

INVESTIGATING THE POST-CONFLICT RECONSTRUCTION OF THE RING ROAD IN AFGHANISTAN

Sophia Dhalla

There is a widespread consensus among development practitioners and academicians that, given the right conditions, road reconstruction projects have the potential to bring about development and target poverty. At the core of this claim is the belief that roads reduce social isolation by connecting citizens to vital services such as market, health and education services, as well as social and political networks. This paper will analyze the construction of the Ring Road in Afghanistan, a main highway reconstruction project carried out by the international donor community, beginning in 2003 and continuing to-day. The following question will be addressed: Despite the intentions of the international community to bolster national peace and provide social services through the Ring Road, to what extent has this reconstruction project actually reinforced conflict and diminished peace? This paper will critically examine the unforeseen negative consequences of the road, including the involvement of the Taliban and land grabbing by government officials. In addition, this paper will attempt to answer why this lack of foresight on the part of international donors occurred in the first place, despite their well-intentioned efforts.

INTRODUCTION

This paper will examine how the post-conflict reconstruction of the Ring Road in Afghanistan has impacted local livelihoods. The Ring Road is part of a 3,360 kilometer main highway reconstruction project funded largely by the international donor community.¹ Once completed in 2015, it is believed that 60% of Afghans will live within 50 kilometers of this road.² Donor agencies originally believed that the road reconstruction project would facilitate a rise in enterprise capabilities and disposable incomes, affording farmers lower transport costs to expand their market beyond local communities. Furthermore, the Ring Road was intended to connect rural Afghans to government services, including schools and hospitals, while spreading peace and stability throughout the country. However, since the reconstruction of the Ring Road began over a decade ago, reported levels of land grabbing have reached an all-time high along the road.³ In addition, the Taliban has seized control of many segments of the Ring Road, setting up illegal checkpoints, attacking construction workers, and planting landmines.⁴

This paper will address the following question: Despite the intentions of the international community to bolster national peace and provide social services through the Ring Road, to what extent has this reconstruction project actually reinforced conflict and diminished peace? This paper will critically examine the unforeseen negative consequences of the road, including increases in land grabbing

Sophia Dhalla graduated from McGill University in 2013 with a Bachelor of Arts and Science, majoring in International Development and Molecular Biology. She is currently attending medical school at the University of British Columbia, and has a keen interest in global health. This paper was written for a fourth year development seminar at McGill for Professor Karen McAllister, with the guidance of Dr. Jon Unruh.

and strengthening of the Taliban. In addition, this paper will attempt to answer why this lack of foresight on the part of international donors occurred in the first place, highlighting their lack of consultation with locals on the ground prior to building the road.

INFRASTRUCTURE IN AFGHANISTAN: A HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Beginning with the invasion by the former Soviet Union in 1979, followed by civil wars and the rise of the Taliban in the 1990's, the past decades of Afghanistan's history have been rife with conflict. These years of war have resulted in large-scale deterioration of the country's infrastructure, with many important roads and bridges being destroyed.⁵ In 1991, only 13% of the country's roads were paved, and most of them were decimated to dirt tracks during the following ten years of warfare.⁶ After years of war, "[roads] were almost impassable. [They] had been washed out by floods, ground apart by tank treads and bombed in repeated military campaigns. The husks of looted cars and deserted Russian armour lined its shoulders. In places it was mined or littered with unexploded rockets, shells, and bombs."⁷ The large-scale destruction of roads left Afghanistan in an economic crisis, as people could not easily move from one place to another, and local goods could not make it to the market on time. Following the al-Qaeda terrorist attacks on New York and Washington D.C. in September 2001, the United States intervened militarily in Afghanistan and removed the Taliban regime from power. Immediately following this event, Afghanistan suddenly became a major target of international aid and security efforts. At this time, Afghanistan was one of the poorest places on earth, with 70% of the population malnourished and over 64% being illiterate.⁸ Once the Taliban was overthrown, the international community wanted to take immediate action to promote peace and long-term stability throughout the impoverished nation.

