achievement, according to Norway, was to limit corruption by establishing a police payroll system that encouraged 99% of police officers to be paid electronically. However, public perception of police remained very low (Norway, 2012, p. 73).

The Danish evaluation noted that LOTFA struggled to grasp the broader political issues underpinning insecurity, instead focusing on technical and administrative issues. In particular, the inability to develop a multi-year planning framework due to the short-term funding horizons of donors, limited interventions in institutional capacity building, and inadequate measures to address corruption in the sector were significant constraints.
3.2.3 NSP

For the UK, the NSP represented a major development success in post-Taliban Afghanistan. The Norwegian evaluation, however, questioned whether investing in NSP is “the most efficient or sustainable way of delivering community development” (Norway, 2012, p. 56). Finland’s report stated that NSP, with its focus at the subnational level, led to more public faith in the system of government and improved state-civil society relations, but also questioned NSP’s sustainability (Finland, 2007, p. 97).

Sweden’s evaluation found that NSP had done much to deliver public goods such as infrastructure to villages but had no effects on village economies and none on customary structures of authority. Canada agreed that the NSP was good at “sponsoring community development councils across the entire country, financing local subprojects and, in turn, enhancing the legitimacy of the Afghan state” but it questioned whether NSP lead to improved local governance (Canada, 2015, p. 35).

Quoting a SIGAR report, the US evaluation says: “The high level of community involvement in NSP activities – CDC elections, social audits, and community contributions – has resulted in a degree of local ownership of NSP-funded projects which helps safeguard assets” (United States, 2011, p. 27).

3.2.4 Other Findings

Beyond the findings on the big multi-donor trust funds, the evaluations noted a range of other verdicts on governance, with Sweden reporting that combatting corruption proved very difficult (Sweden, 2018, p. 20).

Norway and Denmark reported that their support to ELECT programs, which aimed to contribute to free and fair elections, was reasonably successful. For example, there was an increase in registered voters from 9.4 million in 2004 to 12.7 million in 2009. There was also an increase in the number of citizens feeling that they participated in a free and fair election (from 61% in 2014 to 70% in 2017). This coincided with increased participation in national elections from 4.2 million in 2010 to 5 million in 2015, with an increase in women’s participation of 5% (Denmark, n.d., p. 18). However, Norway also noted that UNDP’s ELECT was widely criticized for poor leadership, poor coordination with international donors, and a lack of budgeting capacity. Since there was no alternative mechanism for financing elections, and because of their enormous political and symbolic significance, it would have been politically difficult to withdraw support (Norway, 2016, p. 105).

The UK’s report states that its governance programs did not sufficiently address issues of accountability for governance and state building. DFID “has given little attention to accountability issues and the demand side of governance, including the monitoring and advocacy role of civil society and other accountability mechanisms” (United Kingdom, 2009, pp. x–xii). The report also mentions that some of the weakest projects have been in the state-building portfolio. Programs implemented in Helmand – a very insecure province – with the aim of improving government capacity at central and local levels and strengthen links between them have not produced good results.

Canada, which spent 22% of its development aid on governance, found little evidence of a broader impact. Opportunities to make local/subnational administration stronger and better connected to the central government were not taken. Worryingly, the evaluation also noted that Canada’s intervention may have led to a “parallel civil service” (Canada, 2015, pp. 2, 3).
New Zealand’s evaluation focused solely on Bamyan province, where it operated a PRT. Focusing mainly on outputs and notes, it reports, among other things, that 3,000 police officers were trained, five new police stations were built, and more than 90% of recruits had passed basic and criminal investigative training since 2005. The country’s first Afghan National Police Women’s Committee was established in Bamyan and female police officers increased from one to 18 in three districts (presumably over eight years). Close to 1,000 government workers in the region encompassing Bamyan were supported through the Aga Khan Foundation’s professional development program (New Zealand, 2013, p. 13). New Zealand police also helped the Regional Training Centre transfer their work from print to digital, including work and holiday scheduling (New Zealand, 2013, p. 14). The Human Rights Commission Bamyan office reported that 50,000–60,000 people received human rights training between 2003 and 2012 (New Zealand, 2013, p. 15).

4 Stabilization

4.1 Objectives and Types of Projects

There exists no accepted definition of what stabilization aid involves and many types of aid could, theoretically, contribute to stabilizing the political or security situation on the ground. Out of the ten donors reviewed in this study, four – Denmark, the US, the UK, and Canada – supported programs specifically designed to promote the military side of stabilization. The hope was that this aid – typically small, quick infrastructure projects, training programs, cash-for-works schemes, or direct transfers of food, seeds, tools, etc. – would help reduce violence. Not every program clearly spelled out a theory of change, but most stabilization programs were implicitly or explicitly based on a version of the “hearts-and-minds” approach, hoping that aid would incentivize local communities to forge cooperative ties with foreign forces and the Afghan government, thus decreasing active or passive support for insurgents.

