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Aid engagement is due further attention

FINALLY, nine years after Australia's intervention in Afghanistan, we are having a parliamentary debate on the nature and future of our engagement.

The debate needs to be about more than troop numbers or whether the Australian Defence Force stays or goes. It must look at our whole engagement with Afghanistan. Australia has a growing non-military commitment to the people of Afghanistan, with millions spent on ensuring schools are built, teachers trained, women can give birth safely and clean water is available. What is the future of this part of the intervention? Are we in it for the long haul when it comes to the people of Afghanistan?

Afghanistan remains the second poorest country in the world. An estimated 42 per cent of the population are living below the poverty line, up from 33 per cent in 2005. Less than 30 per cent of people have access to safe drinking water and more than 90 per cent do not have access to proper sanitation. Afghanistan is the most food-insecure country on the planet. In every development indicator women are disadvantaged compared with men.

From limited aid and military engagement before September 11, Australia's investment in Afghanistan has soared in a decade. Australia is the largest non-NATO contributor of military support to Afghanistan and the 11th largest overall contributor to the International Security Assistance Force. A key objective of the ADF is to train the Afghan National Army's 4th Brigade as part of the broader international effort to build Afghan army capacity.

In the 2010-11 federal budget, Afghanistan is the fourth largest recipient of Australian country aid at \$123 million. This is up from about \$70m in 2009-10.

In 2009-10, about 10 per cent of the AusAID country program was spent in Oruzgan, where the ADF operates. This proportion is expected to increase to between 14 per cent and 20 per cent of the AusAID country program in 2010-11. Unlike some donors, the aid portfolio is not significantly weighted towards Australia's military presence. This is encouraging and suggests that unlike some other donors, AusAID has a more balanced approach to supporting comprehensive aid programming across Afghanistan.

Since the start of ADF operations in Oruzgan in 2006, some have reported that the province has experienced improved security, the establishment of basic services and economic growth.

The ADF reports that it has received positive feedback from local communities and progress is felt in the more populous parts of Oruzgan, specifically Tarin Kowt, Chora and Deh Rawud. In other areas of the province the improvements are more modest or less visible. Despite this, ADF-supported development projects have not been evaluated for cost-effectiveness or outcome. The ADF doesn't appear to disaggregate its aid work from military operations in Afghanistan.

Across Afghanistan there is wider evidence to suggest that high volumes of international aid are being coupled with coalition military activity to follow the fighting to the most insecure parts of the country, while the parts of the country that are considered more secure are receiving substantially

less development assistance. The potential for unrest created by provincial aid inequalities should not be underestimated.

At present, there is insufficient transparency and public disclosure of Australia's whole-of-government expenditure to Afghanistan.

Greater parliamentary scrutiny is needed. The lead taken by Canada, with its quarterly reports to parliament of whole-of-government expenditure, is a worthy example.

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