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Meta-Review of Evaluations of Development Assistance to Afghanistan, 2008 – 2018

Chapeau Paper

March 2020 | Christoph Zürcher



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On behalf of

Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), Germany
Division for Afghanistan and Pakistan



Federal Ministry
for Economic Cooperation
and Development

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Abbreviations and Acronyms

ADB	Asian Development Bank
ARAP	Afghanistan Rural Access Program
ARTF	Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund
ASGP	Afghanistan Sub-National Governance Project
BMZ	Bundesministerium für wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung/ The Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, Germany
CERP	Commanders Emergency Response Program
COIN	Counterinsurgency
DDA	District Development Assemblies
EQUIP	Education Quality Improvement Program
EVAW	Eliminating violence against women
IDLG	Independent Directorate of Local Governance
IEC	Independent Electoral Commission of Afghanistan
IRDP	Irrigation Restoration and Development Project
LOTFA	Law and Order Trust Fund
MBAW	Making Budgets and Aid Work
NDPG	National State Governance Project
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NIBP	National Institution Building Project
NSP	National Solidarity Program
SIGAR	Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
TA	Technical Assistance

Introductory Remarks

The international community has been engaged in Afghanistan since 2001. The complexity of the challenges has been exceptional in many aspects, as the amount of funding provided for reconstruction and development was unprecedented. Afghanistan was a country in ruins with a population deeply traumatised by more than 20 years of war and civil war. In addition, the international engagement was a civilian and a military intervention. Development actors had to learn from scratch how to design civil-military cooperation. On top of that they had to cope with the political realm calling for quick results in order to win hearts and minds. Despite this disadvantageous implementation environment, it must be said that since 2001 the Afghan partners – helped by the international community – have made huge development achievements.

For the BMZ, Afghanistan is still the country receiving the biggest single share of grants. The BMZ unit for Afghanistan has a long track record of monitoring and evaluation going back to 2005. The idea of initiating this Meta-Review of Evaluations of Development Assistance to Afghanistan 2008 - 2018 was motivated by a desire to increase the development impact of our portfolio and to get a solid assessment of how international cooperation in focal areas of German cooperation has fared in Afghanistan over the last decade.

In a fragile country, and this holds true in particular for a country like Afghanistan, it is worth remembering that international aid is a walk on the knife's edge. If aid comes in adequate doses, conceptually well designed, culturally adjusted and truly owned by the partner, a great deal can be achieved. But it is also possible to trigger huge damage in the sense of creating distortions, destroying incentive structures and even fuelling corruption. With regard to Afghanistan, one should take into account in particular that international aid is not a time-invariant process. There is a unique window of opportunity for kick starting development in a country, unleashing the dynamics of socio-economic processes before diseconomies of scale and time cause the system to start backfiring. Once people and cultural norms are 'spoilt', there is no chance to start again from scratch.

In these and in many other aspects, the Meta-Review condenses a vast amount of evidence showing what worked and what did not. It contains both challenging and even unpleasant as well as highly valuable lessons for future programming. Reflecting on the aspirations with which the international community started out in Afghanistan, it is also good to remind ourselves from time to time that Do no harm is the most important and recognized principle of international cooperation. This principle is our ethical benchmark and the daily guidance for all our efforts to improve living conditions in Afghanistan and elsewhere.

There are small glimpses of hope for the beginning of a peace process. But poverty rates are on the rise and the path to achieving lasting peace will be long and arduous. I am convinced that we have the ability to learn and there is a pressing need to do the best we possibly can so as to bring hope to the people of Afghanistan. For the time ahead we hope the Meta-Review will reveal opportunities that the international community may be able to realise.

Thomas Feidieker

BMZ Division for Afghanistan and Pakistan

Preface

The Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) has a long-standing interest in evaluating development assistance to Afghanistan. It has conducted various strategic reviews and evaluations of its own engagement,¹ and has built up a unique aid data management system, the German Development Tracker.²

In September 2018, the BMZ Division for Afghanistan and Pakistan commissioned a meta-review of evaluation reports of international development assistance to Afghanistan published between 2008 and 2018. The main objective of this meta-review is to collect and summarize the experience of donors in Afghanistan. The meta-review will provide important background information for an upcoming evaluation of German development cooperation with Afghanistan. Beyond that, the results will also provide valuable information for development cooperation in fragile and conflict-affected states in general.

Meta-reviews are exercises in learning. This meta-review informs about what has worked and what has not worked: Which approaches and instruments were effective in Afghanistan? What were the impacts and what were unintended consequences? Which results are likely to be sustainable? And what lessons can be learned for future evaluations in similar contexts?

This meta-review summarizes the experiences from a wide range of international actors and organizations, from bilateral donors to multilateral donors to NGOs and to organizations such as the office of the Special Inspector General for the Reconstruction of Afghanistan (SIGAR). These actors have provided a large number of different types of evaluation reports, ranging from impact evaluations to formative evaluations and to performance audits.

¹ See Zürcher, Christoph. 2017. "BMZ Strategische Portfolio Review Afghanistan 2016". Bundesministerium für wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung (BMZ), unpublished report; Böhnke, J.; Köhler, J.; Zürcher, C. (2015). "Assessing the Impact of Development Cooperation in North East Afghanistan 2007-2013. Final Report". Bonn/Berlin: Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development. Available at https://www.ez-afghanistan.de/sites/default/files/Afghanistan_Impact_Assessment_II_en.pdf (accessed January 2, 2020);

Zürcher Christoph, Catherine Gloukhovtseva, Nora Röhner, Gregg Fyffe. 2013. "Strategische Portfolio Review Afghanistan. Schlussbericht" Bundesministerium für wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung (BMZ). Available at https://www.bmz.de/de/zentrales_downloadarchiv/erfolg_und_kontrolle/Afghanistan_Strategische_Review_10_2013.pdf (Accessed January 2, 2020); "Assessing the Impact of Development Cooperation in North East Afghanistan, 2005 – 2009. Final report". BMZ, Evaluation Reports 049. Available at <https://www.ez-afghanistan.de/sites/default/files/EvalBericht049.pdf>. (Accessed January 2, 2020).

² See https://www.ez-afghanistan.de/sites/default/files/DevTracker_German.pdf, and <https://devtracker-afg.de/>, accessed January 2, 2020.