4.2 Findings

Assessments of the results of stabilization programs are generally negative. The main vehicle was the Afghanistan Stabilization Program (ASP), a national program designed in 2004 to “establish basic security and good governance in the districts and provinces of Afghanistan.” Its purpose was to reverse the deteriorating security situation in many areas of the country by delivering visible benefits to provinces and districts. Since its inception, ASP has been criticized extensively by donor and external commentators for its poor performance.

Reporting on the effects of the ASP, the UK evaluation notes that DFID made a single payment of £20 million directly to the Afghan government in March 2004 as the first major donor. The Minister of Interior was responsible for delivery. The ASP included training, establishing a Provincial Stabilization Fund ($2.5 million for reconstruction projects in each province), administrative reform, and support for district infrastructure. By the end of 2006, there was little evidence of tangible benefits on the ground, and DFID ended its support for the program. DFID concluded that ASP’s mandate was poorly defined and over-ambitious in its aim, without a realistic sense of what could be achieved. There was, as yet, no proven relationship between stabilization and longer-term development.
Canada operated its stabilization programs predominantly in Kandahar, the aim being “to link short-term, quick impact projects financed by the military to CIDA’s longer-term, sustainable development activities at all levels” (Canada, 2015, p. 41). The Canadian evaluation does not comment on the effects of stabilization projects on security, but notes that while impressive short-time results were made, “long-term development could not be accomplished with an emphasis on short-term implementation strategies, which sped up project delivery considerably, but failed to ensure sustainable, long-term development results in more than a few areas” (Canada, 2015, p. 41).

Denmark spent DKK 7.1 million (US $1.1 million) on the Helmand Area-Based Stabilization (HABS) program and also provided funding for stabilization advisors from 2007 onward (Denmark, 2012, p. 32). The report noted the absence of published evaluations on these stabilization efforts, but mentioned that DFID found no evidence that developmental activity was having an impact on security.

The US found limited evidence that stabilization programs promoted stability in Afghanistan, with some research suggesting that aid actually could undermine stability. The report pointed to the need to re-evaluate stabilization programs in conflict zones: “We must challenge the assumption that our stabilization programs in their current form necessarily contribute to stability” (United States, 2011, p. 13). Specifically, the report was critical of stabilization projects aimed at winning hearts and minds, saying that at times US funding ends up paying Afghans to do work that they have been doing in the community for free for decades and that such funding can end up “distorting the economy” (United States, 2011, p. 12). Another concern was about over-injecting cash aid into communities with little absorptive capacity. The US evaluation cautions against believing that spending on stabilization inherently paints a positive image of aid providers (United States, 2011, pp. 12–13). It should be noted that these concerns, formulated 2011, were later fully confirmed by a number of reports by SIGAR and by much evidence from academic work (Zürcher, 2017; SIGAR, 2018b).
5 Gender Equality and Female Empowerment

5.1 Objectives and Types of Projects

The evaluation reports of Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, and the UK all contain sections on gender programming. Seen as a cross-cutting theme, they sought to ensure that gender issues were taken into account by the large multi-donor trust funds (ARTF and LOTFA), their flagship projects such as EQUIP (Education Quality Improvement Program, one of the ARTF’s investment windows), and the NSP. In addition, these donors also funded specific gender programs, much of it disbursed through multilateral mechanisms. For example, Norway allocated 80% of its gender funding to UN Women (previously UNIFEM), which in turn sought to build capacity for the Ministry of Women’s Affairs (MoWA), among other projects.

Other programs included civic education and literacy programs run by DFID; the Danish gender-balanced Mine Risk Education (MRE); projects aimed at empowering women against violence by helping women “succeed in policing,” funded by New Zealand and Australia (New Zealand, 2013, p. 14); and Australia’s program “Ending Violence Against Women,” implement by five national and international partners. This program involved counselling women and girls, training law and justice actors on gender-based violence prevention, financially supporting survivors of violence, improving education opportunities for girls in remote areas, and capacity building for local NGOs.

5.2 Findings

Overall, the findings from these evaluation reports suggest that improvements in access to services for women and girls – mainly in health and education – have been made. But progress in the field of gender equality remained elusive; donors often reported outputs, but never outcomes or impacts. Female-specific programs can often go awry. For example, Denmark reported that the creation of gender-balanced Mine Risk Education teams failed because the program did not succeed in bringing in enough women (Sweden, 2018, p. 15). The capacity and political will of the Afghan government and political elites for gender equality programming remains very limited.

Australia sees itself as one of the lead donors on gender. The 2017 Australian report, evaluating programs from 2002–2014, rated the programs in the gender sector as “green,” which was an improvement from 2015–2016’s “amber” rating.

