

The soils of war

The real agenda behind agricultural reconstruction in Afghanistan and Iraq



US Army photo: Sgt. David Turner

In this Briefing, we look at how the US's agricultural reconstruction work in Afghanistan and Iraq not only gives easy entry to US agribusiness and pushes neoliberal policies, something that has always been a primary function of US development assistance, but is also an intrinsic part of the US military campaign in these countries and the surrounding regions. Seen together with the growing clout that the US and its corporate allies exercise over donor agencies and global bodies – such as the World Bank, the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) centres, which influence the food and farm policies adopted by the recipient countries – this is an alarming development. These are not unique cases born from unusual circumstances, but constitute a likely template for US activities overseas, as it continues to expand its “war on terror” and pursue US corporate interests.

Basic inputs for Iraqi farmers – seeds, poultry and so on – are brought from outside and distributed through US military regiments

Asia has seen its fair share of disasters in recent years, both man-made and natural – floods, cyclones, tsunamis, earthquakes, war. After each calamity, efforts are made to put the pieces back together. But “aid” from outside often comes with a political or even a military agenda that aims much more to refashion countries to satisfy powerful interests than actually to rebuild the affected communities. Humanitarian aid is regularly conditional on the adoption of neoliberal policies, and, perhaps more troubling, there has been a recent trend in the case of war to interweave this aid, classified as “reconstruction”, closely with the military machinery of the invading powers. In Afghanistan, where US President Obama is sending an additional 17,000 US troops, and Iraq, the testing grounds for this militarised aid, the distinction between the US’s civilian and military activities has been completely, and deliberately, blurred.

AFGHANISTAN: FOOD AND BOMBS

When the US began its campaign of bombing Afghanistan in 2001, one of its first targets was the Soviet-built Shindand airfield in the west of the country, near the border with Iran. A year later, the US took control of the airfield, one of the largest in the country, amid accusations that it intended to use the site as a possible base for operations against Iran. Today the area around Shindand remains a scene of intense warfare between US/NATO and Taliban forces, with civilians caught in the middle.

On 21 August 2008, US planes taking off from the Shindand airfield bombarded a village in Shindand District, killing at least 88 innocent civilians. When protesters later took to the streets of the regional city of Azizabad, the Afghan National Army opened fire on the crowd, leaving several people wounded. The protest had erupted after officials from the central government came with food aid for the affected families. “They destroyed our houses, killed dozens of people and they still send us wheat?” said Hamidullah, a local resident who took part in the protests.¹

In the war in Afghanistan, bombs and food are a package deal. At the very airfield from which the US planes launched their deadly attack, US forces had established an agricultural training centre just months before. “The agricultural centre has many positive effects for both the troops and the local population,” says a leader with the US Special Forces civil affairs team. “This allows us to build a rapport with the villagers through education and employment; therefore, they are given a reason to think twice about allowing the anti-Afghan forces to step in and influence their lives in a negative way. The presence of this agricultural centre is a security measure in and of itself.”² Its explicit objective is to give a positive spin to the US occupation.



Afghan workers preparing fields of the US Agriculture Centre in Shindand

1 Najib Khelwatgar and Ahmad Qurishi, “Afghan Army open fire on Shindand protesters, Karzai worried”, PAN, 23 August 2008: <http://tinyurl.com/42z5mr>

2 A US Special Forces civil affairs team leader, quoted in Anna Perry, “Afghan Agricultural Center Contributes to Better Security”, American Forces Press Service, 3 July 2008. <http://tinyurl.com/br3zlc>





The US officials say that the centre will eventually build up agricultural production for export in the area and wean local farmers away from producing poppies – a crop that still provides more security and income to farmers than the millions of dollars in foreign aid, so little of which trickles down to them. The centre is equipped with laboratories, classrooms, several fish ponds with hatcheries, vineyards and orchards. A weather station and drip irrigation system are planned. All of it is run by the US military.

To the south-east, USAID contracted the US firm Chemonics Inc. to build an agriculture centre outside Lashkar Gah, a city in the province of Helmand, another area of intense conflict with the Taliban. Chemonics is an international firm that specialises in private sector development and agriculture, and operates under the slogan “to catalyse agribusiness”.³ It was founded in Washington in 1975, and since then USAID has been its major client.⁴ According to its president, Richard Dreiman: “We at Chemonics are proud to be part of Afghanistan’s agricultural and agribusiness renaissance.”⁵ Chemonics says that the location originally chosen for

Box 1: The Agricultural Advisers

Since 2003, 25 USDA-funded Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) have been deployed to train Afghans in farming techniques. The following number of USDA agricultural advisers has been working with the PRTs:

	No. of advisers	No. of months deployed
2003	3	6
2004	10	6
2005	10	6
2006	8	9
2007	8	9
2008	13	13

Source: USDA’s Foreign Agricultural Service

3 To get a sense of the nature and extent of Chemonics’ interventions, see “Rebuilding Agricultural Markets Program (RAMP) Afghanistan: Fiscal Year 2006 Work Plan. <http://tinyurl.com/bva5ap> Among the USAID partners in this is the Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE – www.cipe.org). See also “Windfalls of War: US contractors in Afghanistan & Iraq”, on the website of The Center for Public Integrity. <http://tinyurl.com/bwra93>