The meta-review summarizes the major findings from these evaluation reports. We have arranged all evaluation reports in five different groups, and for every group we have produced a stand-alone summary report. These are:

1. Systematic Review of Impact Evaluations of Development Aid in Afghanistan (short title: "**Impact Evaluation Report**")
2. Summary Report of Eleven Bilateral Country-Level Evaluations (short title: "**Bilateral Report**")
3. Summary Report of Selected SIGAR Reports (short title: "**SIGAR Report**")
4. Summary Report of Evaluation Reports by the Asian Development Bank (short title: "**ADB Report**")
5. Summary Report of Selected Evaluations by Multilateral Organizations and NGOs (short title: "**Multilateral and NGO Report**")

This chapeau paper is a very condensed summary of the five stand-alone reports. For more details, readers are invited to consult the five stand-alone reports, which also contain all the bibliographic references to the source documents.

1 Introduction: Will We Ever Learn?

In 2006, the Center for Global Development published a widely discussed study entitled "When Will We Ever Learn?" The study aimed to investigate why rigorous evaluations of development programs were relatively rare, despite the ethical obligation to learn how to make aid better, and despite the commitment of development organizations to provide more accountability.

More than a decade later, the same question could be asked regarding Afghanistan – one of the longest and costliest engagements by the international community. While there have been achievements – access to basic health and primary education has massively improved; clean drinking water is much more widely available; roads and bridges have been rebuilt; electricity has reached many villages; rudimentary government services are available; small, basic infrastructure and training has improved livelihoods in rural communities – most of the more ambitious goals were missed.

Afghanistan is still engulfed in war, poverty levels have not changed, and the government has hardly gained legitimacy or capacity. Even when we acknowledge that Afghanistan is one of the most challenging places for development assistance, the overall results of more than a decade of international aid are sobering.

It is time to learn more about what has worked, what has not worked, and why. As an attempt to distill lessons and patterns from the hundreds of available reports, a meta-review of evaluations of development aid to Afghanistan is certainly an exercise in learning. For this meta-review, 148 evaluation reports published between 2008 and 2018 were analyzed. These reports provided a wealth of information and knowledge, and readers are invited to consult our five stand-alone reports for more details.

Overall, one finding stands out: the international community has repeatedly overestimated its own capacity and the capacity of its Afghan partners to bring about rapid social change. What has worked best are modest, locally embedded projects with immediate, tangible benefits. What has rarely worked are complex projects aimed at building capacity and changing behaviour. More specifically, interventions in basic health and education, and in improving basic livelihoods, led to results. Interventions in building capacity for the administration, or in sectors such as the rule of law or gender, rarely worked.

In reading these 148 reports, one also realizes that the international aid community is often not good at learning. Monitoring and evaluation systems are weak, and have hardly improved since 2002. Back in the early 2000s, many donors pointed out that, in order to achieve meaningful and sustainable development, more time was necessary. Fifteen years later, few sustainable results have been achieved, but many donors continue to suggest that better results will still require more time. Few donors appear to have changed their fundamental strategic approach, despite the fact that their own evaluations strongly suggest that many aid programs are neither efficient nor effective in the Afghan context.

In all fairness, the Afghan context is an incredibly challenging one, as these 148 reports vividly remind us on almost every page. The situation on the ground was and still is characterized by a lack of basic security; Afghan partners in government and in civil society lack basic capacities; many entrenched political actors have little interest in real reforms. Despite these challenging conditions, there was since the early days of the international engagement in Afghanistan tremendous political pressure on development actors to rush in and to provide quick results. An additional layer of complexity was added by the fact that the international engagement was from the beginning both a civilian and a military intervention, and planners in headquarters as well as practitioners on the ground had to learn how to cope with the task of civil-military cooperation. Under such circumstances, designing effective aid programs is a herculean task.

At the time of writing – in November 2019 – the prospects for Afghanistan's immediate future are less clear than ever. For the moment, the so-called peace-process has stalled; it is unclear if and when a complete withdrawal of US troops will take place and what the implications for the intra-Afghan civil war will be. It is not even possible to predict whether the Kabul government will hold on to power. What seems to be clear, however, is that the international donor community is not abandoning Afghanistan. Development cooperation will continue. Now is a timely moment for donors to reflect on what their engagement in the future may look like, and how they may avoid some of the mistakes which were made and which this meta-review documents.

It is our hope that this meta-review will contribute to learning, and eventually to more effective and efficient ways of using development aid to help Afghanistan.

2 Methodology of the Meta-Review

We intended to cover various types of evaluation reports (such as impact evaluations, performance audits, formative evaluations, bilateral country-level evaluations, etc.) produced by a wide range of relevant bi- and multilateral actors.

In order to identify relevant studies, we conducted a systematic literature search designed to find any English language publications (articles, books, conference papers, reports), published between 2008 and 2018, evaluating development interventions in Afghanistan. Six comprehensive databases were searched: PAIS, WPSA, EconLit, IPSA, Web of Science and Academic Search Complete.

We also searched manually for studies on the websites of the development agencies of all OECD DAC countries, on the websites of multilateral donors such as the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, the UN and UN agencies, and on the websites of selected NGOs with a large portfolio in Afghanistan, among them the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), CARE, Médecins sans frontières (MSF), Mercy Corps, Oxfam, Welthunger Hilfe and World Vision. We also searched for relevant publications on the website of the Special Inspector General for the Reconstruction of Afghanistan (SIGAR).

Obviously, the identified studies vary considerably in terms of scope, objectives and methodological rigour. This is why we arranged the selected evaluations in five different groups:

A first group consists of rigorous impact evaluations. Reports in this group are primarily designed for measuring causal impacts of programs or projects, using sophisticated methods and fine-grained quantitative data. Typically, they do not provide information about efficiency or sustainability.

A second group consists of country-level evaluations by bilateral donors. These reports usually evaluate the complete aid portfolio of a national donor over a longer period of time (usually at least five years). These reports are typically based on desk studies and interviews. They are designed to assess all five OECD DAC evaluation criteria (relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability and impact), but usually cannot assess impacts because of a lack of data and methodological challenges.