Shortly after the defeat of the Taliban, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) conducted the *Afghanistan Civil Infrastructure Assessment*, identifying the reconstruction of the Ring Road as a priority for Afghanistan's development. USAID presented a final report of their assessment to the Afghan government, which stated that "damaged roads have become bottlenecks to the movement of people and goods."⁹ At the Tokyo Conference on Afghan Reconstruction in January 2002, donor agencies concurred that the large-scale reconstruction of the Ring Road would help extend the central government's influence in bringing peace and economic prosperity to the rest of the country. Three main goals of the Ring Road were outlined at the Tokyo conference: a) facilitate trade and economic linkages, b) improve access to schools, health clinics, and other government services and c) bring rural areas into commercial interaction with the marketplace.¹⁰ The Ring Road reconstruction project began in 2003, involving the cooperation of twelve countries and multilateral agencies under the leadership of USAID. Each of these donors is responsible for financing and constructing their allocated segment of the road by 2015. To date, the international donors have

collectively donated approximately \$3 billion towards rebuilding the Ring Road; after security expenditures, road reconstruction is the largest recipient of aid money in Afghanistan.¹¹ The most significant financial contributors include USAID, the Asian Development Bank, Japan, and the World Bank, respectively.¹² Upon completion, this road will connect sixteen major provinces and cities within the country, while connecting Afghanistan to neighboring Tajikistan, Pakistan and Iran.¹³

ROAD RECONSTRUCTION AND DEVELOPMENT: WHAT THE EVIDENCE HAS SHOWN

There is a widespread consensus among development practitioners and academicians that, given the right conditions, roads have the potential to bring about development and target poverty. At the core of this claim is the belief that roads reduce social isolation by connecting citizens to vital services such as market, health and education services, as well as social and political networks.¹⁴ In a rural context, roads provide a foundation for increased agricultural yields through improved access to markets, increased availability of relevant inputs, and lower input costs. According to a 2002 report by the Asian Development Bank, “The improvement of roads is broadly recognized as a fundamental precondition for development, and remoteness and lack of mobility are widely identified by the poor themselves as factors in heightening their vulnerability and perpetuating their poverty.”¹⁵

The belief that roads have the potential to catalyze social and economic development has been widely supported in the literature through various country case studies. The most successful modern example of investment in road reconstruction as a means of poverty alleviation has been in China. Since 1985, China has reconstructed over 250,000 kilometers of roads and bridges, with investment focused on 28% of the poorest districts in the country.¹⁶ The reconstruction of these roads have served as vital transport corridors for the export and import of goods as well as domestically commercialized products.¹⁷ Additionally, the agricultural yields of Chinese farmers have increased significantly with travel times to commercial markets reduced by over 75% in some villages.¹⁸ Other similar success stories have been reported in regions of Cameroon, Vietnam, and Ecuador.¹⁹ In each of these cases, road reconstruction efforts were supplemented with government service provision, consultation with local villagers, and a high degree of transparency. It is becoming increasingly evident that while roads serve as a critical complement to development, they will not necessarily alleviate poverty on their own. As the World Bank cautions, “Roads should be considered as a necessary but not sufficient tool for development.”²⁰ At present, the literature is heavily focused on developing a more nuanced understanding of the conditions needed for successful road implementation. Analyzing the detrimental experience of the Ring Road in Afghanistan will serve to build upon this understanding, providing insight into road reconstruction in a post-conflict context.