The evaluation listed detailed outputs, such as the following:

- 1,695 cases of “violence against women” received counselling services
- 1,665 police and justice officials, 75 judges and prosecutors, and 50 governmental and NGO staff trained on gender-based violence prevention and response
- Piloting a Young Women’s Leadership Program
- Improved educational opportunities for students, predominately girls, in rural and remote areas that fall outside the reach of the normal school system
However, the report is silent about the outcomes, impacts, and sustainability of Australian gender programming, which makes one wonder on which basis Australia rated its gender programs as “green.”

At the time, Canada did not have specific gender projects but treated gender as a cross-cutting theme. Its report noted that gender equality results were mainly concentrated in the social sectors through improved access to services. Improvements for women related to human rights and their role in decision-making were limited (Canada, 2015, pp. 3, 6).

Finland, like Canada, did not run specific gender projects, but noted its support for the Microfinance Investment Support Facility to Afghanistan (MISFA) and argued that microfinancing automatically contributes to gender equality. In 2011, 67% of loans were made to women. However, the report is silent about the possible impact of these loans on female economic empowerment.

Sweden’s report stated that, in general, progress was made in terms of girls’ and women’s access to health and medical care, without explicitly linking this progress to Swedish or international support. The report also noted that there remained “room for further improvement to reduce the discrimination towards Afghan women” (Sweden, 2017, p. 12).

The UK report noted that DFID’s female-centred civic education program reached more than half a million women in 2004, surpassing its target of 328,800. DFID also reported that 41% of registered voters were female (United Kingdom, 2009, p. 48). However, the report remained skeptical about overall improvement on gender equality and noted, somewhat somberly, that “gender will for a long time be one of the intractable issues to which only incremental improvements can be made” (United Kingdom, 2009, p. 35).

Norway’s 2012 report also predominately listed outputs. Norway’s contribution to LOTFA, for example, helped to recruit 1,000 female police officers (Norway, 2012, p. 70). With Norwegian help, 23 Women Resource Centres with a focus on literacy training were also established at the local level. The evaluation calls this “a remarkable achievement in a country where women are hardly ever allowed to go outside their villages” (Norway, 2012, p. 91). It does not, however, report on the outcomes and impacts of these centres. The report also points to “a positive example of Norway’s positive role was in Faryab where last minute support from the PRT with the Governor and the NGO AWSDC (Afghan Women Skills Development Center) ensured that two female representatives were mobilized to attend the Peace Jirga in Kabul in 2010,” and that “women in Kabul also appreciated the various functions hosted at the Embassy which provided activists with safe space to meet each other as mentioned in interviews” (Norway, 2012, p. 91).

In a rather self-congratulatory tone, the report adds that “a strong point of Norwegian assistance is the representation of Norwegian women in the development program overall. Having access to foreign women role models is important because there are no women in senior positions in the provincial government so women’s needs can easily be overlooked” (Norway, 2012, p. 90). The impact of these foreign women role models is not further discussed.

Despite such symbolic successes, the report also notes “no signs of increased capacity in MOWA (Ministry of Women’s Affairs) as a result of UNIFEM support” (80% of Norway’s gender funding went to UNIFEM; Norway, 2012, p. 78). The 2012 Norwegian report concluded that there was little overall impact on gender issues outside Kabul and the more liberal cities, and that Afghan ownership of internationally agreed-upon policy priorities, among them gender, remained limited.
The 2016 Norwegian report reiterates the assessment of the poor performance of UNIFEM in its support for MOWA. It also stated that “changing cultural and religious values takes a long time in most societies. Concrete measures are needed to bring about changes in Afghan social structures that result in greater influence and more rights for women. Political rhetoric and support for international conventions in themselves produce few results” (Norway, 2016, p. 115). It then called for projects that strengthen women’s access to resources and services in practical ways and mentioned “education for girls is an example of an initiative that may improve women’s position in society in the long term” (Norway, 2016, p. 115).

The report also provided an example of how gender projects may do more harm than good – something about which other reports were silent.

**Training female police officers, seen as an important part of the Norwegian police effort, had unforeseen consequences:**

At least one of the female Afghan officers in the Norwegian programme decided to move abroad due to threats she received. Many viewed the project as a direct threat to Afghanistan’s cultural and religious values and, without the continual presence of international personnel, the women had little protection against attitudes in their own society. This was a nationwide problem. The effort to train female police officers illustrated a basic dilemma in the international community’s emphasis on gender equality. On one hand, there was a need to increase the number of women in police and legal institutions and, in so doing, help to safeguard women’s rights. On the other hand, placing women in male-dominated structures, such as the police, entailed risks. The Ministry of Interior Affairs had not taken measures to ensure women’s safety in the workplace and female police officers were subjected to discrimination and sexual harassment. However, many international donors, including Norway, were more concerned about counting the number of policewomen than examining the nature of the effort and the consequences for the individuals.