A third group consists of performance audits and lessons-learned reports published by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR). SIGAR's main mandate is to audit US reconstruction programs in Afghanistan, and multilateral programs in which the US participates. Being concerned mainly with performance audits, SIGAR's focus is on efficiency and effectiveness.

A fourth group consists of evaluation reports by the Asian Development Bank. The ADB supports mainly large infrastructure projects in Afghanistan through loans and grants. ADB evaluation reports look at four out of five OECD DAC criteria (relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability) and occasionally also discuss (but not measure) impacts.

A fifth group consists of evaluation reports by various multi-national organizations and NGOs. While reports in this group are not in terms of their methodology set up to measure impacts, they nevertheless provide important contextual information. They also usually look at the five OECD DAC evaluation criteria, but usually discuss mainly relevance and effectiveness.

The studies in these five groups are based on various levels of methodological rigour. Clearly, the most rigorous studies are impact evaluations in group 1. However, there are good reasons to also include other studies. Not all evaluations look at impacts. There are also formative evaluations, participative evaluations, performance audits, or country-level evaluations that operate at high levels of generalization where evaluating impacts becomes impossible. All of these evaluations contain valuable information, even if they are not suited for attributing causation. Furthermore, some interventions lend themselves more easily to evaluating impacts than others. For example, it is relatively easy to measure the impacts of health interventions, but very difficult to attribute causation to capacity-building measures. Thus, including only rigorous evaluations would mean losing many evaluations on interventions for which measuring impacts is difficult.

It is important to note that the inclusion criteria are different for each group. The strictest and most objective inclusion criteria were applied to the first group (impact evaluations). We only included studies in this group which made a credible, transparent and methodologically solid attempt to measure the counterfactual. In order to make sure that our selection was as unbiased as possible, two scholars independently read the studies. Only when both scholars agreed would the study be included. In the case of a conflict, the lead researcher, Christoph Zürcher, made the final decision. Eventually, 32 impact evaluations were deemed of good quality and included.

For other groups different inclusion criteria applied. We included all bilateral country-level evaluations published after 2008, irrespective of their methodological quality. Likewise, we also included all ADB evaluation reports in order to get good coverage of infrastructure projects. We included SIGAR reports when they referred to one of the priority sectors of German development cooperation. Finally, we also included in a separate group evaluation reports by NGOs and multilateral donors which did not meet the strict criteria for impact evaluations but still contained, in our view, important lessons. Clearly, the inclusion criteria for this group are much less objective and strict than those for the first group (impact evaluations). It is important to keep these differences in mind when reading the five reports.

The next table shows the inclusion criteria for each of the five groups.

Table 1: Inclusion Criteria

Group	Inclusion Criteria
Systematic Review of Impact Evaluations of Development Aid in Afghanistan, 2008 – 2018	All studies with causal attribution of impacts , published in English, 2008 – 2018 with a credible, transparent and methodologically solid attempt to measure the counterfactual. Note that this is a lenient definition for causal attribution. While most impact evaluations rely on sophisticated statistical methods for assessment, our definition also includes studies based on careful process tracing or comparison. Decision made by two scholars who independently read the full study.
Summary Report of Eleven Bi-lateral Country-Level Evaluations, 2008 – 2018 ³	All country-level evaluations of aid to Afghanistan by bilateral donors published in English, 2008 – 2018.
Summary Report of Selected SIGAR Reports, Afghanistan, 2008 – 2018	All SIGAR lessons-learned reports plus selected SIGAR reports when they referred to priority sector of German development cooperation.
Summary Report of Evaluation Reports by the Asian Development Bank, 2008 – 2018	All ADB evaluation reports on Afghanistan, 2008 – 2018.
Summary Report of Selected Evaluation Reports by Multilateral Organizations and NGOs, 2008 – 2018	Selected evaluation reports by NGOs and multilateral donors. The evaluation reports may not explicitly address casual attribution, but still contain important lessons. The decision to include was made by the lead researcher.

Once selection and grouping of the evaluation reports was completed, we extracted the relevant information. As we have mentioned, the reports in the five groups are quite different, hence we made no attempt to strictly apply the same information extraction framework to all groups. However, in general we did focus on the priority sectors of German cooperation (governance, education and vocational training, health, water, energy, and sustainable economic development) plus two additional cross-cutting sectors (stabilization and gender). Secondly, we collected all information about the five DAC evaluation criteria (relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability and impact). Finally, we also looked for relevant information about the contextual factors which made it more or less likely that performance objectives were met.

No meta-review is ever complete in its coverage and this one is no exception. Ours is limited to evaluation reports published in English; we limited our systematic search to six important databases; and it is possible, even likely, that we have not found all studies published on the websites of bilateral and

³ Germany conducted two forward-looking reviews of the BMZ aid portfolio for the period 2013 – 2017 and 2017 – 2021. These reviews were not included in the meta-analysis since they did not meet all of the inclusion criteria for bilateral evaluations, but we report the main results. Please see the box on page 7 in Part 2: Summary Report of Eleven Bilateral Country-Level Evaluations.

multilateral donors and NGOs. Many of these websites are true labyrinths, offering little in terms of search options. Finally, there are probably hundreds of studies that have never been made accessible to a wider public. It is safe to assume, however, that these studies, hidden away in the electronic or paper archives of donors, neither contain success stories nor are based on robust methods. Since all donors are eager to share good news from Afghanistan and showcase examples of solid evaluation, it is likely that any such studies would have been widely shared.

Despite these limitations, we are confident that our study offers the most comprehensive, least biased view so far of development assistance to Afghanistan.

3 The Evidence Base

The total number of studies included in this meta-review is 148. Of these, 32 were impact evaluations designed to attribute causation in a methodologically rigorous way. Some sectors have been subject to more rigorous evaluation than others. For example, for the health sector, we found 21 studies overall, of which nine were rigorous impact evaluations. For water, however, there were only six studies, with none that could be classified as a rigorous evaluation. **Table 2** lists the number of studies per sector, and the number of that total that we classified as “rigorous.”