NEGATIVE UNINTENDED EFFECTS OF THE RING ROAD

Despite intentions to promote peace and security through reconstruction of the Ring Road, these post-conflict reconstruction efforts appear to have exacerbated the conflict within Afghanistan. While summary reports from donor agencies have downplayed the extent of insecurity and instability along the Ring Road, the media has reported on the detrimental consequences of the road since it was first constructed. According to the *Afghanistan Times*, land grabbing by corrupt government officials has skyrocketed since the construction of the road, leading to large-scale displacement of local Afghans from their land.²¹ This issue of land grabbing along the road is further aggravated by Afghanistan's crippled land tenure system and the widespread corruption in the country. In addition, the Taliban have seized control of many parts of the road, planting landmines, kidnapping workers and setting up illegal checkpoints along the road.²² In many cases, criminals masquerade as police officers and order drivers to pull over, sacking their vehicles and stealing their goods.²³ A 2012 article in *The Telegraph* reported that "[The Kabul-Kandahar Ring Road] was built at massive expense as a symbol of success for the new Afghanistan, but instead the...road has become a highway of death that shows what has gone wrong."²⁴ By the month of August, over 190 bomb attacks had occurred along the Ring Road in 2012 alone, along with 284 shootings; this equates to nearly one shooting for every mile of road.²⁵ The subsequent sections will further investigate the negative unforeseen consequences of the Ring Road including increases in land grabbing and strengthening of the Taliban.

Increases in Land Grabbing

Since the construction of the Ring Road in Afghanistan, significant increases in land values along the road have resulted in large-scale land grabbing by powerful interests. Of the thirty-four provinces in Afghanistan, the nine provinces with the greatest levels of government-seized land are located in closest proximity to the Ring Road.²⁶ In six of these provinces, over 80% of the land has been grabbed.²⁷ It is currently estimated that over four million acres of land across Afghanistan have been seized illegally, primarily by top government officials and military leaders.²⁸ Anecdotal evidence suggests that the majority of this grabbed land is being used for speculation purposes. Since the construction of the Ring Road, land within 10 kilometers of the road has increased in value by as much as 20 times over the past decade.²⁹ With the knowledge that land values along the road continue to skyrocket, land speculation has become a common practice amongst wealthy elites. The seized land remains unused until its value goes up so that it can be sold for a profit. Other elites then buy the land and repeat the same process.

This widespread increase in land grabbing is further fueled by the lack of an enforceable land tenure system in the country. Land tenure in Afghanistan is based on a "confusing and highly divisive" mix of statutory, customary, Islamic, and warlord laws.³⁰ Afghans are not convinced that the statutory courts can resolve land disputes as the judicial system is the most corrupt sector of the government.³¹

Consequently, customary agreements and land documents have been rendered “virtually meaningless” due to fraudulent officials who demand bribes.³² Since the Ring Road reconstruction has occurred in the context of unstable land tenure and widespread corruption, powerful interests frequently use threats of land seizure along the road for extortion. In 2003, the *Washington Post* reported on a case involving twenty families in the Sherpur community whose homes were located along a newly paved segment of the Ring Road.³³ The Afghan police forced these families out of their homes and the land was redistributed to 29 cabinet ministers, Kabul’s mayor, and the Central Bank’s governor.³⁴ Ahmad, a 56-year-old father of six, said, “The police came in and beat me with their guns when I refused to leave...I have worked for the army for 26 years, but now the powerful people with guns have humiliated my family and destroyed our home.”³⁵ According to the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission, this incident in Sherpur represents a “microcosm” of what has been happening on land along the Ring Road throughout Afghanistan.³⁶ While land grabbing by wealthy elites continues to rise, 1.6 million people in Afghanistan do not have adequate housing, and the supply of land available for long-term citizens, refugees, and Internally Displaced Persons does not meet even 10% of the demand.³⁷ As U.N. reporter Kothari describes, for the past decade “there [has been] a crisis of housing and a freeze on land allocation, but that doesn’t apply to the wealthy, the well-connected, the commanders, or the drug lords.”³⁸

Upon revisiting the original goal of the Ring Road to extend the influence of the government in promoting peace and security, it appears that this has not happened in practice. While the road has extended the influence of the government, corrupt government officials have abused this influence by seizing land along the road to satisfy their profiteering interests. This, in turn, has displaced many innocent citizens from their homes, creating a widespread sense of distrust towards the government amongst the majority of Afghans. This problem is expected to worsen in the near future due to the recent discovery of mineral-rich regions throughout the country.³⁹ These untapped mineral deposits have an estimated value of \$1 trillion, which is extremely lucrative considering that Afghanistan’s current gross domestic product is only \$12 billion.⁴⁰ It is believed that this discovery will lead to aggressive seizures of land above mineral deposits and along segments of the Ring Road leading to these mineral-rich regions. According to Batson, the public resentment over land grabbing “is so acute that it is thought to constitute a significant conflict-related flash-point, able to push the country into renewed civil unrest.”⁴¹ Therefore, instead of promoting peace, the Ring Road, through increases in land grabbing, has actually detracted from long-term peace and security in the nation.

