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AGRICULTURE AND PROVINCIAL RECONSTRUCTION TEAMS: **Assessing the Effectiveness of Agricultural Advisor Projects in Afghanistan**

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Introduction

Afghanistan once had a well-developed and productive agricultural sector. As late as 1978, the country was self-sufficient in cereal grains and had a strong export market for horticultural products.¹ It also produced industrial crops such as cotton and sugar beets and had the relevant industrial capabilities to process them.² However, nearly three decades of conflict and little or no investment have decimated Afghanistan's agricultural sector and reduced both the amount of cultivable land and the level of crop yields.

To assist the nation in rebuilding its agricultural economy, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has provided advisors who have worked on Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs). Based largely on their end-of-tour reports, this paper examines and evaluates the challenges, successes, and modes of interaction of USDA advisors with their PRT and Afghan colleagues and concludes with recommendations for the future.

BACKGROUND

More than 80 percent of Afghans are employed in agriculture but only one-third of the country's gross domestic product (excluding opium) is produced by the agriculture sector.³ The dependence of the vast majority of the population on low-productivity, subsistence farming creates a high level of poverty (36 percent in fiscal year 2008-2009), and high unemployment rates (35 percent in 2008).⁴ The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) estimates that almost 18 percent of Afghanistan's population suffers from chronic food insecurity, and the majority of farmers with landholdings produce amounts insufficient to meet the needs of an average family.^{5,6}

Afghanistan's decimated agricultural sector, persistent conflict, and weak to non-existent government institutions have forced many Afghan farmers to pursue other, often illicit, ways to make a living, particularly via opium poppy cultivation. The drug trade resulting from opium poppy has contributed to terrorism and has been a

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key source of income for the Taliban and Afghan warlords.⁷ U.S. and Afghan policy makers widely believe that Afghanistan needs stronger agricultural development to provide farmers with viable agricultural alternatives to poppy cultivation.

The U.S. government has publicly pledged its support in helping to rebuild the country's agricultural sector. Since 2003, the USDA has placed agricultural experts on civil-military PRTs in Afghanistan's provinces.⁸ As of May 2009, the USDA had twelve PRT agricultural experts, one senior PRT agricultural expert at a brigade task force level, and one PRT coordinator based in Kabul. Between 2003 and 2010, more than 50 agricultural advisors have been deployed to PRTs in Afghanistan (table 1).

Table 1 PRT Agricultural Advisors in Afghanistan		
	PRT Advisors	Length of Deployment (months)
2003	3	6
2004	10	6
2005	10	6
2006	8	9
2007	8	9
2009	13	13

Source: Foreign Agricultural Service, "USDA Activities in Afghanistan, Rebuilding Agriculture and Food Security in Afghanistan," <<http://www.fas.usda.gov/icd/drdr/afghanistan.asp>> (15 February 2010).

These experts directly advise provincial agricultural officials and strengthen the Afghan government's institutional capacity to rebuild markets, provide services to its farmers, and achieve its other agricultural objectives. USDA advisors also plan and implement projects and advise the military on agricultural issues.^{9,10}

DOCUMENTATION FOR EVALUATION

Even though the U.S. government has placed great emphasis on Afghanistan's agricultural reconstruction, little effort has been made to evaluate the organization, management, and support given by PRTs to agricultural efforts. To do so, the authors have compiled documentation regarding USDA advisors' work on PRTs in Afghanistan. One set of documents consists of project compilations and brief lessons-learned reports done by USDA's Foreign Agricultural Service (USDA-FAS), the coordinating agency for agricultural advisors on PRTs. The most recent lessons learned

report was done in collaboration with the Defense Department's Center for Complex Operations (CCO).¹¹ The report presents a broad overview of the challenges facing USDA advisors on PRTs and offers recommendations for improving agricultural advisors' experience on PRTs.¹²

Other documentation consists of the agricultural advisors' monthly and final project reports. The USDA-FAS requires agricultural advisors to complete a standardized report format for both monthly and final reports. In the final report template, agricultural advisors are asked to describe their projects and answer questions regarding their interactions with the military, other U.S. government civilian agencies, the Afghan government and other organizations. Advisors are also asked to make recommendations for improving future PRTs.¹³

As a previously unexamined primary data source, these final reports offer a unique resource to examine the first-hand accounts of USDA advisors at the end of their PRT deployment.¹⁴ While not all advisors completed a final report, the existing reports cover nearly the entire period of USDA's involvement with PRTs in Afghanistan. As such, they offer an opportunity to conduct a simple longitudinal survey of agricultural advisors' experiences on PRTs and examine their views on the sustainability of PRT contributions to Afghanistan's agricultural reconstruction.

Through the findings of these reports and supporting evidence from the lessons learned documents, conclusions are drawn and recommendations offered for improving the effectiveness of both agricultural PRT projects in Afghanistan and the role of the USDA agricultural advisor on future PRTs. Given the potential that future conflicts will require sustained U.S. interagency involvement in stability and reconstruction efforts, best practices derived from the advisor experiences on PRTs will hopefully be of use to the Department of Defense (DOD) and USDA decision-makers to help guide future efforts, increase USDA-DOD collaboration, improve training, and provide policy recommendations for ensuring greater project effectiveness in the field.

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Agricultural Advisor Reports and Data Selection

Given various data constraints, we have focused on advisor reports done in 2005 and 2009, with some reference to those of 2007. Those are the years in which a majority of the USDA advisors were present in the country and in which a majority of comparable advisory reports were written. Table 2 contains the total number of final reports included in the analysis.