Table 2: Studies per Sector

Sector	Total number of studies	Rigorous impact evaluations
Health	21	9
Education	14	3
Gender	14	2
Stabilization (including CERP)	12	11
Sustainable economic development (including rural development)	12	0
Governance (including rule of law, democracy promotion, election support and public sector reform)	12	0
ARTF	11	0
Infrastructure	10	0
Sub-national governance (including NSP)	8	4
Energy	6	2
Water	6	0
Multi-sector, country level	15	0
Other	7	1
Total	148	32

Table 3 reports who commissioned the included studies, and what percentage of the studies were rigorous impact evaluations (it should be noted that these numbers are based on our sample, which was constructed based on exogenous selection criteria, and are thus not representative for the universe of all evaluation studies).

Looking at the evidence base, a few observations stand out. Firstly, given the length, breadth and cost of the international engagement in Afghanistan, the overall number of evaluations – especially of rigorous impact evaluations – seems quite small. Secondly, rigorous impact evaluations took place mainly in the fields of health and stabilization. The explanation for this may be that health outcomes are easily measurable. The frequency of stabilization evaluations can be explained by the fact that the military collected the data which made impact evaluations possible, and by the massive interest in counterinsurgency (COIN). Thirdly, most rigorous impact evaluations were produced by independent scholars and academics. Donors rarely commissioned complex impact evaluations. Fourthly, methodologically robust evaluations by NGOs appear to be rather rare. And finally, there is a rather small number of evaluations in the field of sustainable economic development and rural development, which is surprising given how important that sector is in Afghanistan.

Table 3: Commissioners of the Studies

Commissioner	Total number of studies	Rigorous impact evaluations
SIGAR	56	0
Multilateral	37	6
Academic/independent	23	19
ADB	13	0
Bilateral donor	13	2
NGOs	6	4

4 Findings

In this section, we provide important findings in a very condensed form. Readers are invited to consult the five stand-alone reports for more details, including all references to the original sources.

When reading these condensed findings, it is important to remember that when we make, for example, a statement such as “capacity building never worked”, we mean that “we have not found evidence **in the reviewed 148 reports** that capacity building worked”. Obviously, we cannot exclude that there may have been successful capacity building programs in Afghanistan – but these are not documented in the reviewed reports, and we made considerable efforts to identify a very broad and representative sample of evaluation reports.

The implication for practitioners is that it is now up to them to credibly demonstrate that there are more than anecdotal successes in the field of capacity building. If this cannot be demonstrated, then they should for now accept the finding that capacity building in this context failed. Looking ahead, this then also means that we should engage in a discussion about what is and what is not possible in a context such as Afghanistan.

4.1 Contextual Factors

4.1.1 Security

A reading of the 148 evaluation reports makes it clear that the lack of basic security was a pervasive problem, constantly affecting every aspect of development cooperation. The reports highlight how difficult it was to implement and monitor development projects when sites are not accessible, or when development workers are at risk of being targeted by insurgents. Many reports describe how a lack of security caused delays and cost overruns. Lack of security also necessitated that aid organizations employed security measures, which increased implementation costs. A recurring recommendation is to better acknowledge that Afghanistan is a country embroiled in war rather than a post-conflict country, and that donors therefore should develop a more realistic assessment of the security environment. Despite the very difficult security situation, there was considerable political pressure on aid organizations to allocate aid to the most insecure regions in the hope that aid could help to stabilize these regions. As we know now, this was not the case, but allocating aid to insecure regions naturally made projects less effective and efficient, and more difficult to monitor.

4.1.2 Local Political Economy

These evaluation reports also vividly remind us that the political economy in Afghanistan was and still is a major impediment to effective development cooperation. The international engagement in Afghanistan faced since day one a volatile and unstable political situation, a highly fragmented political elite, and a lack of political will for reform among many members of the Afghan elites.

Many evaluation reports, especially those by SIGAR, also point to the pervasive corruption and widespread rent-seeking behaviour, which undermined governance, security and service delivery, and led to distrust and lack of legitimacy for the government.

Cultural norms also affected programs, especially those concerning gender equality and human rights. Many reports note the discrepancy in attitudes between donors and many segments of Afghan society in these fields, which often led to a lack of buy-in and little political will for reforms.

Many donors noted that Afghan ownership of development programs was a major factor for effective aid, but also noted that ownership was rarely high. Unfortunately, the reports do not explicitly investigate the reasons for this, but they do provide some indirect clues: ownership may have been low because Afghan structures lacked the capacity to meaningfully “own” programs; political infighting politicized aid; and there was a general lack of political will to support programs in fields such as good governance, gender, human rights, decentralization, anti-corruption and similar fields.

Taken together, this local political economy made it extremely difficult to design and implement effective aid programs.

4.1.3 Capacity

A third recurring theme is the lack of capacity among the Afghan partners. Almost all reports stress that Afghan governmental structures lacked the capacity to deal with aid flows in a productive way. Unfortunately, many donors consistently overestimated Afghan capacity, designing programs based on largely imagined absorptive and administrative capacity.⁴

⁴ The analyzed evaluation reports contain little information about the capacity of Afghan civil society organizations, Afghan NGOs and the Afghan private sector. One reason for this is may be that there are only very few quality evaluations by NGOs, which typically partner with other NGOs and with civil society organizations. From what little evidence we have, we could assume that Afghan development NGOs (which are often branches of international NGOs) have a bit more capacity than their counterparts from the government, especially in rural development (see Summary Report of Selected Evaluation Reports by Multilateral Organizations and NGOs, 2008–2018, and there especially Altai Consulting 2017) and FAO UN 2016). NGOs in the sector of democracy promotion appeared to have low capacity (see Summary Report of Selected Evaluation Reports by Multilateral Organizations and NGOs, 2008–2018, and there especially Transtec 2013 and 2015).

4.2 OECD DAC Criteria

4.2.1 Relevance

None of the 148 evaluation reports judged that a project was not relevant. Given that Afghanistan has needs across all development sectors, it is perhaps not surprising that all projects were seen as relevant. This, however, leads us to question whether the criterion of “relevance” is useful at all in such a context. Instead of rating a project as “relevant” when it is seen as addressing a need, it may be more useful to assess whether a given project has any actual impact potential. In other words, relevance is not only a function of need, but also of the probability of success given the conditions under which it is implemented. This would require donors to develop a better understating of the conditions on the ground, and then prioritize projects that are adequate for such a context.

