



# SMALL WARS JOURNAL

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## Interview with Roger Hardister: The Global Partnership for Afghanistan

by Bob Tollast

Since 2004, Global Partnership for Afghanistan has worked with Afghan farmers for sustainable agribusiness including horticulture, forestry and water management. Working across twelve provinces including Paktya, Paktika, Wardak, and Logar as well as supporting training facilities in Kabul and Kapisa, GPFA provides a package of tree stock, seeds, training and supplies so that farmers can invest their land and labor to produce higher annual incomes. Since 2004, GPFA has overseen over 15,000 farm enterprises, planting over 9,000,000 trees and seen the income of many farmers increase significantly. Additionally, GPFA runs the Women Working Together Initiative, which aims to boost the neglected but crucial contribution from women to Afghan farming. Supporting widows and the illiterate, this programme has expanded since its inception in 2005 and like other GPFA projects, has increased modern farming practices such as cold storage and horticultural training among long neglected communities, so that there are now a significant number of women run farms.

### *A Question of Scale*

While public donations are vital for the continued success of GPFA, they have also proved themselves worthy of ongoing USAID support. This is of particular interest in light of recent criticism of aid expenditure in Afghanistan, including skepticism towards large scale projects and quick fix solutions, as well as the empowerment of people who were later found to be highly corrupt.

Scott Dempsey, former USAID development official in Helmand province and ex USAID Foreign Service Officer recently delivered such a critique of the CERP/ USAID approach in Afghanistan in his SWJ essay *Is Spending The Strategy?* Dempsey singles out electricity generators in Kandahar an expensive temporary fix, and the distribution of 16,000 water pumps for irrigation as forming part of a short term and unsustainable strategy.

In contrast, GPFA Executive Director Roger Hardister extolled the benefits of the small scale approach in Nicolas Kristoff's NY times blog last year, noting that

Small is good. It is an open secret in Afghanistan that many large agencies with projects worth tens if not hundreds of millions of dollars are just not as flexible and able to respond to opportunities as smaller, more nimble groups. GPFA staff, almost exclusively Afghan, are less dependent on high profile security precautions, and are therefore less conspicuous. They are also part of local social networks, which provides a measure of support and security. They know the people and communities and can get to the field and make things happen.

With this in mind, I posed some questions to Roger Hardister on the problems of scale encountered in Afghanistan, and the challenges aid agencies- or anyone, might face in what was once known as “the orchard of Central Asia.”

**A lot of GPFA projects are small and local. Larger aid projects have proven beset by problems, often dependant on foreign expertise and so time consuming that local Afghans do not feel a benefit (even if real benefit is further down the line.) Is small the way forward?**

Both are needed. Unfortunately the tendency is to focus on longer term “development” (variously defined) projects to the exclusion of those that produce more immediate benefits. While it’s true that larger longer-term projects are needed to generate the policies, infrastructure, capacities, political structures and long-term financing to assure positive impacts over time, focusing exclusively or primarily on these while neglecting smaller projects with more immediate benefits is like shooting yourself in the foot.

Put this in the context of a conflict where even at the best of times it is difficult and often impossible to reach rural communities, and where the price of their involvement in government and foreign sponsored projects may endanger them, why would they risk themselves or their communities without any immediate tangible benefits?

Projects with immediate and significantly sustainable impacts are essential. Smaller projects of this type, implemented by smaller agencies, are more likely to succeed in the current context. More resources and a more flexible approach are needed to support these efforts.

While I hesitate to say these smaller projects should be coordinated with larger more systemic ones, there is definitely a layering effect with positive outcomes. However, it’s not simply a question of small or large projects, or long or short-term projects; both are required. What we need are immediate, significant, sustainable and highly visible benefits for local farmers, farm families and communities.

People define these benefits as peace and security on a daily basis in their own and surrounding communities, improvements in health and living conditions for themselves and their families, education for their children, and sustainable increases in family incomes. Increasing access to government services, capacity building, or increased participation in the political process as defined by others are not top of mind. Nor do they consider a crackdown on corruption or reduction in poppy production priorities.