4 See “Chemonics International”, *Washington Post*, Post 200 – Top DC area businesses <http://tinyurl.com/dds7eh>

5 “Chemonics announces scholarship at Afghan AgFair”, Chemonics’ website, 20 February 2009. <http://tinyurl.com/ddvsqd>



Box 2: Ramping up US companies in Afghanistan

In 2003, USAID launched a project called Rebuilding Afghanistan's Agricultural Markets Program (RAMP), a three-year project to be carried out in 13 provinces. It had two main objectives: to increase agricultural productivity and to link villages to markets. This programme clearly reflects the thinking behind "rebuilding": it is understood as a process for integrating Afghan agriculture within the global trading system and for developing basic skills and tools for agribusiness. RAMP's immediate beneficiaries were US companies. As a USAID brochure stated brazenly: "[RAMP] provides an excellent opportunity for U.S. equipment and service providers. Since a majority of funding is expected from U.S. sources, U.S. companies will definitely be given preference under RAMP. It is very important for U.S. firms to find good local Afghan companies to partner with under this activity."¹

One US private company to win a big contract under RAMP was Chemonics International Inc. Chemonics was charged with the construction of the airfield and agriculture centre in Helmand province and another series of contracts, worth a total of US\$600m, for "socio-economic assessment" and "food security" in Afghanistan. Even though the latter was the largest contract the US government publicly awarded for work in the country, Chemonics was reluctant to provide details of the tasks it was contracted to undertake. The Center for Public Integrity, a Washington-based centre for investigative journalism, was unsuccessful in its repeated attempts to get Chemonics to provide it with copies of the contracts.²

RAMP's projects are typically supplied and serviced by US firms, such as Valmont Industries Inc., which won contracts to supply mechanised irrigation equipment, and CDM, which served as a technical resource for water and irrigation projects in Afghanistan from 2002 to 2004. They also favour contract farming and foreign investment. Parwan Dehydrates Company, a vegetable exporting factory established through RAMP in Afghanistan's Parwan province, has contracts with 1,200 farmers for the supply of dried vegetables. It is a joint venture between Development Works Corps (DWC), Canada, which holds 60 per cent of the equity, and the yet to be established Parwan Growers' Association, which will hold the remaining 40 per cent. DWC is a member of USAID-RAMP.³

Aside from RAMP, Chemonics is carrying out another project for USAID – the Accelerating Sustainable Agriculture Program (ASAP) (2006–10). The programme seeks to strengthen the role of private capital in agriculture and to develop the capacity of the Ministry of Agriculture to support it. As is stated in the programme, the emphasis is on "market-led solutions that help farmers and companies capitalize on new economic opportunities".⁴

1 http://www.export.gov/afghanistan/pdf/construction_3-ramp.pdf

2 The Center for Public Integrity, *Windfalls of war: Chemonics International Inc.*, 31 March 2004, <http://tinyurl.com/cqwm8o>

3 See Kenneth E. Neils, "Case Study: Vegetable Dehydration and Processing Factory in Afghanistan". <http://tinyurl.com/b9lb9v>

Another such venture is one focused on major replanting campaign targeted at revitalising Afghanistan's formerly world-renowned table grape industry. Under initiatives designed with Roots of Peace, U.C. Davis shipped 4,000 grapevine cuttings to Afghanistan under a US\$10-million contract from USAID.

4 See Chemonics' website: <http://tinyurl.com/dmdusz>

the agriculture centre, in a farming area, was rejected; they were instead "instructed" for "strategic military and security considerations" to establish it at the Lashkar Gah airfield, which is under the control of the UK military.⁶ It is clear that the line between the military and aid objectives has been blurred – and purposely so.

Thirty years ago, when Afghanistan was a net exporter of food, Helmand was the country's breadbasket. The US proclaimed after the invasion that by 2007 it would once again make the country self-sufficient in food. Today in 2009 that goal is as distant as ever, with Afghans still dependent on food imports and foreign assistance. This is largely because the war has continued, devastating the country's agriculture. Rather than genuinely helping Afghans to recover their old farming skills, the agriculture centres provide a veneer of agricultural reconstruction to a military mission that is destroying Afghanistan's food systems. They are an attempt to legitimise the military bases of an occupying power.

The Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) that the UK and US deploy in the Afghan countryside with increasing frequency serve a similar purpose to the agriculture centres. A PRT typically consists of 60–250 military personnel, a USAID field officer and a US State Department political officer. USAID says that there are about 25 PRTs currently operating in Afghanistan. According to USAID:

"PRTs in Afghanistan are key instruments through which the international community delivers assistance at the provincial and district level. As a result of their provincial focus and civilian and military resources, PRTs have a unique

6 Chemonics International Inc., "Lashkar Gah Bost Airport and Agriculture Center, Helmand Province, Afghanistan: Environmental Assessment", October 2008. <http://tinyurl.com/ajn8ze>



mandate to improve security, support good governance, and enhance provincial development. The combination of international civilian and military resources also allows the PRT to have wide latitude to implement their mandate.... PRTs seek to establish an environment that is secure and stable enough for the operation of international and Afghan civilian agencies to provide development support. Due to their unique composition, PRTs are also able to deliver development and support to less secure areas. USAID's programs attempt to work with PRTs to deliver services in less secure or underserved areas of Afghanistan."⁷

Some of the PRTs are called Agricultural Development Teams, and they have a specific agricultural mission. Aside from the ridiculous intent to teach Afghan farmers about how they do things in Iowa or Texas, and the provision of free wheat seeds to convince farmers to abandon poppy cultivation, these teams, composed mainly of soldiers from the National Guard, also make critical contributions to military operations. "It helps in the military kinetic part because it involves cooperation of the local population, and intelligence resources can be brought to bear", explains Army Major-General King E. Sidwell. "It makes friends when you might not otherwise be able to make friends."⁸

Agribusiness grows on the battlefield

The support between the military and agricultural work runs both ways. While agricultural reconstruction facilitates US/NATO military operations, the military operations push forward the agenda of US and other foreign-based agribusiness corporations by creating a context where they can easily put pressure on the government to adopt neoliberal policies. The war provides these corporations with both a lucrative short-term market in the blossoming "reconstruction" industry (see Box 2) and an opportunity to integrate Afghanistan into their global production networks and markets in the long term.

Seeds are at the centre of these processes. Those "rebuilding" Afghanistan's agriculture zoomed in on exactly that. In 2002 a global multi-partner exercise with 34 organisations was brought together under the banner of the CGIAR, with US and Australian funding. This Future Harvest Consortium to Rebuild Agriculture in Afghanistan (FHCRAA) lasted about a year, within which time it imported and distributed several thousand tonnes of wheat seed from Pakistan and set up seed multiplication programmes for varieties of other crops that it brought in from the International Centre for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA) in Syria.⁹

The Consortium and other CGIAR-led initiatives have completely bypassed the rich heritage of farmers' varieties in Afghanistan, which would have provided the basis for genuine agricultural reconstruction. According to an ICARDA survey conducted in 2002, neither rain-fed rice varieties nor rain-fed and irrigated wheat varieties that have been supplied by the aid organisations have included any Afghan genetic materials. The authors of the survey concluded that Afghan wheat farmers are "on their own when it comes to replicating and reselecting local variety seed".¹⁰

Afghanistan has instead been deluged with all manner of foreign seed varieties, some of which have come through projects with foreign seed companies seeking to test their varieties in a potential future market (see Box 3). Concerns were raised early on about the indiscriminate importing of seeds and the disregard of local seeds, prompting the FAO,¹¹ ICARDA¹² and the Afghan Ministry of Agriculture to propose a Code of Conduct for seed aid in 2002. But any concern for farmers' seeds has been overrun by the insistence of the US and EU on crafting a seed industry in Afghanistan allied to their larger political agendas. Essentially this means building up a few local seed companies that can initially serve as a conduit for seed aid, and later, if the US wins the war, open the door to foreign seed companies and agribusiness.

7 USAID: Afghanistan, "Provincial Reconstruction Teams".
<http://tinyurl.com/akn2qjb>

8 Quoted in Army Staff Sgt Jon Soucy, "Missouri Guard's Agricultural Mission Grows in Afghanistan", American Forces Press Service, 23 December 2008.
<http://tinyurl.com/couxfb>

9 See ICARDA's web page about the FHCRAA.
<http://tinyurl.com/c8793l>

10 J. Dennis, A. Diab and P. Trutmann, "The Planning of Emergency Seed Supply for Afghanistan in 2002 and Beyond", a draft concept paper prepared for the Tashkent Conference, 2002.
www.afghanseed.org

11 FAO Newsroom, "Code of conduct on seeds for Afghanistan reached", 30 May 2002.
<http://tinyurl.com/3sphbl>

12 See also ICARDA website's "Seed for Afghanistan" section.
<http://tinyurl.com/b44kba>



Box 3. Multinational companies move into farming

Soya has never been grown in Afghanistan and it doesn't form part of the country's culinary tradition, but a new programme, supposedly devised to combat malnutrition, plans to change all that.¹ USAID has funded Nutrition and Education International (NEI), set up by Nestlé, to teach Afghans to sow and eat soya beans.² NEI is linked to the World Initiative for Soy in Human Health (WISHH),³ which was founded by the American Soybean Association (ASA) in 2000,⁴ to organise the distribution of free soya milk to pregnant women and infants throughout the developing world. WISHH works with the North American Millers' Association (NAMA), whose members include global giants ADM, Bunge Milling and ConAgro. In Afghanistan NEI works with Stine Seed Company, Iowa, and Gateway Seed Company, Illinois, both of which supply it with genetically modified Roundup soya and Roundup-Ready herbicide to be sold on to the farmers. According to NEI, it distributed two tonnes of genetically modified soya seed in Afghanistan in 2005.