4.2.2 Efficiency

A common thread across all reports is the observation that the difficult context in Afghanistan made development cooperation unusually costly. This is true for all types of projects, but especially for large infrastructure projects. Most projects experienced implementation issues, delays and costing problems (overruns or underutilization of funds). Most often, efficiency suffered from a lack of security, lack of partner capacity and a local political economy which made development cooperation challenging.

4.2.3 Effectiveness and Impacts

Few studies measured actual impacts, but many assessed the effectiveness of projects. It is clear that effectiveness in general was low, but there are differences between sectors and between types of interventions.

Among the more effective interventions were those in the health and education sectors. A middle ground is occupied by infrastructure, including small-scale infrastructure in rural areas, as most projects were somewhat effective in delivering intended objectives despite capacity constraints, institutional weakness, and a volatile security environment. Interventions in sectors such as good governance, rule of law and gender equality were rarely effective. Mostly ineffective were stabilization projects.

In general, smaller, modest participatory projects with an instrumental focus (for example, directly influencing change by providing new resources) were more effective than large, complex projects aimed at building capacity and changing behaviour and discourse.

4.2.4 Sustainability

Worrisome is that almost all reports stress that the sustainability of achieved results is very much in question. This appears to be the case for all types of aid programs across all sectors. A lack of capacity makes it unlikely that the Afghan government will be able to take on investments in larger projects, and the weakness of district and community level organizations makes it equally unlikely that even small and less complex infrastructure projects will continue to function once support ends. Also, much of the progress which has been made in public administration and public management may not be sustainable because it relied to a large extent on the so-called “second civil service”, that is on the work of temporary consultants.

4.3 Findings by Sector

4.3.1 Governance

A very broad sector; governance includes capacity building, public sector and regulatory policy reform, democracy promotion, election support, anti-corruption programs and rule of law. In general, the effectiveness of the evaluated programs in the governance sector was low.

Programs aimed at improving capacities for the Afghan central administration rarely succeeded (see Multilateral and NGO Report, esp. pp. 11-12), and most donors, especially bilateral donors, routinely mentioned weak state capacities as a major impediment for their work (see Bilateral Report, p. 27). In the few instances where progress was made, it remained confined to small silos that did not translate to overall state capacity, and/or it was “borrowed” from the so-called “second civil service” consisting of well-paid Afghan returnees or international consultants (Bilateral Report, p. 17). There is anecdotal evidence that some ministries have more capacities than others (for example the Ministry of Finance is often said to have more capacity), but the reviewed reports do not offer enough details for assessing the relative capacities of various government branches in a systematic way.

Also not very effective were programs aimed at increasing capacity for sub-national administration and those meant to build up capacities for managing relations between the centre and provinces in order to provide meaningful decentralization (Multilateral and NGO Report, pp. 12). Among the reasons for this poor record are power struggles between and within ministries, and between centre and periphery, which made it difficult to build capacity. Decentralization involves the redistribution of power and access to resources. This is highly politicized, and reforms in politicized fields are rarely effective. Decentralization programs were indicative of a top-down approach by donors, as there was no real demand for such programs from within Afghanistan.

Interventions in regulatory policies were also not often successful. For example, ADB projects aimed at reforming public administration, creating better regulatory frameworks for private sector development and for the agriculture sector, had little effect. ADB concluded that technical skill transfer was unlikely because the institutional absorptive capacity of the partner was limited (ADB Report, p. 21).

The two reviewed projects in rule of law were both not successful because they were overly ambitious, were not based on the political-economic realities on the ground, and were ideologically framed by an unrealistic theory of change (Multilateral and NGO Report, p. 13).

Finally, with regard to democracy promotion, the reports suggest that development assistance could provide the technical capacities needed for conducting elections; however, projects aimed at democratic awareness or democratic participation had little effect (Multilateral and NGO Report, p. 14).

In sum, programs aimed at better governance and more capacity were rarely effective in the Afghan context. Such programs faced too many political challenges. Factors which hampered such programs were entrenched patronage-based practices within the government, a lack of buy-in from the government, donor-driven top-down project design with little regard for the core institutional requirements and demands of the partner institutions, and lack of political will of the government especially for decentralization. Given the permanent competition for power among various networks (often ethnically based), there was little cooperation within and among institutions, little interest in building up institutional learning and institutional memory, and few incentives for cooperation with the sub-national level. Furthermore, the frequent change of key personnel as a result of permanent power struggles exacerbated the problems.

4.3.2 ARTF

Most donors saw the Afghan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF) as the main vehicle for governance programming and as an efficient channel for allocating and distributing aid money. The ARTF was also seen as a good instrument for aid coordination, resource mobilization, and policy dialogue among donors, and between donors and the Afghan government. However, bilateral donors found little evidence that the ARTF was effective at building capacity within the Afghan government. Donors also expressed concerns that the ARTF was not sustainable and would require a complementary, gradual phase-in of Afghan fiscal responsibility (see Bilateral Report, p. 16).

Many bilateral donors as well as SIGAR expressed concern about the lack of effort by the World Bank to monitor and evaluate outcomes and impacts of the ARTF, especially its investment window. SIGAR criticized the World Bank for its weak monitoring of the ARTF, noting limitations in its transparency and accounting for ARTF funding, and in the Afghan government's fiduciary controls (see SIGAR report, pp. 31).

Over the years, the ARTF has financed an impressive number of infrastructure projects. The evaluation reports suggest that less complex infrastructure usually fared better than more complex projects. Given the ARTF's still relatively weak monitoring and evaluation system (despite recent improvements), we do not know much about the outcomes and impacts. There is some evidence that implementing and operating complex infrastructure through the ARTF is still beyond the capacity of the Afghan government.

Donors placed high hopes in the ARTF as an instrument for not only financing the operation of the government, but also for increasing governmental capacity, improving governance, and boosting economic growth. The reviewed evaluation reports cannot demonstrate that the ARTF has met these ambitious objectives.

4.3.3 Sub-national Governance (including NSP)

The National Solidarity Program (NSP) was the flagship project of the ARTF. Evidence suggests that NSP contributed to an increase in services and infrastructure in rural areas but had little impact on economic growth or local governance (Impact Evaluation Report, esp. pp. 10).

NSP mobilized communities, created ownership for the projects, and mandated the representation of women in the newly formed community development councils. There is no evidence, however, that the formal participation of women in community-level decisions has had a tangible impact on overall gender equality (Impact Evaluation Report, esp. pp. 10).

