

Why GAO Did This Study

Water is critical to the stability of Afghanistan and is an essential part of U.S. efforts in Afghanistan. Since 2002, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Department of Defense (DOD) have awarded \$250 million for water projects.

This report examines (1) the alignment of U.S. water goals and projects with Afghan water-sector development goals; (2) U.S. agencies' coordination of water-sector efforts among themselves, with the Afghan government and the donor community; (3) U.S. efforts to manage and monitor these water projects; and (4) U.S. efforts to build sustainability into water-sector projects. GAO reviewed and analyzed planning, funding, and performance documents from U.S. agencies and implementing partners, and interviewed U.S. officials in Washington, D.C., and U.S., Afghan, and donor officials in Afghanistan.

What GAO Recommends

GAO makes several recommendations to the USAID Administrator, in conjunction with DOD and other relevant agencies, to improve planning, coordination, and management of U.S.-funded water projects in Afghanistan. This includes developing an interagency plan and designating a centralized database. GAO also recommends steps the USAID Administrator needs to take to improve performance management. USAID and DOD generally concurred with our recommendations.

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AFGHANISTAN DEVELOPMENT

U.S. Efforts to Support Afghan Water Sector Increasing, but Improvements Needed in Planning and Coordination

What GAO Found

The goals outlined in the U.S. government's 2010 Inter-Agency Water Strategy generally align with Afghan government strategic goals for the water sector. The Strategy identifies short, medium, and long-term goals to be achieved between 2010 and 2014. Additionally, since 2002, the U.S. government has implemented a wide range of water projects throughout Afghanistan to improve access to safe drinking water and sanitation, agriculture irrigation, and water-sector management. These projects generally align with Afghan water-sector goals. The United States expects to accelerate development efforts in the water sector and estimates that an additional \$2.1 billion will be needed to fund these efforts from fiscal year 2010 through fiscal year 2014.

The Government Performance and Results Act and several U.S. strategic documents concerning operations in Afghanistan emphasize the importance of interagency coordination. GAO has reported on the importance of interagency coordination and collaboration when multiple U.S. agencies are involved in U.S. counterterrorism-related efforts. GAO's review showed that the United States has taken steps to better coordinate water-sector development projects but that additional efforts are needed. For example, the U.S. government has developed an Infrastructure Working Group, an Inter-Agency Water Strategy, and has started to meet on a regular basis. However, an interagency implementation plan called for in the strategy has not been completed. Also, USAID and DOD have not developed a centralized database to enhance coordination, which GAO previously recommended. Moreover, U.S. agencies generally do not meet on a regular basis with all the relevant ministries in the Afghan government, and they lack complete data concerning other donor projects to maximize the U.S. investment in development projects.

USAID's Automated Directives System outlines USAID's performance management and monitoring procedures. GAO found that gaps existed in USAID's performance management and monitoring efforts for water sector projects in Afghanistan. For example, while 4 of the 6 implementers of projects GAO reviewed established performance indicators, some did not always establish targets for the indicators as required. In addition, although USAID collected quarterly progress reports from 5 of the 6 water project implementers for the projects GAO reviewed, it did not analyze and interpret this information as required. Finally, though USAID has identified several alternative monitoring procedures staff can use to help mitigate monitoring challenges in high threat environments, USAID has not effectively ensured that such guidance was disseminated to staff in Afghanistan.

The U.S. government has included a focus on building sustainability into U.S.-funded water projects in Afghanistan. Recent U.S. strategies have emphasized the importance of project sustainability. GAO has identified two key elements to ensuring water project sustainability: enhancing technical and managerial capacity to maintain projects within the institutions with water-sector responsibilities, and ensuring funding is available to keep projects operational after they have been completed. Ongoing USAID water projects included in this review have incorporated sustainability initiatives. DOD guidance also emphasizes sustainability. However, DOD officials have acknowledged the difficulties of sustaining water projects in Afghanistan.