(Norway, 2016, p. 107)
6 Sustainable Economic Development

6.1 Objectives and Types of Projects

Sustainable economic development is the broadest sector in this review. Among the main objectives are poverty reduction, securing livelihoods, creating jobs, and improving rural development, mainly by investing in infrastructure projects such as energy corridors and irrigation schemes and by providing training to farmers.

It is interesting to see that the sector received little attention in the 11 evaluation reports, despite the fact that economic development and poverty reduction are at the core of international development and received a significant share of the funding to Afghanistan. This may partly be explained by the fact that much of the funding was channelled through large multilateral mechanisms – prominently the ARTF and NSP – which makes it difficult to assess effectiveness and to attribute effects to individual donors.

6.2 Findings

One of Australia’s priorities was to support the Afghan Government in achieving economic growth; its focus was mainly on improving livelihoods in rural areas by lifting the incomes of farmers, supporting better market access, and improving seeds. An important program was the Australia Afghanistan Community Resilience Scheme (AACRS), a partnership between the Afghan and Australian governments and five NGOs. Projects under AACRS were implemented through the NGO partners (Australia, 2017, pp. 10–11). Australia also supported the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation, and Livestock in helping Afghans living in areas with little water (Australia, 2017, p. 11). AACRS worked with 95,000 people in ten provinces on livelihood projects. More than 23,000 people – including 5,500 women – received training on “improved agricultural practices, vocational training, and market development” (Australia, 2017, p. 11). While the report is mostly silent on impacts, it reports that average income increased for women farmers (without specifying the numbers).

Finland mainly worked through NSP and MISFA (Microfinance Investment Support Facility for Afghanistan), but did not report possible impacts of these programs on economic gains. As we have seen above, it is doubtful that NSP had an impact on poverty reduction.

Sweden’s evaluation simply highlighted that poverty levels did not decrease, remaining at 36% of the population, and concluded that Swedish aid did not contribute to the reduction of poverty, and its objectives were thus not met (Sweden, 2017, p. 11).

Denmark channelled much of its aid through ARTF, but also supported other programs, such as the Comprehensive Agriculture and Rural Development Facility (CARD-F), which aimed to increase the prosperity of agricultural communities through support for specific value chains (dairy, poultry, cotton, etc.) with training, technical assistance, and infrastructure development; the report does not mentions any results (Denmark, n.d., p. 32).
New Zealand’s aid mainly went to Bamiyan, where it ran a PRT. The impact of these projects is largely unclear. One of the projects was to support a tourist information office, including training for English speaking guides. As of today, the website of Bamiyan’s tourist office, unfortunately, is down.

The UK provided support to the livelihood sector, spending close to £45 million in 2005–2006 and contributing another £20 million to MISFA (Microfinance Investment Support Facility for Afghanistan). DFID supported the rural construction sector as well, providing £18 million in 2005–2006 to the National Rural Access Program (NRAP), £17 million to the NSP, and £10 million to the Helmand Agricultural and Rural Development Program (HARDP) in 2006. DFID considered its support to rural reconstruction as effective because it created jobs and built/repaired almost 10,000 kilometres of rural roads, as well as schools and clinics. HARDP also resulted in more than 200 wells and roads in process, and its support to NSP resulted in upwards of 4,000 “sub-projects including access to basic services such as power, roads, drinking and irrigation water, and education” (United Kingdom, 2009, pp. 47, 42).

Canada spent around 20% of its funds on economic development during the 2007–2018 period, but the sector was never mentioned as being among Canada’s development priorities. Its massive so-called “signature project” was the Arghandab dam, meant to increase the amount of irrigated land. However, the evaluation found no information on actual long-term impacts and concluded that despite evidence for achieved outputs there was “no evidence that the system is being effectively operated, which may lead to a rapid deterioration if no follow-up is provided through the new project funded by USAID” (Canada, 2015, pp. 28–29). The Arghandab dam became a symbol for the difficulty and ineffectiveness of large, ambitious “signature” projects in highly insecure regions.

Canada’s report also mentioned a 2013 evaluation of NSP that found improved access to basic services (such as utilities and health) but no effect “on general production and marketing outcomes nor on agricultural yields, productivity, nor harvest sales. Overall, the study concludes that the impact of the NSP on economic welfare appears to have been driven more by the infusion of block grants than by completed economic projects, such as irrigation canals, access roads, or bridges. This is corroborated with the finding that NSP-funded village-level irrigation and transportation projects had limited success” (Canada, 2015, p. 37).