NSP led to an increase in positive attitudes towards sub-national and national governments, towards NGOs, and towards international troops. However, these positive effects only hold in villages with a relatively good security environment (Impact Evaluation Report, esp. pp. 10).

Besides NSP, there were other programs aimed at increasing sub-national governance. There is scant evidence about the impact of these programs, but it appears that projects rarely led to increased capacity for sub-national administrations (Multilateral and NGO Report, esp. pp. 11).

4.3.4 Stabilization (including CERP)

We have reports summarizing the experience of the stabilization programs of the UK, US, Denmark and Canada. Assessments of those programs are usually negative; there is no evidence that stabilization projects led to more stability in insecure regions (Bilateral Report, pp. 18). The available evaluation reports, above all the SIGAR lessons-learned report, suggest that aid often exacerbated inter-group tensions and attracted violence (SIGAR Report, pp. 26; Impact Evaluation Report, pp. 13-18). Often, aid was spent too fast, with a lack of oversight, and in insecure regions with little or no local governance structures in place.

A recent systematic review (which is not part of this meta-review) found that aid only has a stabilizing effect when implemented in reasonably secure regions under government control. Additionally, chances for stabilization through aid are better when projects are implemented in participatory ways – preferably through accepted local authorities – and when aid is transparent and did not benefit local power brokers through corruption or nepotism.⁵ These lessons were not often applied in the stabilization programs reviewed here.

⁵ Cf. Zürcher, Christoph. 2017. "What Do We (Not) Know About Development Aid and Violence? A Systematic Review." *World Development* 98 (October): 506–22. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2017.05.013>.

4.3.5 Education

Most reports agree that substantial progress has been made regarding better access for boys and girls to primary education (Bilateral Report, pp. 24; Impact Evaluation Report, pp. 35). Well-targeted projects did improve outcomes in primary education (Multilateral Report, pp. 24). However, the quality of education remains problematic, a large demand for infrastructure remains, and many gains may not be sustainable given the enduring insecurity and the lacking financial and bureaucratic capacities of the Afghan government (Multilateral and NGO Report, pp. 25; SIGAR Report, pp. 18).

4.3.6 Health

The available studies point to a tangible increase in access to basic health care and to a massive improvement in such health indicators as child and maternal mortality (Impact Evaluation Report, pp. 26; also Multilateral and NGO Report, pp. 27; and Bilateral Report pp. 25). Interventions in the health sector were usually effective. The reviewed reports suggest that successful interventions took place in midwifery training, antenatal care visits, deliveries attended by health workers, conditional cash transfers for women and community health workers, and improved family planning.

4.3.7 Gender

Evaluations suggest that improvements in access to services for women and girls – mainly in health and education – have been made (Bilateral Report, pp. 19). Progress, however, is attributable to the rehabilitation of infrastructure and the end of Taliban rule rather than the success of the gender projects themselves.

Regarding programming for gender, donors typically reported outputs only, but remained skeptical about outcomes or impacts. Donors noted that both the capacity and the political will of the Afghan government and political elites for gender equality programming remained very limited as prevailing cultural norms made progress difficult (Bilateral Report, pp. 19, SIGAR Report, pp. 25). Despite sustained support, the capacities of the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MoWA) remained weak (Multilateral and NGO Report, pp. 19, Bilateral report pp. 21). SIGAR noted that gender programs were not adequately monitored and evaluated, which made it impossible to identify any possible impact. Insecurity, limited government capacity, and cultural norms also impeded any US efforts to advance women's rights (SIGAR Report, pp. 25).

Overall, the effectiveness of gender programming appears to be low (Bilateral Report, pp. 19). There are, however, pockets of modest success. Examples include rural literacy, increased access to health and education, and better livelihoods in women-specific activities within agriculture, such as mushroom farming and kitchen gardening. In sum, small, modest projects embedded in traditional structures helped to increase access to health, education, and modestly improved livelihoods for women. By contrast, larger, more ambitious projects aimed directly at changing gender norms and relations had no discernible impact (Multilateral and NGO Report, pp. 18-22).

4.3.8 Sustainable Economic Development

Programs supporting economic development, macroeconomic policies, and financial management capacities achieved some progress in the early stages of reconstruction. For example, there was initial growth in telecommunications, transport, and construction, but results were not sustainable nor was it realistic to expect sustainable economic growth, given the insecure environment and the shrinking aid flows after 2013 (SIGAR Report, pp. 14).

Interventions aimed at promoting the private sector were rarely effective. Evaluations cited weak institutional infrastructures and procedures, widespread corruption within the Afghan government, political instability, and insecurity as the main reasons (SIGAR Report, pp. 14). Related, interventions aimed at regulatory policies for fiscal management and for public administration reform were also rarely effective. One reason for this is that technical skills transfer is not likely when institutional absorptive capacity is limited (see ADB report, p. 21).

Support for rural development, often implemented through newly created community-level organizations, has helped to build a large amount of small infrastructure. Better access to services and basic infrastructure such as roads, irrigation, and access to energy contributed to improved livelihoods and has strengthened coping mechanisms, but has not led to sustainable economic growth that translated into jobs or income opportunities (Multilateral and NGO Report, pp. 23). The capacity of the government partner institutions in rural areas was weak, and it proved to be difficult to build more capacity.

In sum, interventions in sustainable economic development, despite some progress, have not been able to reduce poverty rates or to promote sustainable economic growth (Bilateral Report, pp. 23).

4.3.9 Infrastructure

Most of our evidence on large infrastructure projects (roads, energy, rail, airports) stems from ADB, which noted that projects were often not efficient, but were somewhat effective in delivering intended objectives despite capacity constraints, institutional weakness, and a volatile security environment. Despite frequent cost overruns and delays, caused by lack of partner capacity and an adverse security situation, projects could be implemented. Examples include energy, road, and airport projects. However, ADB considers the sustainability of all projects as less than likely, due to capacity constraints, weak institutional capabilities, and borrower dependency on funding and technical assistance (see ADB Report).

4.3.10 Capacity Building

Capacity building is a cross-cutting issue. A lack of capacity is at the core of a fragile state, and development actors seek to build capacity across all levels of government and in civil society, by making capacity building an important component of a program, or even by making it the sole focus.