Strengthening of the Taliban

Since the international community first stepped into Afghanistan to reconstruct the Ring Road, the road has become a prime target for the Taliban. The Taliban has destroyed vehicles, attacked construction sites, and killed and kidnapped

construction workers. Between 2003 and 2008, 162 contractors associated with the USAID road reconstruction project have been killed, and an additional 202 workers have been injured in Taliban attacks.⁴² In addition to targeting construction workers, the Taliban has been attacking members of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), a NATO-led security mission that was launched in Afghanistan by the U.N. Security Council in 2001. There have been frequent reports in the news of Taliban fighters killing drivers, hauling cargo for NATO, or slicing off the noses and ears of NATO workers before setting them free.⁴³ In addition, the Taliban have set up various checkpoints along the Ring Road, demanding bribes in exchange for the security of vehicles that want to pass.⁴⁴

In addition to collecting bribes, the Taliban have also been profiting from under-the-radar alliances with contracting companies that are involved in the Ring Road reconstruction. For example, the World Bank subcontracted their segment of the road to the Louis Berger Group (LBG), a New Jersey-based international engineering consulting company. LBG, in turn, subcontracted the project to an Indian company, who then subcontracted the project to Mr. Ghulam Arafat, a warlord in the Khost province without a registered company.⁴⁵ Mr. Arafat has been paying the Taliban \$1 million per year for “security purposes” since LBG’s contract began to ensure that the Taliban did not attack the project.⁴⁶ Upon the discovery of this subcontracting misdemeanor by the international community in November 2012, LBG was fined \$69.3 million dollars in criminal penalties by the U.S. Justice Department.⁴⁷

These types of incidents have led to widespread criticism that international donors, through financing the Ring Road reconstruction, are simultaneously funding the Taliban. As development practitioners caution, “the more reconstruction activity there is, the richer the Taliban and warlords become.”⁴⁸ This sentiment has been further echoed in the media, with a 2012 article in BBC News entitled *The Taliban’s Secret Weapon: Security*. This article claims, “The Taliban doesn’t rely on drug money or Iranian bounty rewards for serious funding. It takes protection money from infrastructure and transport projects, and donations where it can get them.”⁴⁹ Overall, while the Ring Road was originally intended to promote peace and security, this goal is being severely undermined through the Taliban’s control over the road.

MEASURING THE SOCIOECONOMIC IMPACT OF THE RING ROAD

A critical analysis of the Ring Road would not be complete without investigating the positive socioeconomic impacts of the reconstruction project. While the media has intensively focused on the insecurity created by the road, little attention has been paid to determine whether the road has exhibited positive effects on local livelihoods. Out of the twelve international donors, USAID is the only agency that has conducted an impact assessment of the Ring Road since its construction began. In 2009, USAID published an assessment, *Roads Socioeconomic Impact Assessment*. However, the United States Government Accountability Office (GAO) has criticized this assessment heavily. A 2010 GAO report found that USAID failed to perform a

sound impact assessment of the Ring Road, as the majority of their findings were “based on rough estimates, anecdotes, and impressions...therefore the results are not generalizable.”⁵⁰ As such, data is limited on the socioeconomic impact of the road, making it difficult to draw firm conclusions about any beneficial effects of the reconstruction project based on the existing USAID report.