Canada’s evaluation noted that many community infrastructure projects, “such as water supply networks and tertiary roads, are simply too expensive for most communities to maintain” (Canada, 2015, p. 43). Furthermore, many of these community-based projects resulted in millions of labour days but the employment was of a temporary, unsustainable nature without continuing aid flows. Finally, the evaluation pointed out that projects on microfinance, enterprise development, and vocational training had not yet produced income generation or more jobs.

Norway’s rural development efforts targeted a wide range of areas: access to clean drinking water, electrification, agriculture and farming projects, income-generation, afforestation, disaster prevention, self-help groups, and local capacity-building of organizations. Rural development was viewed as an important, long-term initiative and as one of Norway’s priorities (Norway, 2016, p. 13).

Like most other donors, Norway viewed the World Bank’s NSP as a good channel for national support, and a large part of Norwegian funds for rural development went there. Citing an external evaluation, the Norwegian report stated that the NSP had been successful in providing access to clean drinking water and electricity, but less impact on infrastructure or the reputation of Afghan central authorities. However, the program did help to increase the participation of women in local decision-making.
Norway’s aid was also directed at Faryab province, where it operated a PRT. The objective was to “support to rural development aims at increasing yields and improving the income base, improving the quality of water for drinking and irrigation purposes, increasing sources of renewable energy and meeting infrastructural needs” (Norway, 2012, p. 98). The report states that the projects reached remote communities and contributed to increased agriculture and better access to water.

Norway also supported the National Area-Based Development Program (NABDP), a joint intervention of the UNDP and the Ministry of Rehabilitation and Rural Development (MRRD). NABDP seeks to reduce poverty and vulnerability through a dual focus on productive rural infrastructure and the institutionalization of District Development Assemblies (DDAs). NABDP was found to have built a large number of small rural infrastructure projects across all 34 provinces, but it was not possible to assess its impact because of a lack of baseline data (Norway, 2012, p. 86). The report stated that “the least effective component of NABDP is the economic regeneration component which aimed to create jobs and incomes for people throughout the country. This is one of the most important challenges in Afghanistan, which various donor-funded projects have also aimed to address, but so far limited results have been realized” (Norway, 2012, p. 86).

In conclusion, the fact that poverty levels have not been reduced strongly suggests that the overall objective of aid – poverty reduction – has not been met. Development aid has helped build a large amount of infrastructure, alleviate threats to livelihoods, and fund many labour days, but has not led to sustainable job creation or income. Unfortunately, there is no unadulterated success story to be found in this sector.

7 Education

7.1 Objectives and Types of Projects

Education was an early priority for the Afghan government, and all reviewed donors allocated parts of their funding for education projects. By far the most popular and most funded mechanism was EQUIP (Education Quality Improvement Program), an investment window under the multi-donor trust fund ARTF. EQUIP’s objective was to improve the quality of education in the long-run by strengthening the management of schools and teaching/learning activities, by investing in teachers and associated staff, by constructing schools, and by supporting the Ministry of Education to ensure sustainability (Norway, 2012, p. 56). Initially, EQUIP mainly financed the rehabilitation and construction of schools.

In addition, many donors also supported other education programs bilaterally. In fact, the education sector became notorious for its lack of donor coordination, as noted in the US evaluation: “The Afghan Government is constantly outraged by the fact that they see the Germans build a school here, the French supply schoolbooks there, and the Belgians do a teacher meeting at a third location, which means you have three separate projects that fail, rather than one project that would succeed if, indeed, you knew about them and were able to steer them to work together” (United States, 2011, p. 28). Nevertheless, after years of war and Taliban rule, early and substantial progress was achieved in the education sector, with rising enrollment rates for both boys and girls in primary education.
7.2 Findings

Undoubtedly, foreign aid has helped to rebuild education in Afghanistan. The Canadian evaluation pointed out that access to education went up between 2002 and 2013, but cautioned that progress since 2008 had been moderate and that 2020 goals for enrollment might not be achieved (Canada, 2015, p. 26). Sweden, likewise, reported a drastic increase in access to education for women and girls: in 2001, only 40% of girls were attending school; by 2014, the percentage had increased to 61% (Sweden, 2017, p. 9).

Denmark channelled most of its education aid through EQUIP but also supported the NGO Danish Assistance to Afghan Rehabilitation and Technical Training (Denmark, 2012, p. 12). Denmark reported that its funding to EQUIP contributed to the following outcomes: increased student enrollment in basic education from 9,100,000 in 2014 to 10,350,000 in 2017; number of schools built increased from 8,000 in 2014 to 9,500 in 2017 (Denmark, n.d., p. 27).

New Zealand’s aid for education once again focused on Bamyan province. The report lists a number of outputs: by 2012, there were 353 schools, up from 12 during the Taliban era. In 2003, Bamyan University consisted of two faculties and 200 students – by 2013, it had grown to four faculties, 20 departments, and 2,700 students, with 15% of them female (New Zealand, 2013, p. 11). In 2005, 15% of teachers were female, growing to 38% by 2012. Only three female students passed the university entrance exam in 2005, increasing to 247 by 2012 (New Zealand, 2013, p. 2).