Taken together, the 148 evaluation reports suggest that capacity-building measures were mostly not successful. In the few instances where progress was made, it remained confined to small silos, not translating into more overall state capacity, and/or it was mainly borrowed from the so-called “second civil service” consisting of well-paid Afghan returnees or international consultants (ADB Report, pp. 21).

There is no clear case of a highly successful capacity-building program in our sample, but quite a few examples of rather ineffective capacity building. For example, donors agree that the ARTF had no impact on better governance nor did it contribute to better capacity in the Afghan government (Bilateral Report, p. 28). Likewise, three programs for decentralization and capacity building for the sub-national administration were not successful (Multilateral and NGO Report, pp. 12). Also, two reviewed capacity-building programs for civil servants proved mostly ineffective (Multilateral and NGO Report, pp. 11).

The evaluation reports clearly suggest that the weak capacity of the Afghan administration severely impacted project implementation, maintenance, and monitoring, and many reports called for more capacity building efforts. However, the evaluation reports also suggest that capacity-building measures, when part of a project, were usually not successful (ADB Report, p. 22).

The reasons for these disappointing results vary, but are mostly linked to the difficult context, as described above in the section on governance: there was little demand for such programs, the permanent competition for power among various networks hampered cooperation within and among institutions, and the frequent changes of key personnel made institutional learning difficult. Most importantly, capacity building is not effective when there is no political will to build capacity, which is often the case in politicized fields (such as decentralization, which the central government opposes).

4.3.11 Monitoring and Evaluation

All bilateral evaluation reports mention that monitoring and evaluation systems of donors were weak (Bilateral Report, pp. 30). Donors especially criticized the World Bank for its weak monitoring of the ARTF, but country-level bilateral evaluations also admitted that their own monitoring and evaluation systems were rarely able to measure outcomes. It is therefore not surprising that so few evaluation reports are based on solid data. Many reports correctly point out that one explanation for weak monitoring and evaluation is the lack of basic security, which made access to many project sites difficult. Yet, it is still surprising that many donors (bilateral, multilateral, and NGOs alike) have apparently made little progress in establishing adequate monitoring and evaluation systems since 2002, when international engagement in Afghanistan began. As a result, we only too rarely understand what impact a program really had, and why.

4.4 Some Lessons to Learn

In this last section, we briefly talk about five general lessons we think emerge from this meta-review. Our selection of these lessons is to some extent subjective, but we made a considerable effort to provide all the underlying data in a transparent and accessible way in the five stand-alone reports. Interested readers should find it easy to consult these data in order to find out more about specific aspects of international development cooperation in Afghanistan, and to derive their own lessons.

4.4.1 What is relevance, or the fallacy of a “needs-based” approach

Afghanistan is one of the poorest countries on the planet and it is engulfed in violence that has been going on for more than four decades. The needs of its population are sheer endless. And, given these needs, almost every development program seems relevant. Our analysis of the 148 evaluation reports showed that not one of the reviewed programs was seen as “not relevant”, precisely because all of the programs answered in one way or another to some needs. But we have also seen that by far not all programs were effective. Actually, in the Afghan context, only a few programs were. Supporting programs which are not effective incurs opportunity costs – there is less aid money for programs which may have more impact. It is therefore both rational and ethical to prioritize programs with a higher probability for a positive impact. This then leads us to question whether the criterion of “relevance” should be based solely on needs. We think “relevance” should be assessed, considering both needs and the probability of having a positive impact. In other words, relevance should not only be a function of need, but also of the probability of success given the conditions under which a program is implemented. Adopting such a view of relevance would require donors to develop a better understanding of the conditions on the ground, and then prioritize projects that promise to be reasonably effective in these conditions. This meta-review provides ample information about which programs have a high probability for impact (and should therefore be continued) and which have a much lower probability of impact (and should therefore be either run as pilots from which we can learn how to improve them, or cancelled).

4.4.2 Taking the local context seriously

Another recurring theme in the evaluation reports is that donors designed and ran programs which were not appropriate for the context. Collectively, the evaluation reports make a number of suggestions about how to adapt programs to the context. The list is long: Interventions should be less complex, implemented sequentially, with much more flexibility to adapt. They should be based on a fair assessment of security conditions on the ground. They should also be based on a realistic assessment of partner capacities. They should not be over-ambitious, and they should be demand driven and not donor driven. Finally, they should consider cultural norms, which may affect many programs, among them those concerning gender equality and human rights. However, donors rarely followed this advice. Donors were clearly aware of the difficult local context, and rightly pointed out that it was extremely difficult to meet performance objectives under these conditions, but we find little evidence that they made strategic adaptations to their aid portfolios, to the way they delivered aid, or indeed to their expectations of what could reasonably be achieved. Instead, many donors pointed out that, in order to achieve meaningful, development results, aid flows over much more time were necessary.

However, we are not convinced that “more of the same, but for longer” would lead to better results. The international aid community has been engaged in Afghanistan for seventeen years now with little signs of increased effectiveness. We think that donors should take the difficult local context seriously, internalize the above-mentioned suggestions, and accept that much of what we would like to do simply may not work in Afghanistan, as long as there is no political settlement to the conflict and no fundamental change in the political economy of the country. Instead, donors should focus on what might work, and learn and adapt on the way. Doing this would require donors to carefully select programs and approaches they think can work, and programs and approaches that should be paused for now. This would also require that aid organizations resist the political pressure “to do more” and to get “quick results” – something they have not done in the past.

4.4.3 Modest and slow is better

One consequence of such an approach would be that development aid becomes more modest and slower. The reviewed evaluation reports strongly suggest that there would be benefits: in general, smaller projects performed better than larger, more complex projects. Also, projects aimed at direct results, such as building small infrastructure and providing such services as access to water and electricity, were often effective. Results have been less strong where programs aimed to be transformative in nature, either for capacity building or to change cultural and social norms. Furthermore, as the evaluation reports show, there can be harm done by spending too much aid too quickly, as was clearly the case for US aid. Government partners did not have the absorption capacities, yet programs spent aid money quickly because the speed of spending was seen as a metric for success. However, the windfall from aid created opportunities for power brokers to increase their influence in villages, cities, and within the government itself. This fuelled corruption, cultivated an environment of impunity, and weakened the rule of law. In our view, a big lesson that emerges from a close reading of the 148 evaluation reports is that aid only has a fair chance of being effective in Afghanistan when programs are modest, rather small than large, do not assume unrealistic partner capacities, are aware of the cultural context, do not spend aid money too fast, do not spend aid money in insecure regions, and are equipped with solid performance measurements and the means to track these measurements with baselines and follow-up data.

