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Canada learning hard lessons in aid to Afghanistan: senior aid official

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KANDAHAR, Afghanistan — Reconstructing Afghanistan is not going exactly as everyone had hoped, a senior Canadian aid official admits.

It's not just the lack of security that poses a problem but the challenge of figuring out what actually works on the ground, said Stephen Wallace, vice-president of the Afghanistan Task Force of the Canadian International Development Agency.

In an exclusive interview Monday with The Canadian Press, Wallace said Canada is learning hard lessons about how to allocate aid funding to rebuild the war-torn country.

"When you do 50 different programs in the country as Canada does, some work really well and some don't work so well," Wallace said in a telephone interview from his Gatineau headquarters.

"What do you do about it? From our standpoint, we will stop and have stopped the stuff that hasn't worked very well and we take the money into the stuff that can scale up and do more."

Canada is spending more than \$100 million a year through 2011 on development in Afghanistan.

About 65 per cent of the amount is funnelled through trust funds administered by international agencies that finance the work of the Afghan government in reconstruction.

The rest is spent through non-governmental organizations on projects like basic humanitarian relief or skills training.

Over the last few years, Wallace said, CIDA has learned that it's impossible to do any aid work in the country without the implicit support of the community.

"Unless you are prepared to use the Afghan system to respond to the needs of the Afghan people, you will often fail," he said.

"And you certainly will not be able to sustain what is succeeding."

What Wallace said has been working for development in Afghanistan is the National Solidarity Program, which creates community councils in districts across Afghanistan who then determine what their own development needs.

The CDCs, as they are called, apply for funding to finance the projects but must also contribute

either money or labour.

More than 600 projects, mostly infrastructure items like bridges and wells, have been completed in Kandahar this year alone, few coming under any attack from insurgent forces.

Another major success for CIDA has been a micro-finance program which gives small loans to individuals to start businesses.

Many of the participants have been women and the loan repayment rate is 95 per cent.

But what CIDA has learned from that program is that giving micro-loans can only go so far.

"If you just thought you could do it and it would work always and everywhere you would be completely wrong and unrealistic about it," he said.

"You have to go from this notion of providing microfinance to providing small business services. What is a business plan, what is a market, how do you develop."

So CIDA is now funding the Canadian NGO Mennonite Economic Development Associates to help train loan recipients on business development skills.

Wallace said where CIDA is hitting walls in getting the Afghan government up to speed in being able to help sustain the projects being built with international aid money.

An example is the cost of salaries for teachers and doctors.

Most communities want health clinics or schools, Wallace said, but the government isn't yet able to handle the demands those place on the system.

"We would have liked to have seen faster progress on that," he said.

"In particular, security costs were much greater than we thought three or four years ago."

The international community's approach to aid in Afghanistan is centred around the Afghanistan Compact, a series of development benchmarks agreed upon in 2006 to be reached by 2011.

But Afghanistan remains trapped in a cycle created by the theory that security is required for development but development is what provides security.

Theoretically, the success of development programs at the local level like CDCs should foster greater security as citizens come to trust and depend on their governments and refuse to support or join the insurgency.

But a slew of statistics from private security firms, NATO and the UN all suggest that the security situation in Afghanistan, and in Kandahar, is the worst it has been in a long time.

In recent weeks, suicide attacks have killed more than 100 Afghans in Kandahar, a Canadian soldier was killed Sunday by a roadside bomb and the insurgents have blown up or attempted to destroy at least four cellphone towers in the province.

Confidence in government is waning - a high-profile gathering of community elders in Kandahar City recently resulted in a letter being drafted demanding the ouster of Kandahar Gov.

Assadullah Khalid for being an ineffective leader.

Meanwhile, the Canadian military insists things in at least four of Kandahar's 17 districts are improving.

Members of the military often snicker at CIDA behind their backs, deriding them for remaining within the confines of the military base while soldiers are out building bridges and roads.

Wallace acknowledged there has been a disconnect between the two arms of Canada's approach to Afghanistan but insists they are nearing the ability to shake hands.

The appointment of a senior civilian officer, Elissa Golberg, to co-ordinate development efforts with military action is one sign that the two sides may be coming closer together.

"I actually think that we probably have a legacy of not having had the same kind of approach, not being able to work together as close as we might have but I also think we have an optimistic environment that we're working in right now," he said.

"In the end, we're both really operational, we're both really hands-on people; we just want to get stuff done."

Wallace's comments come at a time where the international community is taking a hard look at the progress in Afghanistan. Several high-profile think-tanks have suggested the counter-insurgency war is failing and mechanisms for aid delivery are faltering.

CIDA was criticized in the recent Manley report for not paying enough attention to the immediate needs of Afghans, specifically in Kandahar.

Politicians and academics have also derided the agency for being too close-lipped about where it spends its money.