

Study finds economic assistance in Afghanistan largely failed to reduce support for the Taliban

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A Dartmouth-led study finds that two common economic interventions in Afghanistan designed to improve economic livelihoods and win the "hearts of minds" of civilians was ineffective in reducing support for the Taliban in the long run.

When civilians support the insurgency, they are more apt to provide assistance to combatants, such as by providing food or tips on the government's whereabouts, or even by joining the insurgent effort. The study is the first to examine how [cash transfers](#) and vocational training administered by a humanitarian organization affect combatant support in an active conflict zone. The findings are published in the February 2020 issue of *American Political Science Review*.

Working with Mercy Corps, the Dartmouth-led research team assessed how vulnerable youth's political attitudes towards the Afghan government and Taliban was affected by two economic interventions: job training and [cash](#). The program, Introducing New Vocational Education and Skills Training (INVEST), was designed to help lift at-risk youth (age 20+) in Kandahar, Afghanistan, out of poverty and minimize the likelihood that they would join the insurgency.

Approximately 2,600 Afghan men and women (average age of 20), took part in the study. Nearly 80 percent had shared Pashtun ethnicity with the Taliban, and just over half of them had experienced forced

displacement in the past by either the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force or Taliban.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of four economic interventions, where they received either job training, cash, job training and cash, or no aid at all. The job training was comprised of either three or six months of coursework at one of the local vocational training centers in Kandahar, as well as other skills building. As for the cash, a one-time, unconditional cash transfer of US \$75 was wired to a recipient's cell phone. The amount was a significant cash shock, as it was comparable to nearly four months of an average salary. The recipients were informed that the cash came from a "foreign donor" and not from Mercy Corps. By attributing the funds to a foreign source, this could indirectly help build credibility for the current government by signaling to civilians that the government's effectiveness was responsible for attracting foreign funds.

Two weeks and eight months after they had completed the training and/or received the cash, participants were surveyed through in-person interviews on their attitudes towards the Afghan government and Taliban, and violence.

The results of the study were striking. Despite the vocational training, the program had only a modest effect in helping recipients improve their economic livelihoods. There was a 5 percent increase in both the likelihood of recipients earning cash and owning land. Employment outcomes were nominal; participants reported working just one day more per month than before they had completed the training. The intervention also did not appear to have an effect on pro-government sentiment. If anything, the intervention just raised people's expectations. With very few jobs available, supporting the Taliban became an appealing option, where they could stand to earn US \$15 a day and receive other perks.

As for the cash infusion, two weeks after receiving the cash transfer, there was increased support for the Afghan government among recipients. Nine months later, however, this trend was reversed. Recipients reported anger towards the government and increased support for the Taliban. Participants had spent most, if not all of the cash on consumables and once that money was gone, their lives really had not improved.

In contrast, there was modest progress among participants who had received both the cash and the vocational training. Support for the Afghan government increased. Yet, if they received the cash or [job training](#) separately, the intervention had the adverse effect of increasing support for the Taliban rather than steering participants away from it.

"Throughout the world, the humanitarian industry is spending a tremendous amount of money in conflict areas providing [job training](#) and infusing cash; yet, there is little evidence that these aid programs work," explained Jason Lyall, the inaugural James Wright Chair in transnational studies, director of the Political Violence Field Lab and an associate professor of government at Dartmouth, who led the research project, and has conducted fieldwork in Afghanistan.

"In conflict zones, non-governmental organizations often aim to offer [vocational training](#) as a way to help civilians break into the market; yet, this approach may be flawed by creating false hope in areas that may have a struggling economy and a limited number of jobs," he added. "Cash transfers are the number one instrument used in the field for dealing with refugees, especially in conflict settings, as this type of intervention is inexpensive and has little overhead. Our research in Kandahar, Afghanistan, demonstrates how a one-time cash infusion in a war zone ultimately increased combatant support, and that from a moral point of view, is problematic," explained Lyall.

With the study's findings, the researchers hope that the humanitarian community will strive to be more rigorous in their methods before implementing aid projects in conflict zones, so as to minimize the potential for a backlash effect.

More information: JASON LYALL et al, Can Economic Assistance Shape Combatant Support in Wartime? Experimental Evidence from Afghanistan, *American Political Science Review* (2019). [DOI: 10.1017/S0003055419000698](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055419000698)

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