

A response to the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee inquiry
into

“The administration, management and objective of Australia's overseas
development programs in Afghanistan in the context of the 'Transition Decade'”

Section (e):

**“How to guarantee the safety of all workers involved in the delivery of
Australian aid programs in Afghanistan”**

This submission is a singular view on the above issue that is guided by experiences gained from working in insecure humanitarian environments for over a decade including three and a half years in the “red zone” of Iraq. It is not a balanced or comprehensive submission but rather an effort to inform members of this Committee of a particular point of view. The experiences that inform this submission in particular draw upon the period of transition in Iraq from a relatively safe environment in 2003 through to the period of insecurity during which I, like many others, had to manage security threats that for my organization included having expatriate and national staff kidnapped, personnel killed, armed attacks and innumerable death threats.

Eliminating risks eliminates rewards

To respond directly to the question posed, namely how to guarantee the safety of workers, the answer must begin with acknowledging that there can be no guarantee. **Nor should one be sought as any approach that offers a guarantee of safety to aid workers will negatively impact the quality of aid being delivered and as such be counterproductive to Australia's development goals.** We must acknowledge that there is a risk involved in providing aid as there is for our defence personnel in fighting wars. Such risks in both cases should only be minimized as much as they do not precipitously undermine their overall purpose.

In this regard it should be understood that undertaking aid work, whether humanitarian or developmental, requires interacting with people, be they local farmers, small business owners or government officials. Sealing off the ability of aid workers to do their job by placing them behind t-walls to live in military bases or through other means of seeking to ‘guarantee’ their safety, as seems to be the trend, undermines the potential effectiveness of their work.

In both Iraq and Afghanistan because of the large sums of money available the environment was and remains conducive, even attractive, for many implementing organizations to manage development programs remotely—that is not geographically, but in isolation of the people, transforming development experts into contract administrators. This type of bureaucratized

development assistance that sub-contracts at arm's length corrupts the development process and greatly weakens outcomes. Possibly, in seeking a degree of absolutism or simply working within organizational constraints many aid policy decision makers depend upon long debunked ideas that suggest fixed sets of inputs, regardless of country or culture, spur development and stabilize states—as if there was a universally replicable recipe requiring fixed dabs and dollops of certain state building ingredients. They favour the types of projects that can be sub-contracted (building roads, refurbishing schools or organizing foreign study tours for officials) but their long term effectiveness is questionable. This is because fundamental to good development practise is the counter intuitive idea that how you undertake an activity matters more than the actual output of the activity and to achieve this aid workers much interact with their counterparts.

As such seeking to “guarantee” the safety of development workers should be avoided, while seeking to improve their safety should be considered carefully against the potential risk of undermining the effectiveness of a particular aid operation. The latter is a difficult balance that cannot be fixed, legislated or predetermined in any way, but rather must be delegated to organizations and individuals who choose to go into war zones to provide aid.

[A way to mitigate risks](#)

There are ways that the Australian government can and should contribute indirectly to mitigating potential risks. In seeking to improve the safety of aid workers this Committee can add to the already considerable body of work undertaken by various NGO-military dialogues by reviewing Australia's current approach to post conflict civilian-military relations not only for the transition in Afghanistan but for future operations.

The blurring of the lines between military personnel and aid workers has been much discussed and both sides to the argument have been well documented but it requires further attention. What remains unsaid is that the cohabitation and overt collaboration between military and civilian personnel is exposing the majority of foreign aid workers, current and future, to unnecessary harm. The unnecessary extension of the whole-of-government concept to the coal face in a way that includes the establishment of PRTs and Australian Civilian Corps personnel being seconded or integrated into military units is largely driven by a misguided idea that cost and operational efficiency across all levels equates to improved developmental results. The concept of PRTs was only introduced into Afghanistan by the United States in 2003 and Iraq in 2005 **before which in previous missions civilian and military personnel coordinated but were not integrated**. Yet this approach appears to have taken root and further closer collaboration is being sought by Australian government agencies:

AFP, a key agency, would like to see closer alignment with AusAID and greater integration of a whole-of-government approach across agencies in planning,

*budget and **implementation**: “There is more work to be done across this security–development nexus space to synchronise more effectively the programs of AusAID and other government development programs (e.g. the Defence Cooperation Program, AFP policing program, AGD rule of law program).”*
(emphasis added)

Independent Review of Aid Effectiveness, (April 2011) p. 263

The role of AusAID in Afghanistan is integral to Australia’s whole–of–government efforts, and sees AusAID staff working in a difficult and dangerous environment. AusAID staff in the Uruzgan Provincial Reconstruction Team live and work alongside the Australian Defence Force (ADF), including regularly travelling outside the secure military base at Tarin Kowt and spending periods of time at forward–operating bases.