Table 2 PRT Agricultural Advisor Reports			
	2005	2007	2009
Advisor Final Reports	15	3	9

DATA COMPIRATION

We compiled and coded information from these reports into spreadsheets and grouped variables into three categories:

- Operational or administrative aspects of the agricultural advisors participation on the PRT (training, administrative, funding, critical skills).
- Interagency coordination (military, USAID, Department of State [DOS], and nongovernmental organizations [NGOs]).
- Mission effectiveness (capacity building, sustainability, alignment with national strategy).

We created separate spreadsheets for the 2005 and 2009 advisory groups, and then compared the spreadsheets to create a simple longitudinal study. No separate spreadsheet was created for 2007, as its data set was too small to be significant, but information from 2007 was viewed to determine if it was (or was not) supportive of observations from 2005 and 2009.

We should note that report templates changed between 2007 and 2009, creating some variations in the type of information provided. For example, while the 2005 format included specific questions about the nature of the advisors' working relationships with the military, USAID, DOS, NGOs, and host nation authorities, this question was omitted in the 2009 format. However, some advisors in 2009 provided information on these topics, and in many cases, the information provided was within the same categories as the earlier format. For this reason, we used the same variables and coding

methods to allow for analysis between the year groups.

For each variable, we included all comments pertaining to each issue in the spreadsheet and aggregated to determine the presence of trends or patterns. As appropriate, we noted the findings from the draft CCO PRT Lessons Learned Status Report and the Lessons Learned Workshop for USDA Personnel when their findings pertained to trends found in the agricultural advisor reports.¹⁵

Analysis

OVERVIEW

While the effectiveness of agricultural assistance activities is usually measured by increases in cultivated acreage; farm productivity; improvements in irrigation, fertilizer, and machinery; and farm income, the effectiveness of agricultural advisors and their ability to accomplish their missions are in no small part dependent upon the operational and administrative support they get in the field. In the case of an advisor on a PRT, variables such as funding, training, administrative issues, and critical skills determine his or her ability to get to the right location, find the needed funding, and receive the necessary cooperation from the other military and civilian PRT personnel to carry out a project. If project sustainability and host nation reconstruction are desired end states for PRTs, setting effective organizational conditions for the interagency PRT members is crucial to allow them to conduct successful activities.

...advisors must apply for funding through the U.S. military Commander's Emergency Response Program (CERP) or USAID's Quick Impact Program (QIP)...

FUNDING

The USDA lacks the legislative authority to provide funding to its advisors for reconstruction activities.¹⁶ For this reason, USDA agricultural advisors have no access to dedicated funding sources for agricultural projects. To fund projects in their province, advisors must apply for funding through the U.S. military Commander's Emergency Response Program (CERP) or USAID's Quick Impact Program (QIP) supporting local governance and community development. Advisors in the last few years have also obtained funding from U.S. National Guard Agribusiness Development Teams (ADTs) deployed to Afghanistan.¹⁷

Eleven out of fifteen (73 percent) of the 2005 agriculture advisors and all three of the 2007 advisors reported frustration by the lack of USDA-specific funding. These advisors all reported difficulties obtaining funding for agricultural projects for their provinces. Two reported difficulties obtaining either CERP or USAID funding. Some

advisors found they were unable to receive funding for agricultural projects because of the military's lack of understanding of the need for agricultural projects. One reported an inability to obtain funding because the initial PRT commander was not supportive of agriculture projects, while another expressed frustration with the amount of time spent finding funding, stating that time spent searching for program funds could have been better used on project development. Advisors stated that the lack of their own funding sources prevented them from doing more agricultural projects. Even small amounts of funding, according to one advisor in 2009, would have allowed for immediate implementation of small-scale locally-appropriate projects.

In its 2006 USAID PRT assessment, USAID recognized that USDA representatives provided invaluable agricultural advice and support to PRTs. However, it reported that the USDA's lack of legislative authority to provide funding to its representatives for PRT activities forced advisors to rely heavily on persuasion to access CERP or USAID QIP funds. The report concluded that USDA representatives, as well as representatives of any civilian agency serving on PRTs, needed access to dedicated funding.¹⁸

These comments are consistent with the findings from the USDA-CCO workshop and the CCO general PRT conclusions. At the USDA-CCO workshop, returned advisors commented that USDA advisors were often seen as a burden or a nuisance because they lacked their own funding. Advisors reported that USAID and DOD controlled the agenda in theater because they controlled the funding, which allowed them to conduct projects without consultation with other PRT members. Additionally, even when available, funding sources failed to take into account the fact that agricultural projects often need multi-year funding to match agricultural cycles.

TRAINING

...Agriculture experts now complete four weeks of training before deployment to Afghanistan...

The training that USDA agricultural advisors receive before deployment has evolved over the course of the USDA's involvement with PRTs. Agriculture experts now complete four weeks of training before deployment to Afghanistan: one-week course in counter-threat training; one-week familiarization course on Afghan culture; weeklong Afghan PRT orientation course; and six-day PRT training at Camp Atterbury in Indiana.¹⁹ The PRT orientation course is intended to provide advisors with basic skills and knowledge in order to work with an integrated civil-military field team. The course also includes a basic overview of the U.S. political and military strategy in Afghanistan, Afghan government structure, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), Afghan development programs,

civil-military planning and integration, and other topics related to the PRT mission. The training at Camp Atterbury then provides an overview of integrated civil-military activities in Afghanistan; teaches participants about the structure, role, and capabilities of PRTs and military units; and provides basic training for operating and conducting development in a counter-insurgency or stabilization environment. Advisors also have two days of training at the USDA headquarters, where they receive information on USDA agricultural activities in Afghanistan, logistics, and administrative issues.

