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She published the below op-ed nine on June 19, and it appeared in print on June 20. Nothing to do with Imran Khan or Pakistan.

Afghanistan's Last Locavores

By PATRICIA McARDLE

Arlington, Va.

MANY urban Americans idealize "green living" and "slow food." But few realize that one of the most promising models for sustainable living is not to be found on organic farms in the United States, but in Afghanistan. A majority of its 30 million citizens still grow and process most of the food they consume. They are the ultimate locavores.

During the 12 months I spent as a State Department political adviser in northern Afghanistan, I was dismayed to see that instead of building on Afghanistan's traditional, labor-intensive agricultural and construction practices, the United States is using many of its aid dollars to transform this fragile agrarian society into a consumer-oriented, mechanized, fossil-fuel-based economy.

In 2004, the Department of Energy carried out a study of Afghanistan. It revealed abundant renewable energy resources that could be used to build small-scale wind- and solar-powered systems to generate electricity and solar thermal devices for cooking and heating water.

Rather than focus on those resources, the United States government has spent hundreds of millions of dollars to build large diesel generators and exploit the country's oil, gas and coal reserves. The drilling of new oil wells may provide unskilled, poorly paid jobs for some locals, but the bulk of the profits will likely flow overseas or into the pockets of a few warlords and government officials.

American taxpayers' dollars are also being used for energy-inefficient construction projects. During my year in Afghanistan, I sat for hours in meetings with local officials in remote mountain and desert locations, sweating or freezing — depending upon the season — inside concrete and cinder-block schools and police stations built with American aid. These projects are required to adhere to international building codes, which do not permit the construction of traditional earthen structures.

These structures are typically built with cob — a mixture of mud, sand, clay and chopped straw molded to form durable, elegant, super-insulated, earthquake-resistant structures. With their thick walls, small windows and natural ventilation, traditional Afghan homes may not comply with international building codes, but they are cooler in summer and warmer in winter than cinder-block buildings. They also last a long time. Some of Afghanistan's oldest structures, including sections of the defensive wall that once surrounded the 2,000-year-old Silk Road city of Balkh, are made of cob and rammed earth. In England, people are still living in cob houses built before Shakespeare was born.

Renewable energy and sustainability aren't just development issues. They are security issues, too. Seventy percent of the Defense Department's energy budget in Afghanistan is spent on transporting diesel fuel in armored convoys. In a welcome attempt to reduce this dangerous and expensive dependence on fossil fuel, the Marine Corps recently established two patrol bases in Afghanistan operating entirely on renewable energy.

Unfortunately, it is too little, too late. Had a renewable energy program been initiated a decade ago, when the United States entered Afghanistan to help overthrow the Taliban, Washington could have saved billions of dollars in fuel costs and, more important, hundreds of lives lost in transporting and guarding diesel fuel convoys.

Along with advocating the construction of a pipeline to carry natural gas from Central Asia, across Afghanistan and into Pakistan, the United States is also helping to fund a 20th-century-style power grid that will compel Afghanistan to purchase the bulk of its electricity from neighboring former Soviet republics for decades to come. Even if this grid survives future sabotage and political unrest in Central Asia, its power lines and transmission towers will be carrying this imported electricity right over the heads of rural Afghans and into Afghanistan's major cities — despite the fact that the United States Central Command has identified the lack of access to electricity in rural areas as a major obstacle to sustaining the gains achieved by our counterinsurgency strategy.

Sustainable development in Afghanistan has taken a back seat to "quick wins" that can be reported to Congress as indicators of success: tractors that farmers can't repair and that require diesel fuel they can't afford; cheaply built schools; and smooth but wafer-thin asphalt, which will never stand up to Afghanistan's punishing climate without costly annual maintenance.

If donor nations dismiss Afghans' centuries of experience in sustainability and continue to support the exploitation of fossil fuels over renewable energy, future generations of rural Afghans will be forced to watch in frustrated silence as the construction of pipelines, oil rigs and enormous power grids further degrades their fragile and beautiful land while doing little to improve their lives.

And long after American forces have departed, it will be these rural farmers, not Afghanistan's small urban population, who will decide whether to support or reject future insurgencies.

Patricia McArdle, a retired foreign service officer and Navy veteran, is the author of the novel "Farishta." She serves on the board of directors of Solar Cookers International.

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