Independent Review of Aid Effectiveness p. 268

In addition aid workers seeking funds from various international donors (the following examples are from US government awards) are expected to incorporate clauses into their contracts that require an acceptance of their instrumentalization under the military. Sample extracts from NGO contracts in Afghanistan:

“NGO” should “support military efforts in communities by helping to ‘hold’ areas after they are cleared”

“NGO” is to provide “direct support of ongoing and planned USG Counterinsurgency efforts”

“NGO” is to “implement program activities...in post-battlefield clean-up operations”

What was initially seen as a dangerous misunderstanding within US military circles, articulated by Colin Powell when he said in 2001, “NGOs are such a force multiplier for us, such an important part of our combat team,” has now become a reality.

The point here is that the shift towards integration rather than coordination was driven by military imperatives as opposed to mutual consent. As such it is important to note that **there is no basis for claims that suggest improved development outcomes have been achieved as a result of closer integration on the ground between civilian and military personnel.** Other agencies’ goals may well have benefited as may have in the near term Australia’s national security objectives but as this Committee is asking a specific question related to the safety of aid workers I will not reflect upon these broader and controversial issues. Suffice to say for the

purposes of discussing methods for improving the safety of personnel it is important to acknowledge that there is no evidence of improved developmental outcomes under an on-the-ground whole-of-government approach and as such its negative ramifications such as undermining security for aid personnel need to be critically assessed potentially at the instigation of this Committee.

To begin such a critical appraisal it is important to rebut those who suggest that the Taliban or Al Qaeda do not differentiate between Westerners who claim to be neutral and those who are overtly aligned with the military. In my opinion broadly speaking this is not a fair assertion, though it does occur. Other NGOs and the ICRC seem to also question such a view. From a personal perspective I am convinced that for example, the reason my staff member, the first expatriate to be kidnapped in Iraq, was released relatively unharmed was because of our efforts before and during his kidnapping of emphasizing our operational neutrality and humanitarian ideals which are concepts strongly grounded in Islamic tradition. This was despite public knowledge of our funding coming from US sources and the organization's headquarters being in New York. **Establishing a common understanding of who you are as an aid worker and what your organization's objectives are, including differentiating oneself from the military, is critical to mitigating risks.**

It is important that I note emphatically here that the various institutions within Australia's overall effort in Afghanistan including AusAID, Defence, private donors working through NGOs and other governmental agencies each seek to achieve largely the same goal. This submission does not seek to undermine other's efforts but rather emphasizes that each operates through different means. The question at hand then is how do the actions of one (the military) affect the ability of the other (aid workers)?

Any attempt at establishing a fully integrated approach as has occurred through the whole-of-government effort, while admirable on paper, inevitably operationally subsumes subordinate actors to the dominant players which in the case of Afghanistan are the Western military forces. Not unreasonably nor unexpectedly aid becomes shaped by military objectives including tending towards stabilization, force protection or hearts and minds campaigning. Similarly, as a result of the dominant place of the military, aid channelled through civilian mechanisms is shaped by military planning. Although both development workers and the military ultimately are working towards the same goals the synchronization through a whole-of-government approach creates a hierarchy of objectives that favours the relatively short term goals of the military at the expense of the long term goals of the civilian aid workers.

[Concluding remarks](#)

Australia's military presence in Afghanistan was never envisaged to be a long term commitment. Even though it has now passed ten years, a seemingly long presence, but one

that pales in comparison to the anticipated presence of the development community. As I often told my military counterparts in Iraq, “we were here long before you came, we stayed throughout your deployment and we will remain here long after you’ve gone.” **The negative security ramifications of the blurring of lines between humanitarianism and military actions should not be judged against this ten year backdrop but rather, cognizant that transforming a failed state takes 20-40 years¹, it is important to consider the impact of (mis)perceptions into the future long after the last Australian soldier departs.**

What this suggests then is that impressions created during the military led years, a relatively small timeframe in the development context, of civilians as being subordinate to the military or as “force multipliers”, will remain long after the soldiers have departed. The resulting view from the Afghan side will be that all Western efforts are extensions of the military effort even after the military leaves. This may well not be the actual case but once entrenched such misperceptions are very difficult to change which then unnecessarily puts aid workers’ lives at risk.

The recommendation is to seek an inter-departmental review of the current civilian-military approach in Afghanistan. Such a review should interrogate the risks relative to the benefits of the integrated on-the-ground whole-of-government mechanism, especially as it relates to the impact upon long term development goals including the security of aid workers. As for the specific post-transition period in Afghanistan, the ground work has already been laid years earlier by those organizations that will remain after the soldiers depart. If their efforts in engaging with the community (from the government, religious and tribal leaders through to the local community) are well established then their safety will be greatly enhanced. Those who have not will be forced to quickly establish their own security protocols largely mimicking those left behind by the military requiring very high costs and increased risks with decreased potential for development success.

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¹ *A New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States*, (1 December 2011).