AFGHANISTAN DEVELOPMENT

Agencies Could Benefit from a Shared and More Comprehensive Database on U.S. Efforts

Why GAO Did This Study

Congress has provided almost $20 billion for development efforts in Afghanistan since 2002 through four main programs or accounts administered by USAID, DOD, and State. These efforts are a key component of the U.S. civilian-military strategic framework focused on countering insurgents in Afghanistan. Given the volume and multifaceted nature of U.S. support for Afghan development, it is essential that agencies streamline their efforts to reduce unnecessary overlap and duplication. As such, this report examines (1) the extent to which U.S. agencies' development efforts overlap, (2) the extent to which USAID and DOD's CERP may have conducted duplicative activities, and (3) the mechanisms that U.S. agencies have used to enhance coordination of their development efforts, in Afghanistan. To address these objectives, GAO analyzed data from USAID, DOD, and State on their development efforts and interviewed agency officials in Washington, D.C., and Afghanistan.

What GAO Recommends

Because agencies have made limited progress in collecting and retaining critical data on development efforts in a shared database, GAO believes Congress should consider requiring them to do so. Also, GAO recommends that USAID (1) take steps to include all of its awards in Afghan Info and (2) develop written procedures for reporting and verifying information on development projects. USAID agreed with the recommendations. DOD disagreed with the need for legislative action, believing it may lead to a reporting burden. GAO maintains that a shared database would be beneficial.

View GAO-13-34. For more information, contact Charles Michael Johnson, Jr. at (202) 512-7331 or johnsoncm@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

The four main U.S. agency Afghan development programs and accounts have similar goals and activities and hence overlap to some degree. In fiscal year 2011, the Economic Support Fund (ESF) and other smaller accounts administered by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and the Commander's Emergency Response Program (CERP), administered by the Department of Defense (DOD), funded similar activities related to agriculture; democracy and governance; education and health; energy and electricity; economic growth; and transportation. Both funded activities in 33 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces and in 249 of Afghanistan's 399 districts. The Task Force for Business and Stability Operations (TFBSO), administered by DOD, and the Afghanistan Infrastructure Fund (AIF), administered by DOD and the Department of State (State), also funded efforts in some of the same categories of assistance as ESF and CERP in fiscal year 2011. According to agency officials, these overlapping development efforts can be beneficial, provided that agencies leverage their respective expertise and coordinate efforts.

GAO's analysis of USAID's development activities and DOD's CERP activities in six Afghan districts identified 28 USAID and 28 DOD CERP funded activities that were potentially duplicative. GAO could not, however, conclusively determine whether or not these efforts had resulted in duplication because of gaps and inconsistency in the level of detail on activity descriptions in USAID's and DOD's respective databases. Moreover, some USAID development activities may not have been included because information provided by USAID indicated that Afghan Info—the database designated by the embassy as the official repository for U.S. assistance—did not include 13 active awards, including some assistance to the Afghan government, representing about 10 percent of USAID's obligations for development efforts in fiscal year 2011. These omissions limited GAO's ability to evaluate whether similar activities were providing the same goods or services to the same beneficiaries. USAID also lacks complete standardized procedures for implementing partners to report information on their development activities in Afghan Info, and for USAID personnel to verify the information on these activities.

While U.S. agencies use a variety of methods to coordinate development efforts in Afghanistan, they lack a database to share and retain data. USAID and DOD officials cited informal communication and interagency meetings as the primary method of coordinating USAID and CERP efforts. For AIF efforts, USAID, DOD, and State conduct interagency planning and obtain formal concurrence by relevant agency officials, as required by law. For TFBSO efforts, DOD coordinates through quarterly briefings with USAID and State officials in Kabul and a formal concurrence process. However, the effectiveness of such coordination may depend on the priorities of the staff involved and could be hampered by high staff turnover and the lack of data retention. To address these limitations, GAO has previously recommended that agencies report their development efforts in a shared database. USAID agreed and DOD partially agreed with this recommendation. While Afghan Info has been designated as the central repository of data for U.S. foreign assistance efforts in Afghanistan, DOD still has not reported its CERP projects in a shared database such as Afghan Info, citing concerns with the sensitive nature of its data, which USAID noted could be mitigated by the internal controls in Afghan Info.

_____ **United States Government Accountability Office**