Stine and Gateway aren't the only multinational seed companies to have moved in. In 2002 the German seed company KWS established a public-private partnership with the Afghan Ministry of Foods and Light Industry and a group of private Afghan investors to re-establish sugar beet cultivation in the Baghlan area, 250 km north of Kabul, and to reopen the old Baghlan Sugar Factory, once the centre of Afghanistan's small domestic sugar industry.⁵ Private companies from Germany, Iran and Russia supplied "high-yielding" sugar beet varieties, along with fertilisers. Plans have also been drawn up to use by-products from the sugar refinery processing plants – molasses and beet pulp – to produce feedstock for industrial ethanol.

But not even this project, the New Baghlan Sugar Company, could escape the war: it was in the news in November 2007 when a bomb exploded at the inauguration ceremony. Even so, the partners are pressing on with the modernisation. In 2007 KWS and Monsanto introduced in the US sugar beets genetically modified to be resistant to Monsanto's Roundup herbicide, despite concern that the beets would contaminate other crops.⁶ There is now a risk that GM crops such as these could be used in Afghanistan, triggering off another kind of warfare with local biodiversity.

The International Potato Center (CIP) has been preparing the way for the entry of Technico Pty Limited, an Australian multinational.⁷ CIP has imported into Afghanistan Technico's varieties for trials. USAID has funded the infrastructure for a potato market, and a CGIAR team has developed a certification system.

Three US multinational companies – Chemonics, Development Alternatives Inc.(DAI),⁸ and Planning and Development Collaborative International (PADCO) – are carrying out a series of USAID-funded Alternative Livelihood Programs (ALPs), which aim to provide poppy farmers with another way of earning their living.⁹ Their big success to date is the export of pomegranates flown out on US military planes to a Carrefour supermarket in Dubai.¹⁰

1 Nutrition and Educational International (NEI), "Final Report, 2004 Soybean Production Experimentation in Mazar-e-Sharif, Balkh Province, Afghanistan". <http://tinyurl.com/cgvxyx>

2 See NEI website, <http://www.nei-intl.org/index.html>

3 See WISHH website, <http://www.wishh.org/>

4 See American Soybean Association website, <http://www.soygrowers.com/international/wishh.htm>

5 FAO Newsroom, "Restarting sugar production in Afghanistan", 17 December 2004.

<http://www.fao.org/newsroom/en/news/2004/52501/index.html>

6 See the Organic Seed Alliance website for more information.

<http://www.seedalliance.org/index.php?page=SugarBeetJune2008>

7 See Technico's website, www.technituber.com.au

8 DAI is an international business development consulting firm. www.dai.com

9 See PADCO's AECOM International Development website, <http://www.padco.aecom.com/>

10 "Afghans seek image change with anar", FreshPlaza: Global Fresh Produce and Banana News, 24 November 2008. http://www.freshplaza.com/news_detail.asp?id=33728

As in the rest of the world, a private seed industry in Afghanistan requires a legislative framework that creates a commercial seed market. This is done through laws that make proprietary seed sale the norm, forcing farmers to buy rather than save or share such seeds, with little protection for farmers' own local varieties and seed practices.¹³ Thus, on 13 September 2005, by way of a process led by the FAO and the EU, the Agriculture Ministry adopted a National Seeds Policy which, while seeming to defend the seed-saving rights of farmers, endorsed monopoly rights for seed companies that would make it illegal for farmers to exchange or sell commercial seeds:

*"Farmers will maintain their right to use, exchange, share or sell their farm-saved seed between themselves without any restriction and will have the right to continue using any varieties of their choice without being hampered by the system of compulsory registration provided they do not commercialise production emanating from proprietary varieties."*¹⁴

13 GRAIN, "Seed laws: imposing agricultural apartheid", Seedling, June 2005. <http://www.grain.org/seedling/?id=337>

14 National Seeds Policy of Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 2005 (emphasis added).

A national seed law soon followed, the draft of which prohibits the sale of non-



certified seeds unless they conform to minimum standards of germination, purity and labelling. As small farmers might find it difficult to comply with these requirements, it could affect the sale and exchange of farmers' seeds.¹⁵

With this legal framework in place, the first private company producing and selling wheat seeds was inaugurated in Bamyán province in Central Afghanistan in August 2006.¹⁶ Other companies have since followed, and in October 2008 an Afghanistan National Seed Association (ANSA), headed by the chief executive of a private Afghan seed company, was created in Kabul with FAO support.¹⁷ To call it a national industry is a bit of a stretch. Afghanistan's private seed companies are kept afloat by outside donors. In 2008, for instance, USAID and the UK government's Department for International Development (DFID) contributed US\$3 million each to an EU Seed Project that provides loans for the purchase of certified wheat seed. What is more, the main activity of the seed companies is to produce seed for the foreign donor programmes or military operations. Most if not all of their seed sales are through contracts with foreign agencies, as part of poppy eradication programmes or military PR exercises.