Though joint civil-military training is usually cited as an important way to improve working relationships in the field, interagency training among purely civilian agencies is also desirable in order to bridge cultural gaps and educate civilians about the capabilities and limitations of each organization. Too little of such training has been done. The USDA-CCO workshop explicitly stated that the USDA must pursue joint training efforts, both to educate the agricultural advisors about the interagency and to improve the other PRT members' awareness of agricultural development and USDA capabilities.²⁰ The USAID assessment also concluded that adequate pre-deployment training involving the military and civilian PRT members would eliminate most of the critical challenges facing PRTs.²¹

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ADMINISTRATIVE ISSUES

The advisors' final reports revealed persistent problems with both logistical and administrative issues surrounding advisors' deployments to PRTs. Six of the 2005 advisor reports (40 percent) cited various administrative or logistical issues and two of the three 2007 reports also cited administrative frustrations. These issues ranged from poor communication with the Washington office to administrative problems with pre-deployment processes and not receiving reimbursements and extra pay. Three advisors from 2005 cited frustration at the lack of benefits relative to other civilian representatives on PRTs, stating that they were not receiving the same kinds of benefits in terms of pay, travel, compensatory time, and per diem as representatives from other U.S. government agencies. Three of the 2005 advisors also cited issues regarding the need for the Washington office to provide better communication and coordination with their home offices at the USDA.

Many of the agricultural advisors discussed the critical need for overlap between the incoming and outgoing advisors. Overlap with incoming advisors allows the incumbent advisor to pass on relevant information about the area's agricultural situation; introduce the new advisor to key host nation, PRT, and interagency contacts; and

...the lack of overlap between advisors...often results in the termination or trailing off of the last advisor's agricultural projects...

...advisors also reported that people and networking skills were used more than technical skills...

hand over control of existing projects. Even a brief overlap between advisors provides essential continuity of effort that would contribute to the sustainability of agricultural projects. However, the lack of overlap between advisors and, in many cases, the long periods of time between advisors, often results in the termination or trailing off of the last advisor's agricultural projects.

A 2005 advisor remarked that several agricultural projects were lost by the military and USAID during the time gaps between agricultural advisor deployments. Another 2005 advisor stated that the PRT commander was frustrated by the time between advisor deployments because he had no guidance about ongoing agricultural projects. One 2009 advisor reported that previous agricultural projects stopped when his predecessor left, and he was forced to "start with a clean slate on agricultural issues" because of the four-month gap between USDA advisors. Another advisor commented that any skills that he taught to local leaders would not last long if a replacement advisor was not able to reinforce them. These findings are consistent with the USDA-CCO Lessons Learned report, which states that tour overlaps and sufficient transition time between advisors are essential for the smooth transfer of responsibilities in country.²²

CRITICAL SKILLS

The 2005 final report template asked agricultural advisors to describe what made their accomplishments possible and to list the skills they utilized most as PRT agricultural advisors. Although agricultural advisors are selected based upon their expertise and knowledge of agriculture, agricultural production, or resource management, only four of the advisors from 2005 cited technical skills (such as engineering, irrigation and water management, or veterinary medicine) as the skills that they utilized most during their assignment (table 3). Eight advisors (53 percent) listed various types of networking and people skills (communication, coordination, networking, facilitation, and flexibility) as their most utilized skills. Three advisors reported that they used both technical agriculture skills and people skills during their assignments. Similarly, two of the 2009 advisors also reported that people and networking skills were used more than technical skills. Many advisors reported that such skills were essential to acting as an unofficial interlocutor between the PRT and NGOs, among local leaders, and even between the PRT and ADTs.

As noted by one advisor and echoed by the USDA-CCO report, advisors are not matched to a PRT based upon their skill set and the needs of the particular province.²³ Therefore, agricultural generalist

skills and people skills are likely to be more useful to an advisor than very specific skill sets that may not be needed in that particular area. It is difficult, however, to draw a conclusion that technical skills in agriculture are unneeded, particularly because technical skills differentiate USDA advisors from USAID representatives working on reconstruction. Also, PRT commanders rely on USDA advisors for broad-based knowledge of agricultural issues, which suggests that USDA advisors should be selected based not only on agricultural skills, but also on demonstrated abilities in communication and facilitation.

Table 3 Critical Skills Used By Agricultural Advisors			
Type of skills:	2005	2007	2009
Technical agriculture skills	4	--	--
People skills	8	1	2
Both technical and people skills	3	1	--

...actually creating successful collaborations between civil and military PRT members in the field remains difficult...

CIVIL-MILITARY COORDINATION

Effective working relationships between the civil and military members of a PRT are necessary for the team to accomplish its mission and conduct successful and sustainable PRT projects. One of the heralded, principal strengths of the PRT is its ability to coordinate civil-military efforts. Civil-military coordination is also considered to be a key component of the “whole-of-government approach,” the coordinated efforts of departments and agencies of the U.S. government toward a shared goal.²⁴ However, actually creating successful collaborations between civil and military PRT members in the field remains difficult. As stated previously, U.S. civil and military personnel meet at the PRT and generally have very little training to prepare them for working with each other. PRT members by necessity must learn to work together on the ground when they arrive, a task that is further complicated by the high turnover rate of units and the asynchronous deployments of individual PRT members and military units.

These structural and organizational difficulties often make it difficult to establish the strong working relationships that are necessary to conduct successful activities. Additionally, as USDA advisors arrive at PRTs without their own funding and resources, they must rely on developing personal relationships with both the military and other interagency members to find funding sources to achieve their missions. Regular coordination with all members of the PRT is also important to keep the advisors involved in PRT activities, obtain buy-in for their projects from their military and

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interagency colleagues, and help ensure good implementation of projects.

