

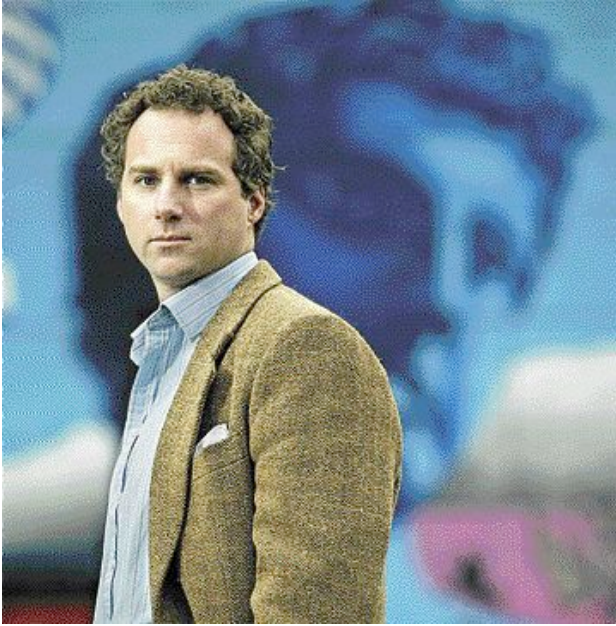
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Linking despair to infrastructure

Canadian nonprofit recognized for assisting post-conflict nations

By Sarah Anderson, The Ottawa Citizen December 16, 2009

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Canadian Scott Gilmore, who founded Peace Dividend Trust, took what his organization learned in East Timor and applied it to the group's first big project, Afghanistan.

Photograph by: Julie Oliver, The Ottawa Citizen, The Ottawa Citizen

A Canadian nonprofit that helps link international aid agencies to local construction companies, food suppliers and labourers has been given a prestigious -- and rich -- American award for its work.

Peace Dividend Trust, which works in East Timor, Haiti and Afghanistan, was founded in 2004 by Ottawan Scott Gilmore. The prize from the Skoll Foundation, more than \$800,000, is to help Gilmore's group expand.

"These are horrific, difficult places to work. Getting even a simple thing done is difficult," he said. "But it is worth the

effort."

Gilmore, once a Canadian diplomat, founded PDT with colleagues working in development in East Timor. They would meet at the end of the day over beers to discuss what was going badly. The consensus was that most of their problems were in the nuts and bolts -- like hiring labour and buying goods to distribute.

Gilmore eventually quit the Canadian foreign service to found PDT.

"The economic challenges these post-conflict nations face are surprisingly similar," Gilmore said. "We took what we'd learned in East Timor and applied it to Afghanistan," the group's first big project.

To make it easier to invest locally in Afghanistan, PDT has created a database of over 4,400 Afghan businesses. So far, this tool -- funded by several aid agencies including the Canadian International Development Agency -- has redirected \$370 million into the Afghan economy and it continues to grow.

Before, these companies and skilled workers were there, but there was no easy way to find them.

"It's widely accepted that economic stability means security," Gilmore said. Involving local workers and suppliers in international aid efforts not only helps revive a damaged economy, but it is also cheaper than importing goods from abroad.

"Our biggest successes have been in changing the procurement practices of aid organizations," he said.

PDT's success in Afghanistan has garnered the official endorsement of the U.S. government: all of its aid organizations are to operate through PDT and to adopt its "Afghan-first" policy, according to a memo from the U.S. ambassador there and top American general Stanley McChrystal.

"It's a major vote of confidence in what we've been trying to do," Gilmore said. It will also mean millions of dollars invested in the Afghan economy and thousands of Afghan jobs.

PDT is funded primarily by Britain, the United States, Canada, Australia and Norway, as well as by the UN and the World Bank.

Gilmore said PDT is one of the only organizations that deals with the dull aspects of aid work, but it is exactly these areas that need the most improvement.

Communication is the next challenge Gilmore wants to take on. In many developing or crisis-stricken areas, it's hard to get the word out about projects that could use local workers.

In some places, too, hostile rumours about aid missions can spread faster than the truth, imperilling workers and their projects.

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