4.4.4 Aid in insecure regions

Much of the aid for Afghanistan has been directed to its most insecure regions. Unfortunately, aid for stabilization does not work in highly insecure regions. Aid can only have a positive impact when it is injected in reasonably secure regions under government control. Additionally, chances for stabilization through aid are better when projects are implemented in participatory ways – preferably through accepted local authorities – and when aid is transparent and does not benefit local power brokers.

In the absence of these conditions, the evidence strongly suggests that aid in insecure regions will fuel conflict. This may happen because aid will exacerbate intercommunal or interethnic tensions. Or, in regions where insurgent groups are present and able to act, aid will trigger a strategic reaction: insurgents will either shut down aid projects because they fear that aid may increase the cooperation

between local communities and the government, or insurgents will try to regulate aid flows in order to “tax” aid and increase their prestige and legitimacy among local communities as enablers of aid. Sometimes insurgents also target roads or bridges when they think that they give the military an advantage. Such strategic responses will lead to more immediate violence (since shutting down aid projects or “taxing” requires violence or the threat of violence) and it will increase the capabilities of insurgents for future violence. In the light of this observation, we think that development actors should not implement aid in localities where insurgents retain meaningful capabilities to coerce and tax local communities and aid workers.

4.4.5 We cannot work in the dark

Finally, almost all evaluation reports mentioned the lack of adequate performance measures and solid data. Weak monitoring and evaluation systems have seriously hampered our ability to really understand what impacts the billions of aid dollars had in Afghanistan. It is true that to some extent the difficult security context is to blame for this. But it is still surprising that many donors (bilateral, multilateral, and NGOs alike) have made little progress in establishing better monitoring and evaluation systems since 2002, when international engagement in Afghanistan began. We know that we are not the first to say this – but we think that investing in monitoring and (impact) evaluation will greatly help to make aid more effective, either by identifying approaches which have worked or, at the very least, by identifying approaches which are not effective under the given conditions.

5 Critical Reflections

The findings of this analysis are first and foremost an invitation to reflect. They are a starting point for a discussion, not an end result. Some of the questions that arise are: Why do we see more success in some sectors, and less in other sectors? Does that mean that success in the more “difficult” sectors (such as governance, gender, or capacity building) is simply not achievable under the given circumstances? Or does it mean that with better planning and better implementation, results could have been better? If the latter is true – which I believe it is – then what are realistic objectives and realistic time frames, under the given circumstance? Finally – where should we invest our aid going forward? Where do we think we can have a meaningful impact in a reasonable timeframe? And, no less important, where do we think we need to invest so that future developments will become possible, even if we cannot expect to see impacts in the immediate future? The meta-review does not provide easy answers to these questions. But it prompts us to critically reflect on them.

The results, sobering as they may seem at first glance, can and do offer some guidelines by pointing to fields where impacts are more or less probable. We should take these insights seriously, but at the same time we should keep things in perspective.

Evaluations – especially rigorous ones – measure success as the extent to which a clearly defined objective has been met. Success is therefore always dependent on how it is defined. In Afghanistan, ambitions and expectations were too high, and in a way, many programs were therefore set up for failure, since it was never likely that they could reach all their ambitious objectives. But this does not mean that a program has had no impact at all. Examples abound. ARTF may have had little impact at increasing good governance and overall institutional capacity. But it did enable the government to pay salaries to teachers and administrators, to build schools or to repair roads. Rural development programs may not have created employment on a massive scale, but they did improve livelihoods and provided some poverty relief. Gender programs may not have empowered women, but they did help to improve women’s literacy and provided some additional incomes for women. All of these modest achievements add up and pave the way for future development – a way that would be blocked without these “small” achievements.

Furthermore, evaluations have a relatively short time frame. They usually take place immediately after a program has ended. Often that is not enough time for impacts to unfold. Longer time frames would quite possibly unearth more successes.

Also, do we always look at the right place for successes? Often evaluations assess programs which are dear to the hearts of donors. Hence many evaluations may look at things such as progress in good governance, democracy, or gender. Considerably fewer evaluations look at less fancy and less visible things such as: has a ministry acquired more technical expertise to run its daily affairs? Are salaries paid? Are water meters installed? But these more tangible things can make a big difference in the lives of Afghans.

Another bias stems from the simple fact that some things are easier to measure than others: For example, child mortality, or water consumption, or the number of enrolled students in primary schools are easy to measure, hence successes are easily documented. By contrast, increased capacities, better bureaucratic processes, more knowledge, better training, changed attitudes or better education are difficult to measure, yet such changes add up and will manifest themselves in increased human capital which in turn will change the social fabric over time and enable development in the future.

Taken together, these “small things” explain the seemingly paradox observation that while many aid programs appear to be only marginally successful in the light of the meta-review, the overall situation in Afghanistan today is still remarkably different – and better – than it was in the early days of 2002.

The review suggests that the simpler, easier things have worked better than the more ambitious, complex things. For example, donors were able to reduce child mortality, but the justice sector has hardly improved. Wouldn't that mean that all donors should invest all their resources in the easy things, and avoid the complex things? Shouldn't we all go after the low-hanging fruits? I believe that this would be a mistake.

Afghanistan, just like any other developing country in the midst of conflict, needs both the small things as well as a gradual systemic change. The meta-review does not imply that aid cannot and does not support this systematic change. It merely shows that our efforts were not as effective as we had hoped. This, I believe, should prompt us to be even more alert so that we don't miss the next window of opportunity; it should prompt us to carefully balance interventions that have a high probability of immediate impacts with long-term interventions that are necessary steps for future development, even if we won't see immediate impacts. And it should prompt us to identify fields which should be avoided as long as the context makes success unlikely.

The best possible development cooperation I think, is the one that constantly reflects on these issues and is ready to adapt and improve. It is my hope that this meta-review contributes to such an endeavor.

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Note: Reports in **bold** denote rigorous impact evaluations

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