ANSA is not the only game in town. The Taliban runs its own seed supply networks, with a similar strategy of winning the loyalty of local farmers. The US Army claims that the Taliban control a large wheat-seed farm in Ghazni province and distributes seed to farmers in areas under their control. A US National Guard Agribusiness Development Team told the *Dallas Morning News* that it plans to build another wheat-seed farm nearby to "free Ghazni's wheat farmers from Taliban-approved suppliers".¹⁸

Either way – Taliban seed or US Army seed – the seed is certainly not "free". Both come with heavy political agendas, backed by armed forces, that have little to do with the interests of Afghanistan's small farmers. Getting their own seeds back into the hands of these farmers is the only real way that they will find their freedom.

One justification for introducing a range of cash crops is to provide alternatives to the cultivation of opium poppies for the global drug trade. But, while poppy farming is flourishing, few farmers seem interested in the alternatives. It is not hard to understand why: a poppy farmer makes much more money – approximately ten times more – than a wheat farmer. One possible solution, which is being promoted by an Australian scientist from the Canberra-based Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation, jointly with the US San Diego State University's Homeland Security Programme, is to legalise the production of poppies for biodiesel production. Farmers would plant a variety of poppy seed that has been genetically modified to have a high oil content and not to contain narcotic properties. Leading donors are also pressing for more economically viable "alternative" crops and "improved" varieties to offer farmers (*see* Box 3).

15 A copy of the final draft of the Afghanistan Seed Law (August 2006) can be downloaded from grain.org/brl/?docid=340&lawid=2834

16 AfghanMania, "Private Seed Enterprise opens in Bamyán", 21 August 2006. <http://tinyurl.com/b3jrjd>

17 SeedQuest, news section, "Message from the President of the newly formed ANSA", 24 October 2008. <http://tinyurl.com/b9to3g>

18 Jim Landers, "Texas troops combat Afghan insurgents with farming plan", *Dallas Morning News*, 1 February 2009. <http://tinyurl.com/af98d5>



US Army photo. Sgt. David Turner

Basic inputs for Iraqi farmers – seeds, poultry and so on – are brought from outside and distributed through US military regiments



US Army photo by Spc. Erik LeDrew

The US army helping to distribute imported fertiliser, eastern Baghdad.

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19 See Suleiman Al-Khalidi, "Iraq buys 200,000 t of Russian wheat from Glencore", *arabian Business.com*, 25 September 2008. <http://tinyurl.com/bngmlv>

20 Policy Archive, "Iraq Agriculture and Food Supply: Background and Issues", June 2004. <http://tinyurl.com/br6dmd>

21 Cargill, the biggest global trader of agricultural commodities, is a multinational corporation registered in the US. <http://www.cargill.com/>

22 See "Iraq's Closed Factories," *The Ground Truth in Iraq* (blog), 15 January 2009. <http://tinyurl.com/acv6q7>
Bassam Yousif, "Economic restructuring in Iraq: intended and unintended consequences", *Journal of Economic Issues*, March 2007. <http://tinyurl.com/dmjfl2>

23 "More than 90% of Iraqi industries are halted", *IRAQdirectory.com*, 10 January 2009: <http://tinyurl.com/ad2hnr>

24 Focus on the Global South and GRAIN, *Against the grain*, "Iraq's new patent law: A declaration of war against farmers", October 2004. <http://www.grain.org/articles/?id=6>

25 See DAI – Projects: ARDI, "Revitalizing Iraq's agricultural sector", n.d. <http://tinyurl.com/b739o6>

26 It should be noted that since the invasion the US has sought to dismantle former public programmes which provided subsidised inputs, including seeds, to Iraqi farmers, and that the provision of seeds by US forces is seen as a temporary measure before a "free-market" seed system takes over.

27 These are FAO figures, available from FAOSTAT. <http://faostat.fao.org/site/291/default.aspx>

28 Robert Looney, "Neoliberalism in a Conflict State: The Viability of Economic Shock Therapy in Iraq", *Strategic Insights*, Vol. III, No. 6, June 2004. <http://tinyurl.com/ah4zvc>

29 See Rich Magnani and Sawsan Al-Sharifi, "Reform and Rehabilitation of Iraq's agricultural sector: The case of the Iraqi wheat sector", USAID-Iraq, 2005. <http://tinyurl.com/dgllqr> and <http://tinyurl.com/afh7ml>
See also "Iraq Private Sector Growth and Employment Generation – The Potential for Food Processing in Iraq", USAID-Iraq, 15 March 2006. <http://tinyurl.com/ck4rn6>

It is ironic that any mention of rebuilding food and farm systems in Iraq – known as the cradle of agriculture – has to begin with numerous references to the US. However, in today's context it is important to point out that Iraq has long been important to the US as a market for its agricultural commodities. While it is true that the US has long-term interests in developing such a market in Afghanistan, Iraq is already the number one destination for its hard red winter wheat exports and a top destination for its rice.¹⁹ It is a US\$1.5bn market that wasn't accessible to US companies before the invasion, because of the sanctions.²⁰ Indeed, controlling the development of Iraq's agriculture and food systems was so important to the US that in the early years of its occupation it brought in Dan Amstutz, an ex-Cargill executive and a veteran insider with US trade delegations, to be in charge of this sector.²¹