Ten of the fifteen advisors (67 percent) from 2005 stated they had good relationships with the military component of the PRT, with three of those advisors describing their relationship with the military as “excellent” (table 4). Four advisors reported that their interactions with the military were mixed to poor. Some advisors worked with several PRTs and experienced good relationships with one PRT and poor interactions with another. Others had poor relationships with the PRT commander but had good relationships with the PRT civil affairs team. The degree of coordination between the USDA advisor and the military members of the PRT seems to be a direct function of the importance that the commander and senior officers place on agriculture. For example, three of the four advisors with mixed reports on military coordination stated that the commander or contracting officer did not consider agriculture to be important and as such failed to support or fund agricultural projects or provide security and transportation. One advisor reported being treated as “nonessential” by the commander because the commander did not believe agricultural projects were important.

Table 4 Advisor Relationships with Military			
Quality of relationships:	2005	2007	2009
Excellent	3	2	1
Good	7		
Mixed or poor	4	--	--

Two of the three 2007 advisors also described their relationships with the military components of the PRT as excellent, although one advisor stated that the contracting officer did not want to fund agriculture projects because agriculture was “the USAID’s responsibility.”

Because the 2009 final report template does not have a question about the advisors’ relationships with other PRT members, only one of the 2009 advisors explicitly discussed her relationships with the military (interestingly, this was likely only because the advisor used the earlier final report format). She described her relationship with the civil affairs team as excellent and with the commanders of the PRT and ADT as very good. However, the advisor noted that PRT commanders did not recognize agriculture as a primary need for Afghanistan unless directed to do so by a higher level.

Any advisor’s relationship with his or her PRT commander seems

to be particularly important to the success of the advisor's mission, largely because of the advisors' need to obtain CERP funding and other resources from the PRT. Many of the advisors also reported that being involved in the daily activities of the PRT helped make them more visible to the PRT commander and by extension increased the visibility of agricultural projects in general. Four of the advisors (one from 2005, two from 2007, and one from 2009) explicitly mentioned the need to attend daily or weekly meetings with the military to be aware of what the military units were doing, to stay involved with the PRT, and to advise the commander as necessary. One of the 2005 advisors reported that once he convinced the PRT commander of the relationship between agricultural development and security sector reform, the commander added talking points about the importance of agriculture into his briefs.

These findings are echoed in the USDA-CCO workshop report, the CCO general report, and the USAID assessment. The USDA-CCO workshop found that while civil-military cooperation is generally good, commanders and senior officers often do not understand the importance of agriculture to the local and national economies. In addition, both civil representatives and military leaders often lack knowledge about the other's organizational capabilities and limitations. This mutual lack of knowledge and understanding between the civil and military representatives can cause confusion and misunderstandings about priorities and approaches to the mission. Further, the military focus on large-scale, high-impact, and high-profile projects is often at odds with agricultural development programs, which are generally smaller scale, target-specific, and long term. In many cases, PRT commanders underestimated the timelines for agricultural projects and were frustrated that USDA advisors lacked their own funding.²⁵ The CCO PRT report also notes that while civil-military relations tend to improve over time as individuals interact with each other more, these communication problems are symptomatic of deeper civil-military issues regarding resourcing, funding, and strategy.²⁶

Another element of the U.S. government approach to assisting Afghanistan's agricultural reconstruction is the ADT. As previously indicated, these teams are put together by various U.S. National Guard units being deployed to Afghanistan and are comprised of citizen soldiers who have backgrounds in agriculture. At any one time there may be only three or four ADTs in country, so not all USDA advisors have had contact with them.

While only a few advisor reports contain accounts of USDA-ADT coordination, the positive nature of the comments suggests that pursuing greater interaction between ADTs and USDA advisors

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could be beneficial to the overall agricultural reconstruction effort in Afghanistan. ADTs' organic force protection assets and access to funding for agricultural projects could eliminate many of the advisors' challenges involving competition for force protection and funding on PRTs. While more information is needed, limited USDA deployments with ADTs would be useful to test the feasibility of this type of collaboration.

CIVILIAN AGENCY COORDINATION

Unlike extensive discussion of civil-military coordination on PRTs, there is generally little discussion of coordination among interagency members. Nonetheless, as previously discussed in the training section, civilian representatives at times find it difficult to work effectively with each other because of a lack of understanding about other agencies' capabilities and limitations.

For agricultural advisors, good understanding, coordination, and collaboration with these representatives is vitally important. For example, as the USAID is the lead agency for reconstruction activities on PRTs and has its own funding sources, such as QIP, USDA advisors need to build solid relationships with USAID to improve the likelihood of obtaining funding.²⁷ Additionally, the sometimes overlapping reconstruction missions of the USAID and USDA in Afghanistan can lead to confusion regarding roles and responsibilities of each agency. Effective collaboration between USDA and USAID representatives on a PRT can reduce possible organizational tensions while also augmenting and improving the PRT reconstruction activities and projects.

Of the 2005 advisors, four reported good or very good relationships with the USAID representative on the PRT, one reported an adequate relationship, and four reported mixed interactions with USAID personnel (table 5).

Of the advisors with mixed interactions, three had very good relationships with the PRT USAID representative but reported very poor interactions with USAID personnel at the regional or national levels.

Two of the 2007 advisors described very good working relationships with the PRT USAID representative, and three of the 2009 advisors highlighted their supportive working relationships with the USAID representative on their PRT. One of the advisors noted that collaborative working relationships with USAID assist sustainability and introduce important training elements to projects.