**Aside from low literacy, Afghans have been known to harbour some eccentric superstitions. How does GPFA overcome obstacles like low literacy when teaching some of the more advanced skills- is it a constant uphill struggle?**

Given GPFA’s focus on agriculture, this is less of a problem than it may be in some areas. Rather than eccentric superstitions we tend to come across traditional agriculture and planting practices that limit production levels of existing crops and are a barrier to introducing new crops or varieties, and hinder the adoption of improved farming practices.

Existing personal and community relations are also sometimes barriers to the introduction of new practices and market relationships. Education and hands-on demonstrations of successful methods and new enterprises are key to helping farmers see the limitations of many traditional practices.

This is also true of GPFA's extensive involvement of women where illiteracy rates are even higher and where they are often isolated from the larger society. Helping women come together, experience alternatives and conduct their own demonstrations are productive. Reducing the threat to traditional male dominance through deference to existing male leadership has given GPFA access to increasing numbers of women and the confidence of local community leaders which allows us to introduce new ideas with a potential for change.

**A recent report on Afghanistan claimed the following about Shuras: "The elites in certain Afghan communities have proven incapable of reaching consensus on which development projects are best. In others, the strongest faction has twisted the arms of the others prior to the Shuras in order to give foreigners a false impression of community consensus." Who decides what the best aid for a given community is when local politics can be so confusing?**

This reflects a larger problem – the naivety of depending too much on local leadership for solutions to long-standing societal and community problems. This is a particular problem in isolated areas where illiteracy is high, where there are large gaps between ethnic, age and gender groups, and in societies in rapid change where local elites may be particularly out of touch – not necessarily with their own communities but with the challenges facing survival in a rapidly changing world.

It's better to focus on community needs and priorities, anticipate a long and drawn out discussion to broaden the process of participation and arrive at consensus – not a meeting to select a project. During these discussions, identify small projects where there is a clearly perceivable and shared need. Through working on the smaller projects you can get to know communities better, identify real leadership, and find ways of working with local people more effectively. Community education is essential.

The focus in Afghanistan is on the quick fix and on localization (in the absence of effective local institutions including local NGOs) which has led to a reliance on local construction firms where output is defined as a building or other physical structures with no real services or potential for sustainability. Community education is lacking. More emphasis needs to be given to projects – generally smaller with smaller agencies, where output is defined in terms of increased awareness and greater openness to participation and change. The counting of beans is counter-productive when no understand why they are counting.

GPFA's work with cleaning under and overground water channels in isolated and conflict prone areas is a good example. There is general agreement in local communities that this work is needed, where it is needed, and how to do it. It provides immediate and significant benefits in terms of cash for labor (when local labor is used), and immediate benefits for local farmers in terms of access to additional farm land and increasing availability of water.

This simple intervention can be used as a point of departure for further engagement in larger more complex agriculture and watershed management activities. It builds trust, demonstrates results, and is the base for further action. Before going further, local communities are encouraged to visit other communities to see additional possibilities, to look at the need for their own increasing involvement in planning and management of on-going activities, and explore local community financing for new projects. This type of effort can dovetail with larger more developmental and capacity building projects. The two are not mutually exclusive but complementary.

**Finally, the Greg Mortenson Three Cups of Tea scandal. Do you think this is going to seriously hurt the work of NGO's in Afghanistan or do you think the charity giving public understand that people fabricate stories in any walk of life?**

I think that the more serious problem is the tendency of the international press to see Afghanistan as a war rather than as a country. They tend to see Afghan development as reported by those embedded with ISAF forces, who tend to want to assert their independence from their hosts and often look for the negatives rather than the positives, ignoring virtually everything else outside of that discourse. Additionally, the press and public confuse NGOs with one another. In over three years that I have been in Afghanistan I have seen only a handful of real NGOs. The majority of those attending NGO conferences are partner agencies for bilateral funders – normally huge private sector development management firms, local private sector contractors who have established an NGO as an additional portal for their firm, and some local agencies established as income-generating projects for their board and members. At this point there are few real international or local NGOs – few of either operate outside safe areas and most are grossly underfunded.

The public imagination was captured by Greg and his group, elevating the perception of what good NGOs can do to a new high. Unfortunately, when you set someone up so quickly on so high a pedestal there is a tendency to fall far. At the same time I think that the giving public's desire to be of help to those in need outweighs their temporary disappointments with individual efforts.

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