The US came into Iraq with a heavy agenda for reforming all sectors of its economy, not just agriculture. However, the US's Coalition Provisional Authority could not enforce its neoliberal reform programme as rapidly as it wanted to, because it was subject to a series of constraints: the laws of the Geneva Convention, the practical problems of a lack of interest by investors, and the desperate need for some form of organisation to cater to the basic needs of the Iraqi people. Even so, the CPA managed to enact a harsh set of neoliberal policies that had a major impact on the country.²² Indeed, the impact of the reforms, combined with the continuing war, has been so catastrophic that by January 2009 the Chairman of the Iraqi Union of Industries confirmed that 90 per cent of the country's industries had closed since 2003.²³

In respect of the agricultural sector more specifically, the US has implemented a blueprint similar to the one already described in relation to Afghanistan, albeit on a larger scale and with more flagrant profiteering by US companies. In one of its orders, the CPA abolished agricultural subsidies and opened up the agricultural market. Not surprisingly, the country was flooded with cheap imports and local food production collapsed. Just as in Afghanistan, changes in seed laws were seen as crucial. However, whereas in Afghanistan it was at least the central government that enacted the new laws, in Iraq farmers' rights to save seeds were struck down by the infamous Order 81 during the last days of the US's Coalition Provisional Authority's rule.²⁴

Dan Amstutz was put in charge of the USAID's Agriculture Reconstruction and Development Program for Iraq (ARDI). This work, which was managed by one of USAID's most trusted private contractors, Development Alternatives Inc. (DAI), focused on accelerating "the transition from a command-and-control production and marketing system to a market-driven economy where farmers and agribusinesses are able to take risks and realize profits".²⁵ At the top of ARDI's list was wheat, Iraq's most important food crop. In the field, ARDI's work with wheat focused on the import, multiplication and distribution of certified wheat seed.²⁶ Those efforts seem to have had little impact. During ARDI's three years, Iraq's national wheat production dropped from 2.6 million tonnes in 2002 to 2.2 million tonnes in 2006 (despite a doubling in the area sown to wheat) and the national average yields for wheat plunged over those same years from 1.6 tonnes per hectare to 0.6 tonnes per hectare.²⁷ But ARDI was also playing a political game with wheat that was part of a larger US shock-therapy strategy for the Iraq economy and likely to have been of more interest to US agribusiness: its central objective was to liberalise and privatise Iraq's wheat sector, and its Public Distribution System in particular.²⁸ While the chaos following the US invasion made an immediate sell-off or dismantling of Iraq's wheat sector impossible (and illegal under the Geneva Convention), ARDI tried to push the Iraqis down the alternative path of neoliberal reforms that could arrive at the same ends while sidestepping political sensitivities and immediate practical problems.²⁹ Some of this privatisation is now being implemented in Iraq through the "International Compact with Iraq" – a five-year plan negotiated by the Iraqi



Box 4: Parked in the Bay

The US administration deployed two US Naval ships with 3,500 marines on board to the waters of the Bay of Bengal for humanitarian assistance/disaster relief operations in Bangladesh after that country was hit by Tropical Cyclone Sidr in 2007. In the words of the US Charge d'Affaires in Bangladesh, US is "(h)ere for the long term ... to assist with recovery and rehabilitation".¹ These Department of Defense operations come under a joint plan of the US Department of State and USAID. One of the ships, USS Kearsarge, has also been used between 2003 and 2005 in "Operation Iraq Freedom" and the "Global War on Terror". Many local voices were raised in protest in Bangladesh.

1 US embassy, Dhaka, press release, 7 December 2007, <http://tinyurl.com/c2kmpb>
see also Indo-Asian News Service, "Islamists protest US naval presence for cyclone relief", *The Earth Times*, 24 November 2007, <http://www.earthtimes.org/articles/show/147173.html>

government with the World Bank, the US and other major donors.³⁰ Whatever the eventual outcome, the combined devastation of Iraq's wheat production and the opening of its wheat markets to US imports, both brought about by the US invasion, has yielded billions of dollars for US grain companies.

When ARDI came to a close in 2006, USAID launched two new programmes – a US\$343 million Inma Agribusiness Program³¹ and Izdihar (Iraq Private Sector Growth and Employment Generation).³² Both programmes are being carried out by the Loius Berger Group Inc., one of the world's largest infrastructure and development consultancies, and they are designed to prepare the way for agribusiness investment in the food industry.