Table 5
Advisor Relationships with USAID

Quality of relationships:	2005	2007	2009
Good to excellent	4	2	3
Neutral	1	--	--
Mixed to poor	4	--	--

On PRTs, DOS representatives are responsible for political oversight, coordination, and reporting.²⁸ Even though DOS personnel have less of a role in planning and implementing reconstruction projects, interactions between the agricultural advisor and the DOS representative have generally been productive. Many of the 2005 advisors reported that the DOS representatives were very supportive (table 6). Six advisors described their working relationships with DOS as good to very good and one reported an adequate working relationship. Two of the 2007 advisors and one 2009 advisor also described DOS personnel on their PRTs as supportive and reported having very good working relationships.

Table 6
Advisor Relationships with DOS

Quality of relationships:	2005	2007	2009
Good to excellent	6	2	1
Neutral	1	--	--
Mixed to poor	--	--	--

NGO COORDINATION

NGOs play a major role in the reconstruction efforts occurring in Afghanistan. Army doctrine includes NGOs as an important part of the “comprehensive approach” to stability operations.²⁹ In this approach, government agencies, multinational partners, intergovernmental organizations, and NGOs ideally cooperate and work together out of shared understanding and common goals. In practice, this type of unity of effort is somewhat difficult to create because many NGOs need to be seen as neutral, impartial, and independent, which often makes them reluctant to associate with the military. This problem was highlighted by four USDA advisors in the 2005–2009 periods. (See table 7)

...Army doctrine includes NGOs as an important part of the “comprehensive approach” to stability operations...

Nonetheless, many of the USDA agricultural advisors reported good working relationships with NGOs in their areas of responsibility. Seven of the 2005–2009 advisors reported good collaboration with the NGOs operating in their provinces, and three reported mixed relationships with NGOs. One 2005 advisor commented that local NGOs were the key to his projects’ success.

Quality of relationships:	2005	2007	2009
Good	6	2	1
Mixed	3	--	--
NGOs reluctant to work with military	2	1	1
Facilitated between NGOs and military	3	--	--

Source: Created by authors.

The CCO Lessons Learned Report also discusses the difficulties involved in reaching out to local NGOs. The report suggests that productive interactions with NGOs may best be cultivated by a PRT member who can serve as a regular interlocutor between the PRT and local NGOs, thus encouraging trust and communication with NGOs while allowing them to maintain their independence from the military. In many cases the USDA advisor appears to have been the de facto interlocutor on many PRTs. It is possible that NGOs perceive the USDA as more neutral actor than either the USAID or DOS and are thus willing to allow USDA advisors to serve as unofficial interlocutors between them and the military.

Mission Effectiveness

PRTs are tasked with conducting stability and reconstruction operations in unsecure environments in order to set the conditions for long-term development. Evaluating PRT effectiveness at achieving its objectives is a difficult task that is further complicated by the non-permissive environments in which many PRTs operate. The effectiveness of PRT agricultural activities is particularly difficult to demonstrate, as agricultural projects can take several years to develop and must take into account agricultural growing cycles. For USDA advisors on PRTs, the normal problems associated with evaluating international development programs are compounded by their short deployments and Afghanistan's poor security situation. For this reason, capacity building and sustainability are used as proxy indicators to determine to what extent advisors' projects are achieving mission effectiveness.

CAPACITY BUILDING

Adequate capacity in the public and private sectors at the local, provincial, and national levels is critical to any nation's sustainable development. Technical and financial support provided to Afghan communities has historically been poorly utilized due to inadequate systemic capacities. Aid programs in Afghanistan that focused only

on resource transfers often failed because they did not provide enough support for technical education and local capacity development.³⁰

Accordingly, building the capacity of Afghan leaders and officials to manage the affairs of their community, region, and country has been an essential part of improving governance in Afghanistan. As such, it has become one of the key tasks of PRTs in general and agricultural advisors in particular. When analyzed relative to Afghan National Development Strategy (ANDS) objectives in 2005, the greatest number fell into the capacity building category. In 2009, capacity building projects were second only to agricultural production projects.

Ten of the fifteen advisors in 2005 reported conducting activities to improve local officials' abilities to conduct their jobs, and one-third (five advisors) conducted training activities for other host country nationals (see table 8).

Table 8 Number of Capacity Building Agriculture Activities			
Activity Category:	2005	2007	2009
Governance	10	2	3
Training	5	--	2

...building the capacity of Afghan leaders and officials to manage the affairs of their community, region, and country has been an essential part of improving governance in Afghanistan...

Four of the advisors reported developing good to excellent relationships with the local agriculture directors or other officials. Of the 2009 advisors that commented on the nature of their relationships with host country officials, all noted good to excellent relationships (table 9). However, in a number of cases, some issues prevented good relationships, as many advisors noted that corruption was present throughout the Afghan government. Some also reported poor leadership and the lack of skills of many officials limited useful collaboration.

Table 9 Advisor Relationships with Afghan Officials			
Quality of relationships:	2005	2007	2009
Good	4	2	3
Fair	1	--	--
Poor	2	--	--

Many advisors, however, noted that their Afghan partners were very supportive, proactive, and highly involved in working with the PRT on agricultural development activities. Four of the advisors reported that they served only as mentors and advisors,

while local officials made all the decisions and designed the projects. Of particular note was the local Afghan Provincial Director of Agriculture in Ghazni province who worked with agricultural advisors in both 2005 and 2009. Both of his U.S. advisors made particular mention that he and his staff had independently developed and submitted all project proposals.

