



Statement of
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before
The Commission on Wartime Contracting hearing
on
**Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Provincial Reconstruction
Teams (PRTs): Contracting and the Future of Development in
Contingency Operations.**

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Thank you Chairman Shays, Chairman Thibault, and members of the Commission for holding this hearing. I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to share some brief, field-based observations on the smart development principle of “sustainability.” Based on this principle and CRS’ experience, we recommend that the US Government always treat development as a process and consider the comparative advantages of all development implementers.

Catholic Relief Services is the relief and development agency of the Catholic community of the United States. A subsidiary of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, we work in the 100 poorest countries in the world.

As the Catholic Relief Services’ Country Representative in Afghanistan from May 2008 to March 2011, I had the privilege to lead a team of 450 Afghans and 15 international staff working in the provinces of Herat, Ghor, Bamiyan, Kabul, Kapisa, and Panjshir. CRS teams work in close partnership with communities, local government, and civil society groups to implement programming in the areas of agro-enterprise, community-based education, integrated water security, and emergency response.

The idea that development must be sustainable in order to be meaningful is not a new one, and is by no means unique to Afghanistan. Indeed, considerations of sustainability underlie the efforts of organizations like CRS across the world. As you know, CRS and our

colleague organizations The International Rescue Committee, Save the Children, Care, Mercy Corps, and the Aga Khan Foundation recently included sustainability as one of four key principles for development in a white paper entitled, “Being Smart About Development in Afghanistan.” When we mention this principle of sustainability to policy makers, in Kabul or in Washington, the standard reaction is “of course.”

Indeed, the importance of designing development interventions to be sustainable is a matter of consensus. Yet what we observe in the field suggests an enormous gulf between acknowledging the theoretical importance of sustainable development and putting that theory into practice. Over and over, we see the principle of sustainable development sacrificed in order to meet political timelines; expedite burn rates; and deliver easily quantifiable outputs without measuring more abstract impacts. Consequently, what constitutes a small success today often produces extremely negative consequences tomorrow.

No matter how well constructed or how joyful the celebrations at ribbon cutting ceremonies, even something as apparently simple as school construction can prove unsustainable. If a school is built in a location that is easily accessible for the construction company but not for children in surrounding villages, or if there are no qualified teachers assigned to it, it fails to pass the test of sustainability. If a project’s success or failure is measured by how quickly funds were spent or materials like seeds or food were shipped out the door, how can we know if it is sustainable? And if the construction of a water system or

the implementation of a cash-for-work project in one village buys goodwill at the expense of inflaming pre-existing conflicts with neighboring villages, then that project is not only unsustainable, but also is actively harmful.

We see this willingness to make long-term sacrifices in exchange for short-term gains not only in stabilization programs, which are not designed with sustainability in mind, but also in ostensibly long-term development, capacity building, and transition-driven initiatives. So while it may be obvious in the abstract, we continue to emphasize that smart development is sustainable development; that poorly implemented development programs are almost always worse than none at all; and that poorly implemented stabilization or development activities may actually be destabilizing.

In contrast, we therefore offer the recommendation that development be treated as a process. By approaching development as a process that requires careful planning, assessment, implementation, monitoring, follow-up, and frequent course correction, we demonstrate consistent, incremental results while working towards sustainable, lasting impact. Many such projects require three to five years to yield a realistic impact assessment, rather than 18-24 months.

Process-driven development is inherently Afghan-driven, impartial, accountable, and sustainable. CRS's work in Afghanistan provides examples of what this process looks like. Agro-enterprise activities are

designed in consultation with both the communities that will benefit, and the planning team at the provincial department of agriculture.

Before any activities are undertaken, CRS staff and local farmers develop a business plan with profitability analysis; including the value of any inputs contributed by CRS. Farmers who participate in the project receive inputs and participate in workshops. They also receive regular follow-up monitoring and on-the-job training visits. CRS staff and department of agriculture agronomists jointly visit project sites to assess progress, suggest corrections where necessary, and disseminate lessons learned and best practices. This “learn-by-doing” model supports farmers as they learn new skills to ensure success.

Any complaints about transparency, targeting, or staff behavior can be fed back through community leaders, district governors, department of agriculture staff, or CRS monitoring and evaluation teams.

Farmers reap individual benefits, but work together in growers associations or collective marketing arrangements in order to provide them with enhanced leverage through economies of scale and a long-term support network. These growers associations and our collaboration with the department of agriculture builds their skills and technical capacity for future success. Moreover, it establishes the relationships that enhance the capacity and credibility of the governmental system.

Similarly, our approach to community-based education highlights how focusing on process provides for long-term sustainability while delivering immediate benefits. CRS implements community-based education in line with the Government of Afghanistan's Community-Based Education policy. The curriculum taught in CRS-supported classes is the official government curriculum.

Communities that are targeted for participation must be at least three kilometers from the nearest government school building, and are selected in consultation with provincial department of education staff based on their long-term planning. CRS staff conduct extensive community mobilization and awareness-raising activities before the school is started. The equivalent of a parent-teacher association is established as the local, long-term mechanism for decision-making about the school.

The inputs (or hardware) provided by CRS are very limited: classroom materials, books, and pedagogical materials. Communities provide the classroom space and initial salary support for the teacher, until the class is absorbed into the government of Afghanistan system. CRS provides extensive training, monitoring, and on-site support to teachers. While the measureable inputs in such a program may be difficult to quantify – no brick nor mortar is laid – the investment in human resources (or software) promises to fuel learning for generations. CRS' program has helped over 13,000 children, nearly two thirds of them girls, access high

quality education. In many places, these children constitute the first literate generation in their villages.

CRS' more than 60 years of successful, community-based development illustrates that the principle of sustainability is not only feasible, but rather essential for the effective delivery of US development assistance. Organizations such as CRS and the other private voluntary organizations testifying here today are uniquely qualified to deliver assistance that is sustainable and process-driven.

Commissioners, we appreciate your inquiry into our unique approach to development. And we respectfully suggest that a full exploration of the comparative advantages of various development implementers by the General Accountability Office would help to measure development impacts and sustainability over the long-term. Benchmarks and standardized measures of progress made on impact such as improved literacy; increased access to clean drinking water; improved agricultural productivity, and increased local capacity, will ensure a standard of comparison among various implementing agencies.

Thank you again Commissioners for this opportunity to testify. We appreciate your interest in these principles and look forward to working with you as you prepare your final report.