Yet, like similar programmes in Afghanistan, these agriculture reconstruction programmes also serve a military function and are immersed in military operations. Of the US\$250 million of "reconstruction" funds that the US has so far spent on the 581 agricultural projects that it has either proposed, planned or completed since the beginning of the invasion, more than 97 per cent of the projects have been paid for with funds from the Commanders' Emergency Response Program (CERP), which is managed by the "Multi-National Corps-Iraq". Only 2.4 per cent of these projects have been funded by the Iraq Relief and Reconstruction Fund, which is supervised by the US's Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction. CERP was initially funded by way of the cash and assets that the US military seized from the former Iraqi government. After the US military had spent these seized funds by early 2004, just before the Coalition Provisional Authority came to an end, the US decided to keep CERP going with appropriations from the US government. Of the 552 agricultural reconstruction projects the US has started in Iraq, the Multi-National Corps-Iraq have managed 536, the US Army Corps of Engineers have managed six, and USAID has managed only ten.³³ Funding for agriculture reconstruction in Afghanistan is also dominated by a similar CERP, meaning that, in both cases, it is the military that ultimately decides which projects get done.

The USAID and other so-called civilian programmes in Iraq work with Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) – modelled on the PRTs that were first set up in Afghanistan. According to the US Embassy in Iraq: "Established in Iraq in 2005 and inaugurated by Secretary Rice in November that year, the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) initiative is a civilian–military inter-agency effort that is the primary U.S. Government interface between U.S., Coalition partners and provincial and local governments throughout all of Iraq's 18 provinces."³⁴

A December 2008 report by the United States Institute of Peace, "an independent, nonpartisan, national institution established and funded by Congress",³⁵ provides more details about how the PRTs relate to the US military mission in Iraq, and is worth quoting at length:



US Army photo: Spc. Erik LeDrew

The US army signing up Iraqi farmers for the farmers' union.

30 See the annexes to *The International Compact with Iraq: Annual Review, May 2007–April 2008*, which show progress against benchmarks. <http://tinyurl.com/atv6lr>

31 "Inma" means "growth" in Arabic. The Program's website can be found at <http://tinyurl.com/bq70yn>

32 "Izdihar" means "prosperity" in Arabic. The Program's website can be found at <http://www.izdihar-iraq.com/index.html>

33 USDA Foreign Agricultural Service Information Management Unit, "Iraq Agriculture and Irrigation Overview," July 2008, <http://tinyurl.com/bjxozk>

34 US embassy, Baghdad, press release, "Fact sheet on Provincial Reconstruction Teams", 17 December 2007. <http://tinyurl.com/yygq7l>

35 According to "USIP's Missions and Goals" as described on the institute's website. See <http://www.usip.org/aboutus/index.html>

Box 5: Another way is possible

The experience of disaster-ridden regions with aid from abroad and from their own governments does not mean that assistance is never needed. Indeed, help can be meaningful and extremely important, if it enables communities to help themselves. Peasant organisations such as La Via Campesina¹ have shown a way forward. After the tsunami they routed relief directly to communities' right across the affected region:

"In Sri Lanka, India, Thailand and Indonesia, where La Via Campesina has member organisations, farmers launched relief operations to support the survivors of the catastrophe, they gave out rice and vegetables to feed the people affected, and several fund-raising activities were organised to channel national and international contributions towards small peasants and fisherfolk's organisations. La Via Campesina also immediately publicly raised important issues affecting small producers such as the origin of food aid (local or imported food), the type of reconstruction policies implemented (agribusiness or family based production) and people's participation in the process."²

1 International Secretariat of La Via Campesina, "20 months after the Tsunami: Looking back at La via Campesina relief operations", 4 July 2006.

<http://tinyurl.com/b6ftfg>

2 Peter Rosset and María Elena Martínez, "The Democratisation of Aid", in *Red Pepper*, February 2005.

<http://www.redpepper.org.uk/The-democratisation-of-aid>

"We have two new best friends in the rice industry, the director general of the ministry of trade from Iraq and the director general of the Iraqi Grain Board," said Stuart Proctor Jr., president and chief executive officer of USA Rice Federation in 2004 after a meeting with both of these men.³⁶

"PRTs tend to play a supporting, advisory role for the military, providing them with civilian expertise they would not otherwise have access to and offering suggestions on how to shape operations. As one member of a PRT working in a counter-insurgency environment in Baghdad said, 'The military is the blunt instrument; we provide the fine tuning.' Nonetheless, in counter-insurgency environments, the military has the unambiguous lead, and freely ignores PRT's advice if, in their judgment, security concerns dictate.... PRT's report to Baghdad and Washington about political, economic and security developments in their provinces – an obviously beneficial but rarely discussed function. Senior policymakers and military officials highly value the information they get from the PRTs. On a political level, these officials analyze winners and losers and project trends for political development in their provinces. PRT members also monitor security flashpoints and scout for the military, a particularly useful role in areas where the military has a light footprint. On an economic level, officials in Baghdad said that were it not for the PRTs, they would have little idea of how much money was being spent by Iraqi ministries. (The Iraqi Ministry of Finance, for both technical and political reasons, is unable or unwilling to provide this information, but this information is readily available to the PRTs.) ... PRTs are valuable diplomatic representatives to provincial governments. It is highly unusual, if not completely unprecedented, for the U.S. to have independent diplomatic contacts with such low-level and numerous governmental entities in a foreign country. In the current environment in which many U.S. interests depend on the course of Iraqi political development, it is valuable for the U.S. to have these points of diplomatic contact to nudge Iraqi politics in a direction that serves Washington's interests."³⁷

36 Doreen Muzzi, "Iraq trade deal pleases rice industry", *Farm Press*, 13 March 2004. <http://tinyurl.com/absdp5>

37 Rusty Barber and Sam Parker, "Evaluating Iraq's Provincial Reconstruction Teams While Drawdown Looms: A USIP Trip Report", USIPeace Briefing, December 2008. <http://tinyurl.com/5okaaa>

38 Tom Shanker "Campaign promises on ending war in Iraq now muted", *New York Times*, 3 December 2008. <http://tinyurl.com/cab7jy> (The Pentagon is the military headquarters of the US Department of Defense.)