The advisor comments about capacity building and local officials' relationships are also echoed in the CCO PRT Lessons Learned Status Report. The report suggests that PRT members can build capacity by meeting with local leadership frequently, promoting local leaders' efforts within the community, and encouraging local officials to plan and lead projects. The report also recommends identifying and mentoring local credible officials as a way to promote local government legitimacy and possibly curb corruption.

SUSTAINABILITY

...If capacity building is in many ways an activity's short-term objective, then sustainability is its long-term goal...

If capacity building is in many ways an activity's short-term objective, then sustainability is its long-term goal.³¹ Planning for sustainability in projects requires a project designer to determine whether the community's existing resources of manpower, expertise, funding, and support are sufficient for project continuation after external support is withdrawn.

Many well-meaning, development or infrastructure projects often trail off or are abandoned after their completion because of a lack of resources or the departure of the implementing organization. One 2005 advisor commented that he chose education projects and microcredit training because their impact would last longer, noting that many previous infrastructure development projects in his area were underutilized or already abandoned. Another advisor from 2009 stated that new advisors should not begin any new agricultural projects, as too many such projects lacked quality control or monitoring.

To ensure the sustainability of PRT agricultural projects, advisors have used a variety of strategies. As shown in table 10, advisors consistently advocate for local ownership in projects. Four advisors from 2009 included next steps or plans for their projects' continuation in their reports, and five advisors reported that they continued and expanded projects from previous agricultural advisors. One advisor explicitly described his use of locally-available resources in projects that were designed to be self-sustaining and required minimal maintenance. Two advisors described collaboration with the ADTs in their province as a way to ensure sustainability and project success. One of these advisors reported collaborating on at least eleven completed or ongoing projects (with more in progress) with the

Texas National Guard ADT, demonstrating the strong potential for USDA-ADT collaboration in agricultural reconstruction activities.

Type of Strategy:	2005	2007	2009
Local ownership of projects	4	1	2
Long-term plan	--	--	4
National Agricultural Strategy	1	1	--
Continuation of last advisors' projects	--	--	2
Use of local resources	--	--	1
Coordination with ADTs	--	--	2

Discussion of project sustainability is closely linked with the previous discussion of overlapping advisor deployments. Three of the 2009 advisors discussed the lack of progress or the abandonment of past advisors' projects after the advisors' departure, with one advisor attributing this directly to the gap between agricultural advisors on the PRT. However, two advisors reported a successful continuation and expansion of past PRT projects.

Unfortunately, many local officials and communities lack the knowledge and resources to maintain projects that are started and funded by the PRT. The USDA-CCO report also finds that PRT development projects often fail because of a lack of local buy-in and demand. Ensuring long-term ownership and support by the community is a main determinant of sustainable agricultural progress.³² The report also states that smaller projects (between \$25,000–50,000)³³ are often more effective, sustainable, and responsive to local needs than larger-scale infrastructure projects.

As the PRT concept has evolved over time, USDA advisors' ability to select appropriate projects for their provinces seems to have improved. Recent advisors have mentioned the status of past advisors' projects, with two advisors specifically reporting that they had continued and expanded past advisors' work.

ALIGNMENT WITH NATIONAL AGRICULTURAL STRATEGY

Many comments from advisors and other reports have criticized the lack of strategic guidance given to local advisors about national agricultural priorities. The USDA-CCO report and at least two USDA advisory reports have noted that the absence of a comprehensive national agricultural strategy for Afghanistan results in a lack of unified effort among organizations conducting local and provincial agricultural development projects.³⁴ While PRT agricultural advisors

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may not receive explicit strategic-level guidance, the USDA 2009 final report template makes a point of stating that the agricultural advisor's main tasks of assisting reconstruction and building capacity should be done in support of the Afghanistan National Development Plan.

A review of the available project descriptions for completed or in-progress agricultural activities reveals that the majority of advisors' projects correspond to the broad objectives of Afghanistan's agriculture and rural development strategy. In 2005, the greatest number of activities could be classified as capacity building, with almost as many activities devoted to infrastructure development (table 11). By 2009, the number of capacity building and infrastructure activities declined, while the relative number of activities to promote agricultural productivity increased.

This shift could be a positive sign of actually improved capacity. However, the small number of projects and time points prevent drawing too many conclusions from the data. Also, it should be noted that, while it is a positive sign that these projects contribute to Afghanistan's national agricultural strategy, alignment with strategy does not necessarily equate to project effectiveness or sustainability. At this time, it may be more useful to ensure that PRT agricultural projects meet community needs and have local support and ownership, rather than focusing project planning on strict adherence to national-level strategies.

Table 11 Agriculture Activities by ANDS Objectives			
Activity Category:	2005	2007	2009
Capacity Building	45	6	27
Agricultural productivity	33	4	40
Infrastructure	40	7	23
Poverty reduction/food security	5	0	5

Evaluation of PRT Agricultural Projects

While questions regarding how PRT operational variables and interagency coordination affect USDA advisors' mission effectiveness are somewhat easy to evaluate, demonstrating effectiveness, impact, and sustainability of PRT agricultural projects is much more difficult. There seems to be no monitoring and evaluation system in place to measure the progress of ongoing projects or to evaluate the impact of activities. The advisor reports do not contain enough information to make a determination regarding project outcomes or potential impact on the local communities. Although the advisor reports offer simple information about projects, funds allocated, and status of the project, they do not provide detailed information regarding the project's effects on its intended beneficiaries, the people and communities of Afghanistan.

This type of impact determination will be difficult, time-consuming, and often resource-intensive, but it will ultimately be necessary to determine if PRTs are actually helping to set conditions for Afghanistan's long-term development.