The Norwegian report contains the longest, most candid, most thoughtful section on achievements in the education sector of all the reviewed evaluation reports. For Norway, education was a priority, and Norway was the first country to support EQUIP, but from 2004 to 2009, the percentage of total Norwegian development aid that went towards it was relatively small (8–10%). Norway reported the following positive outputs for EQUIP: the construction of 3,425 classrooms under EQUIP I and 1,804 under EQUIP II; an increase in student enrollment (boys to 701,043 and girls to 469,130); and successful human resources training (92,831 teachers and 7,006 principals; Norway, 2012, p. 57). Despite these impressive outputs, the Norwegian evaluation report points out that “no specific studies have been found detailing possible outcomes of the EQUIP projects” (Norway, 2012, p. 82).

The impressive enrollment figures and number of schools built, in fact, include many "ghost" pupils and schools that do not actually exist. In 2015, there were still 3.3 million children without access to education, especially in remote areas. The Norwegian report also cautioned that “few questions were raised regarding the quality of education, which curriculum was used, whether teachers were sufficiently qualified, what the textbooks contained, and, not least, how much the pupils had learned by the time they left school” (Norway, 2016, p. 103). It concluded with the sobering statement that by 2015, it had become clear that the quality of educational in the country was generally poor.
8 Health

8.1 Objectives and Types of Projects

Afghanistan has made progress in its provision of health services since the fall of the Taliban in 2001. Between 2003 and 2008, access to health care was improved with the implementation of a Basic Package of Health Services (BPHS), providing primary care, enhanced access to in-patient care, and elimination of national user fees. Due to limited government capacity to provide health services, all publicly funded health services provided today are done so either through contracting-out, in the form of service delivery by NGOs, or through service provision and programming operated directly by the Ministry of Public Health.

Health did not attract much funding compared to such sectors as governance, rural development, or stabilization, but almost all donors did devote part of their funding. For most donors, the objectives in this sector were to improve access to basic health and medical care – with special attention to access for women and girls – to improve sexual and reproductive health and rights, and to eradicate polio (Sweden, 2017, p. 6; Canada, 2015, p. 24). In general, the reviewed evaluation reports devote very little space to the health sector and are mostly silent about the prospects for sustainability. However, all reports note an increase in access to basic health.

8.2 Findings

New Zealand spent NZ $3,624,321 on health projects over 10 years, including financially supporting the Bamyan provincial hospital through the Aga Khan Foundation, funding basic healthcare in one district since 2006, and funding, along with other donors, clinics in seven other districts (New Zealand, 2013, p. 16). New Zealand reported that the Bamyan Hospital doubled the number of beds since 2004. In 2012, it received ISO 9001:2009 certification. The Shibar clinics saw 469 assisted births and the vaccination of 883 children under the age of one (New Zealand, 2013, p. 16).

Finland’s funding through multilateral channels from 2001 to 2006 supported reproductive healthcare through Marie Stopes International (MSI), an NGO that specializes in reproductive health for women (Finland, 2007, p. 33). Finland noted that funding MSI was highly relevant, as the NGO saw 40–60 clients daily and provided a range of reproductive healthcare – from vaccinations to helping with deliveries – that the Ministry of Health was unable to support at the time.

Sweden reported a reduction of cases of women dying in childbirth and a reduction in the infant mortality rate because of the programs they funded (Sweden, 2017, p. 9).

The American evaluation was the only one to mention projects partnered with the Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) or centred on the Basic Package of Health Services (BPHS). The US included the BPHS in its evaluation as an example of how “national-level programs that are on-budget and have significant Afghan buy-in can achieve more with less” (United States, 2011, p. 25). It is described as “a standardized package of basic services, including maternal and newborn health, child health, and public nutrition,
the four primary health care facilities within the Afghan health system: health posts at the community level, basic health centres, comprehensive health centres, and district hospitals” (United States, 2011, p. 27). The US evaluation sees BPHS as “a remarkable success” given the state of health services in Afghanistan a decade ago. The program is credited with improving the organization of the national health system and increasing the number of people with access to primary health care from 9% of the population in 2003 to 85% in 2008 (United States, 2011, p. 27).

Until 2008, “health was not a separate strategic priority of the Canadian development support to Afghanistan, but sector support was provided through the humanitarian assistance program” (Canada, 2015, p. 17). Therefore, like gender, it supported other forms of aid. It was not until 2011 that the health sector became a more significant development priority (Canada, 2015, p. 17). Canadian funding for health focused on improving donor coordination and polio eradication. Combined with other donors, Canadian funding helped to train thousands of health workers and ensure that 90% of Afghans were within two hours walking distance of basic healthcare by 2011–2012 (Canada, 2015, pp. 25, 26). Canada also took the lead on polio eradication as of 2006. Canada’s evaluation found that capacity in the health sector had improved, but was also at risk of relying on a “parallel civil service” funded by donors (Canada, 2015, p. 38).