The following section will revisit the three original goals for the Ring Road that were outlined by international donors at the 2002 Tokyo Conference on Afghan Reconstruction. The progress toward each of these goals will be critically investigated, providing for a more comprehensive, balanced perspective of the socioeconomic impact of the Ring Road and its impact on local livelihoods.

a) Facilitate Trade and Economic Linkages

It was originally proposed that the Ring Road would facilitate regional and international trade by reducing transportation costs and decreasing travel times along the road. According to the 2009 USAID Report, freight transport into the capital city, Kabul, has increased by 27.6% between 2003 and 2008.⁵¹ In addition, travel times between major cities have been drastically reduced along the newly reconstructed road. For example, the Kabul to Kandahar segment of the Ring Road took 48 hours to cross in 2003, compared to a mere 12 hours after being reconstructed by 2008.⁵² USAID surveyed 143 shop owners in 81 settlements along the southern Ring Road, from Kabul to Herat, in 2008.⁵³ Of these small businesses, 89% received their goods using the southern Ring Road and 76% used the road to get to their shop each day.⁵⁴ More importantly, 56% of these shops had opened within the past five years, suggesting that the reconstruction project has led to the proliferation of new businesses along the road.⁵⁵

However, while the road has promoted local businesses and increased freight transport, it has failed to decrease the cost of transport along the road. In fact, the cost of transportation has increased by an estimated 36% since the reconstruction of the road.⁵⁶ This is due to the overwhelming number of checkpoints along the road, many of which require substantial bribes to be paid to corrupt officials and members of the Taliban. For example, along the Kabul-Kandahar segment of the road, there are an average of 4.6 “official” stops and 18 “unofficial” stops.⁵⁷ It is estimated that one large cargo truck from Kabul to Kandahar can cost anywhere from \$250 to \$1,500 in checkpoint payments and bribes.⁵⁸ USAID found that that the “checkpoints demanding bribes undermine the potential gains from international trade” and have “limited the use of the road as a trade corridor.”⁵⁹

Perhaps the greatest factor hindering the ability of the Ring Road to facilitate trade is the deterioration in security due to the Taliban presence along the road. This situation is expected to worsen in the future, as ISAF peacekeeping troops are beginning to withdraw from Afghanistan. In May 2012 at the NATO Summit in Chicago, an exit strategy was proposed to remove all 130,000 ISAF members from Afghanistan by the end of 2014.⁶⁰ The members of the ISAF have played an integral

role in promoting security along the Ring Road by protecting segments of the road that have not yet been accessed by the Taliban. According to a *New York Times* article in March 2012, as the Taliban continues to strengthen and the ISAF drawback begins, large-scale companies have begun to reconsider scaling back their future involvement in Afghanistan.⁶¹ The article elaborates, “The only Western bank operating [in Afghanistan] said on Wednesday that it would be leaving. Piles of cash equaling about a quarter of Afghanistan’s annual economic output were physically carried out of Afghanistan last year. Fewer foreign companies are seeking to do business here, and those already here are downsizing and putting off new investments.”⁶² Therefore, the concern of increased Taliban presence along the Ring Road may serve to hinder Afghanistan’s economic linkages in the future. This has effectively subverted the original goal of the international community to bolster trade and economic growth through reconstruction of this road.

b) Improved access to schools, health clinics, and other government services

According to the 2009 USAID report on the Ring Road, between 2003 and 2008, real household incomes of Afghans increased by an average of 39%.⁶³ Moreover, USAID reported that within this five-year span, the number of hospitals increased by 23.5% and rates of female school enrollment almost doubled.⁶⁴ While these indicators appear to be promising, they are also misleading, as there is no way of attributing these changes directly to the construction of the Ring Road itself. For example, rather than being a direct consequence of the Ring Road, the increase in female enrollment is more likely due to the 2001 overthrow of the Taliban regime and their decree that girls could not attend school. While the construction of the Ring Road may have coincided with increased female school attendance, this correlation does not imply causation; this same critique applies to the other socioeconomic impact indicators provided by USAID. In fact, in fine print at the end of its report, USAID acknowledges, “these [social welfare] gains cannot be fully attributed to the Ring Road, but are merely coincident...some of the gains may have even occurred even without the Ring Road rehabilitation.”⁶⁵