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UTILITY OF THE REPORTS

USDA agricultural advisors' final reports offer valuable insights into the advisors' experiences on PRTs in Afghanistan. While these reports demonstrate the difficulties involved in monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of development projects in a complex environment, they also suggest ways to improve both the structural and organizational components of advisors' participation, as well as the measures of effectiveness and sustainability of their agricultural projects.

Agricultural advisor reports contained a wide variety of often disparate information; both because of the different formats used and because many advisors adjusted the template to fit their particular needs. Some advisors included only a list of their activities, while others assessed the agricultural needs of the region, described their projects in depth, and included their personal comments and concerns. Because of the diversity of information in the report, it was not feasible to chart responses over time, particularly because the absence of information or a non-response did not necessarily mean the absence of an issue or problem. Regardless, enough information existed in the advisor reports to permit analysis of several variables over the three time periods. Additionally, the available reports represented a majority of the advisors who were in country in 2005, 2007, and 2009. Therefore, the comments in the available reports are likely representative of most advisors' experiences during those periods.

Recommendations

Based upon the previous analysis and findings, we make the following recommendations for improving the USDA's capacity to contribute to the agricultural reconstruction of Afghanistan and, implicitly, to possible similar efforts in other countries now and in the future:

- 1) Provide agriculture-specific project funding.** The high response rate regarding funding issues suggests that the lack of agriculture-specific funding hinders USDA advisors' ability to conduct important, catalytic, and small-scale projects and activities. Community-level activities require smaller amounts of funding and are generally considered to be more culturally appropriate, locally relevant, and sustainable. Larger-scale activities, such as infrastructure or industry projects, would still require funding approval through QIP or CERP, both to obtain funding and ensure PRT and interagency support. However, small amounts of agriculture-specific funding could be used to start projects quickly to take advantage of growing seasons or support small-scale initiatives. Unfortunately, it is probably unlikely the USDA will receive a legislative mandate in the near future to fund overseas reconstruction projects. Nevertheless, if the U.S. government truly believes that agriculture is the most important non-security priority in Afghanistan, then budgeting for agriculture-specific PRT activities should be a priority.³⁵
- 2) Improve interagency training.** While pre-deployment training for USDA advisors seems to have improved over time, more civil-military and interagency training is needed to improve coordination and collaboration among PRT members in the field. Improved interagency training for civilians is necessary to overcome collaboration challenges posed by differing organizational cultures and should be included in the advisors' pre-deployment training. In addition, military commanders and senior officers should receive guidance about working with civilian interagency members. In particular, to limit miscommunications and misunderstandings on the PRT, senior officers need to understand the capabilities and limitations of each U.S. government agency. In regard to agriculture, if the DOD truly believes in the benefits of agricultural reconstruction, then it must direct its commanders and officers to support those initiatives in the field.

In addition, while joint training involving all members of a deploying PRT is the optimal solution, the challenges of aligning

schedules and administrative procedures for combined civil-military training may be too difficult to overcome. Therefore, if it is not feasible to conduct combined training with the actual interagency team members who will work together in the field, greater cross-exposure to interagency cultures and procedures (both civil-military and interagency) is essential.

3) Harmonize administrative procedures to better support advisors in the field. Although it appears that many of the early administrative challenges to USDA advisors in the field have diminished, persisting comments about the lack of benefits relative to USAID and DOS employees indicates insufficient change has been made to revise USDA regulations on supporting civilian advisors in the field. USDA experts cannot be expected to deploy to dangerous areas if they do not receive the same benefits as other federal employees conducting similar work. The USDA must bring its policies for employee compensation in a conflict zone in line with other government agencies. Progress towards agricultural reconstruction in Afghanistan will not be accomplished if the USDA's inequitable employee compensation hinders the recruitment of skilled advisors.

4) Standardize overlapping advisor deployments. Valuable time and effort is lost if departing USDA advisors are unable to pass along their accumulated knowledge and experience to new advisors. Overlapping deployments would create continuity in relationships with local leaders and officials and allow new advisors to build upon existing relationships for greater capacity building. In addition, military collaboration may improve if commanders and senior officials have more continuous agricultural advice. Overlap between advisors can ultimately save resources by better supporting the continuation of existing projects, which would better contribute to the long-term objective of fostering reconstruction in Afghanistan.

5) Train USDA advisors in facilitation and negotiation. As demonstrated by advisors' comments, strong skills in communication and facilitation are essential for USDA advisors to accomplish their objectives. Accordingly, advisor recruitment and training should take interpersonal, negotiation, and facilitation skills into consideration. Further development of these skills would reinforce interagency, NGO, and civil-military cooperation leading to greater mission effectiveness. Perhaps most importantly, negotiation and facilitation abilities would help improve interactions with host country leaders and officials, which could have substantial implications for improving capacity building and project planning.

6) Emphasize the need for sustainability in all PRT agriculture projects. All projects should be planned and implemented in a sustainable manner. An assessment of local needs, demands, and abilities to resource and maintain a project should be a part of every funding request. The need for sustainability must be emphasized in pre-deployment training and reinforced throughout the advisors' deployments. Again, overlapping advisor deployments would significantly contribute to sustainability, including in the planning of multi-year projects.

7) Create a monitoring and evaluation framework for PRT projects. A simple monitoring and evaluation plan should be created that requires USDA advisors to track and demonstrate PRT project effectiveness. Appropriate indicators that take into account local conditions can be developed to allow current and future advisors to monitor project progress over time. Basic training on monitoring and evaluation could be provided to advisors before deployment and codified in advisor handbooks. Only by requiring basic monitoring and evaluation frameworks will PRT projects eventually transition from ad hoc, short-term efforts producing only anecdotal evidence to long-term reconstruction programs with quantifiable results.