9 Conclusions

In this last section, we list 30 findings that emerged from our analysis of the 11 evaluation reports. These findings certainly help us better understand some of the factors and misleading assumptions that have hampered effective aid, but more importantly, they also point to the challenging environment that made substantial progress extremely unlikely. While there are many lessons to be learned about what has not worked and why, there are hardly any lessons about what would have worked better. Unfortunately, in an environment as challenging as Afghanistan, there are no easy solutions and no silver bullets. Perhaps the most important lesson is that more modesty in terms of ambitions, expectations, tools, and instruments should have guided donor engagement.

1. All evaluations highlight how lack of security negatively affected programs. Lack of basic security made it difficult or impossible to implement aid, or, once aid was implemented, to monitor and evaluate. Lack of security also necessitated that aid organizations employ security measures, which increased implementation costs and made aid highly inefficient.

2. Many reports also mention that endemic political instability in the central government added to its lack of responsiveness and capacity.

3. Many reports also mention the negative impacts of widespread corruption in Afghanistan. They note that the political economy of Afghanistan thrives on corruption, which undermines governance, security, and service delivery, engendering distrust and lack of legitimacy for the government. In such an environment, aid – especially that directed at improving governance – is hardly ever effective. While the reports do not mention it, academic work has shown that massive aid flows have been one of the main drivers of corruption (together with profits from the opium economy and security contracts from the US; Fishstein & Wilder, 2012).
4. **Cultural norms** also affected programs, especially those concerning gender equality and human rights. Many reports note the discrepancy in attitudes between donors and many segments of Afghan society, attributing the lack of progress in these fields to cultural norms and a lack of political will to engage in reforms that would contradict them.

5. Many donors note that **Afghan ownership** of development programs was a major factor for effective aid, but also noted that **ownership was rarely high**. Unfortunately, the reports do not explicitly investigate the reasons for this, but they do provide some indirect clues: ownership may have been low because Afghan structures lacked the capacity to meaningfully “own” programs; political infighting often politicized aid; lack of political will to support some donor programs; and donors too quickly building up parallel structures to administer aid programs.

6. All reports stress that **Afghan structures lacked capacity** to deal with the aid flows in a productive way. Unfortunately, **donors constantly overestimated** Afghan capacity and designed programs based on largely imagined absorptive and administrative capacity.

7. Even worse, **capacity-building measures for the central government largely failed**. In the few instances where progress was made, it remained confined to small silos that did not translate to overall state capacity, and/or it was “borrowed” from the so-called “second civil service” consisting of well-paid Afghan returnees or international consultants.

8. Most donors saw **multi-donor trust funds (principally ARTF)** as efficient channels for allocating and distributing aid money. The funds were also seen as good instruments for aid coordination, resource mobilization, and policy dialogue among donors, and between donors and the Afghan government. From a donor perspective, all of this made multi-donor trust funds a popular instrument.

9. But the reports also suggest that it is unclear to what extent, if at all, the capacity of the Afghan government actually improved as a result of ARTF, which was one of its central objectives and why most donors list their funding for ARTF as “governance” or “state-building” aid. There is **little evidence that ARTF was effective at building capacity within the Afghan government**.

10. All reports note that **ARTF needs to be complemented by a gradual phase-in of Afghan fiscal responsibility**. ARTF was originally designed as an interim solution, but has now been extended to 2025, casting doubt on progress towards more fiscal self-sustainability.

11. **Multi-donor trust funds make it impossible to evaluate the outcomes of individual donors.** The responsibility for sound monitoring and evaluation lies with the management, which, in the case of Afghanistan, is the World Bank. Many reports have expressed concern about the lack of effort by the World Bank to monitor and evaluate outcomes and impacts of the ARTF, especially its investment window. The World Bank only installed a regular, external evaluation mechanism in late 2015.

12. The **outcomes and impacts of ARTF have not been well documented** until now. A 2018 SIGAR report found that the World Bank lacked systems to measure performance as it did not develop performance indicators, offer specific quantitative or qualitative status information for performance indicators, or provide clear support or justification for the performance and progress ratings it gave to projects (SIGAR, 2018a, p. 14).
13. The **National Solidarity Program (NSP)** was the flagship project of ARTF. Its objectives were to increase governance in rural areas and to support rural development. All reviewed donors contributed to NSP, which has a good reputation among them, but it should be noted that we have only one independent robust evaluation of NSP (Beath, Fotini, & Enikolopov, 2015).