The common belief that road reconstruction will facilitate greater access to social services is more complicated than international donors may have initially realized. It was originally assumed by donors that these social services would be provided by the state, NGOs, and internationally funded programs. These services, in turn, would contribute to improved welfare of the population and sustained peace. However, while these assumptions may hold true in a peaceful country, they are often impractical and unrealistic in an unstable, conflict-prone setting. According to Unruh and Shalaby, “road reconstruction is actually quite complicated...in a war-related context, service provision is in many instances non-existent, weak, or highly corrupt...this is something that insurgent groups capitalize on with the insertion of their own services.”⁶⁶

In recent years, social service provision has become a fundamental way in

which insurgent groups gain power. The Taliban has begun promoting their own hospitals, schools, and courts, and other services to the Afghan public as an alternative to government counterparts.⁶⁷ At the same time, insurgent groups attack those who cooperate with the government to inflict fear amongst local populations. In February 2013, Integrity Watch Afghanistan estimated that over 50% of Afghans have begun using traditional courts and courts governed by the Taliban due to the widespread corruption of the government judicial system.⁶⁸ As more citizens turn to insurgent groups for social service provision, the Taliban will be able to recruit more members, increase economic gains, and ultimately strengthen their influence. This begs the question as to whether the Ring Road is promoting security by increasing access to government services, or undermining security by enabling citizens to access Taliban-provided services.

c) Bring rural areas into commercial interaction with the marketplace

According to the 2009 USAID report, the percentage of farmers using the southern Ring Road to transport crops to the market increased from 40% to 70% between 2003 and 2008.⁶⁹ The report also claims that the use of purchased inputs, including fertilizers and improved seeds, has become more widespread amongst rural farmers since the construction of the road.⁷⁰ These findings suggest that the road has, in fact, managed to bring rural areas in closer proximity to the marketplace. Despite these positive indicators, however, anecdotal evidence suggests that the extension of the Ring Road to rural villages has actually occurred against the will of many Afghan farmers. Prior to the construction of the Ring Road, many of these rural villages remained isolated from the road network, allowing them to remain hidden and off the radar of the Taliban. However, the extension of the road has actually “exposed” these villages to the Taliban, enabling them to tax or attack citizens due to greater accessibility. As a local resident of the Paghman province explained, “foreign forces came to our villages and said they want to asphalt the road but we said no. We know the road is good but we also know that an asphalted road brings ISAF patrols, and with them comes suicide and roadside attacks.”⁷¹

The construction of the Ring Road has also led to a surge in the number of landmines planted along the road, particularly in these newly exposed rural areas. Between 2009 and 2010 alone, there was a 94% increase in landmine incidents involving the Taliban along the Ring Road.⁷² An estimated 95% of these explosive devices have been planted in agricultural and grazing areas, directly threatening rural livelihoods.⁷³ As a result, many rural Afghans are becoming apprehensive about using the Ring Road to transport their goods to the market. The planting of landmines in agricultural areas is especially detrimental given that 75% of the Afghan population is rural, and only 12% of Afghanistan’s terrain is arable.⁷⁴ In essence, it appears that the Ring Road has served as a double-edged sword for rural Afghan villages; while the road has brought more rural villagers into interaction with the marketplace; it has also brought the Taliban into interaction with the rural villages themselves.

UNDERSTANDING THE LACK OF FORESIGHT BY INTERNATIONAL DONORS: WHAT WENT WRONG?

Despite the well-intentioned efforts of international donors to use the Ring Road as a means of economic development and improved social welfare, these goals have clearly not been realized in practice. As security along the road continues to deteriorate, many development practitioners and scholars have begun to question the apparent lack of forethought on the part of international donors. What were the errors in the planning process that led the Ring Road to become an instrument of extortion and insecurity, rather than one of stability and peace? In attempting to address this question, it is essential to first understand the context in which the original plans for the Ring Road were laid out.