8) Place USDA advisors with ADTs. While only a few advisor accounts discuss interactions with ADTs, these preliminary advisor reports suggest that both USDA advisors and ADTs may mutually benefit from placement of USDA advisors on ADTs. The potential benefits of this type of future collaboration suggest the Army, National Guard Bureau, and USDA should investigate the possibility of trial deployments of USDA advisors with ADTs in Afghanistan.

Concluding Comment

As an organization, PRTs remain a work in progress. Civil-military coordination is a fundamental part of the PRT concept, but more time and effort is needed to improve the collaboration between civilians and the military on PRTs. However, certain improvements can perhaps speed the evolution of PRT civil-military efforts, such as a greater emphasis on interagency and civil-military training. More interagency and civil-military familiarization between PRT members from the beginning of a deployment would hopefully allow PRT members to coordinate and collaborate faster and more effectively, improving overall PRT project planning, implementation, and monitoring. All aspects of the PRT's mission could theoretically benefit from these improved working relationships.

The USDA advisor's participation on PRTs also seems to be evolving over time. Advisor reports demonstrate that USDA

advisors often occupy a unique role on PRTs, serving as facilitators and interlocutors between groups as well as providing PRT commanders with agricultural advice. The reports seem to indicate that administrative challenges are diminishing and that advisors place an increasing emphasis on project sustainability. This new focus on sustainability is heartening, as it suggests that some of the initial growing pains of this cross-government construct are being smoothed out. It also suggests that the emphasis for PRT projects is shifting from short-term outputs to longer-term impact. It remains to be seen if this is a continuing trend or simply a short-term change. Time will be needed to continue establishing the role of USDA advisors on PRTs.

While it is not possible at this time to evaluate the community impact of PRT agricultural projects based only on these reports, the advisor reports suggest that USDA advisors are achieving their short-term mission by promoting capacity building and slowly working toward project sustainability. While these may only be initial steps toward long-term reconstruction, they are an essential part of setting conditions for longer-term development. In this way, agricultural advisors from USDA seem to be playing an important role in the PRT stabilization and reconstruction mission in Afghanistan. **IAP**

...the advisor reports suggest that USDA advisors are achieving their short-term mission by promoting capacity building and slowly working toward project sustainability...

Endnotes

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2. Ibid., p. 16.
3. Central Intelligence Agency Factbook, "Afghanistan," Central Intelligence Agency, <<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/Aaf.html>>, accessed on 20 February 2010).
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6. Alberto Zezza and Mauro Migotto, "Towards a Framework for Agricultural Development and Food Security in Afghanistan," *Reconstructing Agriculture in Afghanistan*, Bourton, UK: Practical Action Publishing, 2007, p. 274.
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8. PRTs are integrated civil-military teams whose mission is to enhance security, extend the reach of the Afghan central government, and facilitate reconstruction in a designated province. PRTs include civilian representatives from a number of U.S. government agencies and generally have representatives from the Department of Defense, State Department, U.S. Agency for International Development, and U.S. Department of Agriculture.
9. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) PRT Handbook for agricultural advisors states that by supporting PRTs with agricultural advisors, USDA hopes to achieve the following goals: (1) Enable, support, and foster the physical and institutional reconstruction of Afghanistan's agricultural sector; (2) Strengthen the capacity of the Afghan Government to rebuild agricultural markets and to support and provide services to the agricultural private sector; and (3) Improve conservation of biological diversity and management of forests, rangeland, and watersheds through the relevant units of the Afghan Government. USDA, *Guide for USDA Agricultural Experts: Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) Afghanistan*, Washington, DC: Foreign Agricultural Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2009, p. 7.
10. Ibid., p. 37.
11. USDA, Lessons Learned Workshop for USDA Personnel Deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan, Washington, DC: USDA Foreign Agricultural Service and Center for Complex Operations, July 2009.
12. While numerous governments, international agencies, and NGOs conduct agriculture-related activities in Afghanistan, we focus on the agricultural reconstruction efforts conducted by the various branches of the U.S. military and U.S. federal government agencies.
13. Agricultural advisors' final reports were sourced from USDA-FAS electronic files. Every effort was made to find all final agricultural reports from Afghanistan within the program files. However, the quality and amount of information in these reports seem to be a function of the individual advisor. It also appears that not all advisors completed final reports. Additionally,

reporting formats, procedures, and requirements apparently varied since USDA's first advisor deployments in 2003, likely as a result of staffing turnover and changing procedures within USDA-FAS.

14. While similarities exist between the experiences of advisors serving in Iraq and Afghanistan, final reports from advisors in Iraq were not included in the analysis because of the differences in the countries' agricultural sectors and the difficulties involved in drawing conclusions between different countries, cultures, and time points.
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30. Republic of Afghanistan, "Afghanistan National Development Strategy 1387-1391 (2008-2013): A Strategy for Security, Governance, Economic Growth, and Poverty Reduction," Kabul, Afghanistan: Afghanistan National Development Strategy Secretariat, 2008, p. 156.
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35. President Barack Obama, "The Way Forward in Afghanistan," White House, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/way-forward-afghanistan>, accessed on 20 February 2010; and Steven Kaufman, "Agriculture Is Top U.S. Non-security Focus in Afghanistan," America.gov, <http://www.america.gov/st/develop-english/2010/january/20100108100954esnamfuak0.3285334.html>, accessed on 20 February 2010.

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