39 Gareth Porter, "How Obama Lost Control of Iraq Policy", *Agence Global*, 2 January 2009. <http://tinyurl.com/azl36z>


It now seems likely that, under President Obama, the PRTs importance to the US mission will greatly expand. According to a report in the *New York Times* on 3 December 2008, "Pentagon planners" are proposing "relabeling some units, so that those currently counted as combat troops could be 're-missioned', their efforts redefined as training and support for the Iraqis".³⁸ As a result of this ploy, the Pentagon intends to keep as many as 70,000 troops in Iraq beyond 2011, which is the date established in the US–Iraqi Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) for the complete withdrawal of all combat troops. If this ruse goes ahead, the distinction between the military and aid workers will be completely blurred. Moreover, by agreeing to this subversion of SOFA, the US President Obama has, in practice, given up on his electoral pledge to withdraw US combat troops from Iraq within 16 months.³⁹ This is hardly a clean break from the policies of the Bush administration.



It is a huge challenge for farmers to organise in such a setting where choices are limited and where farmers are not themselves in control of their own futures. Both the Oil-for-Food programme, which banned purchase of local produce, and the large-scale importation of food after the invasion when the markets were opened up to cheap imports devastated Iraqi farmers. Moreover, farmers' organisations are now being set up by occupying forces to facilitate their "reconstruction" work. In Iraq, the US Army is directly involved in re-establishing the "farmers' unions" that were formerly under the control of the central government and in using these unions to distribute its aid, such as seeds, pesticides and machinery.⁴⁰

Conclusion

It would be dangerous to see the integration of the US military operations and aid work in Afghanistan and Iraq as an aberration. The same merging of "hard" and "soft" power under the military in Afghanistan and Iraq is happening with US overseas programmes in other parts of the world. For instance, a coalition of US groups has accused the newly launched United States Africa Command, known as AFRICOM, of seeking to bring humanitarian work previously done by the State Department and USAID under the Department of Defense directive, an accusation that AFRICOM denies.⁴¹ But it is hard to deny the overall trend: today the United States spends approximately 30 times more on military operations globally than it does on diplomacy and development under the State Department and USAID. Moreover, the Pentagon now controls more than 20 per cent of US Official Development Assistance.⁴² According to Betty McCollum in the US House of Representatives, the fact that USAID has to have an office of military affairs to communicate with the Pentagon "means that something has gone horribly awry".⁴³

It is essential for people around the world to stop aid being hijacked in this way. Aid policies and practices need to be rethought. Some people are calling for an International Agreement on Aid to make aid real and accountable.⁴⁴ This has to go hand in hand with demanding demilitarisation and an end to the wars in Afghanistan and the occupation of Iraq. No matter how good aid work is, it will not contribute towards genuine reconstruction if it is also being used to reinforce the military interests of the principal donor country and to maintain its hegemonic dominance. 

Going further

Reality of Aid

<http://www.realityofaid.org/>

FACTSHEET: How does food aid work?

<http://www.alertnet.org/thefacts/reliefresources/11268811061.htm>

40 See Erik LeDrew, "Artillery Troopers Plant Seeds of Reconstruction in Iraq", US Dept. of Defense, Defend America, October 2004.

<http://tinyurl.com/bvnbmq>

See also Michael Molinaro, "For Jiff Jaffa farmers, democracy and fertilizer go hand in hand", Operation Iraqi Freedom: Official Website of Multi-National Force - Iraq, 13 September 2006.

<http://tinyurl.com/cnkqsf>

See also Michael Molinaro, "Farmers in Iraq Hold Elections to Select Board", US Department of Defense, Defend America, 18 August 2006.

<http://tinyurl.com/d8w8kb>

41 "AFRICOM: The Militarization of U.S.-Africa Policy Revealed", *Africa Action*, 6 February 2008,

<http://tinyurl.com/atbve3>

and Karen DeYoung, "U.S. Africa Command Trims Its Aspirations", *Washington Post*, 1 June 2008.

<http://tinyurl.com/3mprad>

42 Beth Tuckey, "Congress Challenges AFRICOM," *Foreign Policy in Focus*, 23 July 2008.

<http://www.fpif.org/fpiftxt/5398>

43 Ibid.

44 ActionAid International, *Real Aid - An Agenda for Making Aid Work*, June 2005.

<http://tinyurl.com/dm8loa>



US Army photo: Sgt. David Turner