Following the 2001 U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, international aid agencies felt a sudden sense of urgency to implement security projects to prevent the Taliban regime from re-asserting their dominance. Only two weeks after the overthrow of the Taliban, a U.N., World Bank and Asian Development Bank-sponsored consultation occurred in Islamabad, followed by the Afghan Reconstruction conference in Tokyo.⁷⁵ During this time, "All [donors] were engaged in a scramble to submit plans, budgets and proposals, based on desk studies and inadequate assessment missions [due to] the imposed urgency of the process."⁷⁶ In the preface to the U.N. document, *Immediate and Transitional Assistance program for the Afghan People 2002* (ITAP), the authors mention that the process was "fast-tracked" in order to be presented at the Tokyo conference, and consequently, consultations with partners were incomplete.⁷⁷ This suggests that the planning of the Ring Road was not a carefully orchestrated process, but rather part of a rushed "knee-jerk" reaction by international donors to respond to the events that occurred in September 2001. This lack of planning and consultation amongst donors was perhaps one of the first mistakes that led to the downward spiral of the Ring Road reconstruction.

One of the consequences of this rushed planning process was that donors failed to consult with local Afghan village members prior to building the road. Local elders were almost entirely ignored in the decision-making process, and as such, Afghans did not feel a strong sense of support for the project from the beginning. The World Bank has even admitted that "project implementation in a conflict-affected environment like Afghanistan requires a nuanced understanding of local social structure, including the ability to work with community leaders to ensure access to project sites and security."⁷⁸ Perhaps if the international donors had first consulted with the locals, they would have realized how the Taliban and corrupt government officials might impede the ability of the road to promote peace. In addition, rather than employing local Afghan workers, international donors hired Indian, Turkish, and Chinese laborers from abroad to reconstruct the four major segments of the road.⁷⁹ This conscious choice by the donors to not to employ local Afghans is highly contradictory, given that one of the primary goals of the Ring Road was to boost the

local Afghan economy.

Another inherent flaw in the reconstruction process stems from the highly fragmented nature of the project. Each of the twelve donor countries and multilateral agencies are currently responsible for financing, subcontracting and overseeing the reconstruction of their own segments of the road. Despite the leadership of USAID, there is no overriding or impartial body responsible for ensuring a transparent procurement process by all twelve donors. This may explain why the subcontracting alliances with the Taliban have been able to go unnoticed for so many years. According to Barakat, the Ring Road project “shows serious evidence of fragmentation and contradiction, where, as we have seen, an integrated and holistic approach is needed.”⁸⁰ In summary, the lack of a cohesive process, combined with rushed planning and the failure to consult with local Afghans, have all undermined the efforts of donors to promote peace through the Ring Road.

FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

Upon investigating the effects of the Ring Road, it is evident that this reconstruction project has actually exacerbated conflict and detracted from peace, despite the intentions of international donors. The detrimental impacts of the road have been demonstrated through large-scale increases in land grabbing and strengthening of the Taliban presence along the road. Looking into the future, these negative impacts are expected to worsen, as the corrupt government pushes more citizens towards Taliban-provided services and ISAF peacekeeping patrols retreat from Afghanistan. Based on the lessons learned from the original mistakes of donors, a variety of recommendations can be made to improve future management of the Ring Road. First and foremost, donor agencies should attempt to work more closely with local Afghans. This includes incorporating them in the decision-making process and taking their suggestions into consideration. In addition, attempts should be made to hire local Afghan workers for the remaining segments of the Ring Road in efforts to boost the local economy. This sense of community investment in the projects will also serve to strengthen the support for the roads; perhaps making locals more likely to defend the roads against Taliban attacks in the future. Finally, an objective, third party mediator should be hired to conduct a thorough assessment of current subcontractors employed by each of the twelve international donors. This will help facilitate a more transparent procurement process, ensuring that money is not being continuously siphoned to the Taliban through under-the-radar alliances. Ultimately, through understanding where donors went wrong in the original planning process, a variety of lessons have been learned about road reconstruction in a post-conflict context. The lessons learned from the Ring Road experience may serve to facilitate more successful road reconstruction projects undertaken in the future.

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