14. Overall, the reports find that **NSP did contribute to increased services and infrastructure in rural areas**. The project also mobilized communities, created ownership for the projects, and mandated the representation of women in the newly formed Community Development Councils (CDCs).

15. The wider **economic impacts of NSP were limited** with only limited effect on local governance and gender equality (beyond the mandatory, often only formal inclusion of women in CDCs). While NSP did help to create better perceptions of local government and NGOs, these effects were limited to relatively secure zones.

16. After many years of trial and error, LOTFA finally managed to limit corruption by establishing an electronic payroll system for police officers. However, **LOTFA’s wider objective – establishing an accepted and effective police force – has not been met**.

17. Donors agreed that substantial progress has been made in better access for boys and girls to primary education. Outputs regarding school rehabilitation/construction and enrollment figures have been impressive, especially during the early years of international engagement.

18. More recently, donors have observed that the **quality of education remains problematic**: there is still demand for infrastructure, some of the built infrastructure is of poor quality, and EQUIP, the main vehicle for aiding the education sector, has not been immune to corruption (ghost schools, ghost teachers, and widespread teacher absenteeism). Nevertheless, education is one of the sectors where tangible progress has been made.

19. The reviewed evaluation reports devote little space to the **health** sector, and are mostly silent about its prospects for sustainability. However, all reports note a very tangible increase in access to basic health, and a massive improvement in child and maternal mortality.

20. Findings suggest some improvements in access to **services for women and girls**, mainly in health and education. It should be noted that this progress resulted mainly from the end of Taliban rule and the rehabilitation of infrastructure rather than the success of gender projects.

21. **Progress in the field of gender equality has been elusive**. Donors have typically reported outputs only but remained very skeptical regarding outcomes or impacts. Despite sustained support, the capacity of the Ministry of Women’s Affairs remains weak, and the performance of UNIFEM (later UN Women) in providing capacity building was seen as poor. Laws for protecting women’s rights have been adopted, but enforcement remains weak. Both the capacity and political will of the Afghan government and political elites for gender equality programming remained very limited with prevailing cultural norms making progress difficult, as donors noted.

22. **Sustainable economic development** received little attention in most evaluation reports, which is surprising given that Afghanistan is one of the poorest countries in the world and that donors have spent considerable amounts of aid on economic development.

23. Most reports noted that **poverty rates have not decreased**, despite all efforts. Partial success has been achieved; development aid has helped to build a large amount of infrastructure, helped alleviate threats to livelihoods, and created a large number of labour days, but all of this **has not led to sustainable creation of jobs and income**.
24. The evaluation reports also point out that programs in sectors such as microfinance, private sector development, vocational training, or value chains have not led to income generation or more jobs.

25. Support for rural development has strengthened coping mechanisms and livelihoods in rural areas, but has not led to the sustainable economic growth that translates into income opportunities.

26. The UK, US, Denmark, and Canada all ran stabilization programs, meant to support the military component of stabilization. Assessments of the results of these programs are generally negative. The reports by the UK, US, Canada and Denmark suggest that there is no evidence that the stabilization projects actually led to more stability.

27. All reports mentioned the weak monitoring and evaluation systems of the donor community so it is no surprise that the evaluation reports are rarely based on solid data. What is surprising is that donors (bilateral, multilateral, and NGOs alike) have apparently made little progress in establishing better monitoring and evaluation systems since 2002, when international engagement in Afghanistan began. The few available robust project/program evaluations are usually produced by independent scholars, or by scholars cooperating with aid organizations.

28. All reports stress that the sustainability of achieved results – for all types of aid programs including the large multi-donor trust funds – is very much in question. The reports strongly suggest that aid projects depending on Afghan capacity are most likely not sustainable due to the limited ability of the Afghan Government to take on these investments when programs end. Recognizing these limitations, international NGOs place strong emphasis on community ownership with delivery through local NGOs to increase program sustainability. However, the operations, management, and maintenance of even small infrastructure projects at the community level appear to be far from secure since many of these projects are too complex and too costly for most communities to maintain.

29. Many reports noted that, in general, smaller projects performed better than larger, more complex government-run projects. Also, projects aimed at direct results, such as building small infrastructure and providing such services as access to water and electricity, were often effective. Results have been less strong where programs aimed to be transformative in nature, either for capacity building or to change cultural and social norms.

30. Most donors pointed out that in order to achieve meaningful, sustainable development results, predictable aid flows over more time is necessary. However, we are not convinced that "more of the same, but for longer" would lead to better results. The international aid community has been engaged in Afghanistan for 17 years now with no signs of increased effectiveness. Without a fundamental change in the situation on the ground – and a political settlement with an end to violence – aid will remain largely ineffective and unsustainable.
10 References

Bilateral Country-Level Evaluations


Other References


