



Counter-Narcotics in Afghanistan: The Failure of Success?

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Overview

November marks the onset of the opium poppy planting season in Afghanistan. Speculation over the scale of cultivation in 2009 also begins in this month. As in previous years, when the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) publishes its annual Rapid Assessment Survey in February, the speculation over the hectareage of opium poppy grown this season will reach a crescendo, dominating coverage in the media and subsequently shaping policy in the coming season. This is all despite the fact that one year's measure of opium area cannot assess trends of long term change nor does it reveal how any change occurred or, therefore, the likely sustainability of that change.

The problems associated with assessing counter-narcotics achievements purely in terms of the hectareage of opium poppy grown are compounded by confusion over attribution. A rise in the level of cultivation leads to counter-narcotics efforts being seen as responsible for the failure of such policies, while a fall in any given year means the label of success is assigned. For example, reductions in the level of cultivation in the north, northeast and central provinces are primarily attributed to successful counter-narcotics efforts.¹ Yet due to an overall rise in global food prices, the more recent decline in opium price, the Government of Pakistan's ban on wheat exports and lower rainfall in Afghanistan, there has been a significant shift away from opium poppy in favour of the terms of trade on wheat. In 2008, farmers in more marginal areas have been able to obtain a greater quantity of wheat for consumption



¹ UNODC, "Afghanistan Opium Poppy Survey, 2008," (Kabul: UNODC/MCN, August 2008), viii.

Acronyms

Afs	Afghanis (Afghan currency)
AGE	anti-government elements
CNPA	counter-narcotics police of Afghanistan
ha	hectare
kg	kilogram
GTZ	German Agency for Technical Cooperation
MCN	Ministry of Counter Narcotics
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

Key Terms

<i>biswa</i>	100 square meters; 20 biswa in 1 jerib
<i>jerib</i>	200 square meters or 1/5 of a hectare

by growing it on their own land than by growing opium to sell and using the proceeds to purchase wheat. As such, environmental and economic factors have played a more significant role in decreasing opium poppy cultivation levels than counter-narcotics policies did.

Over the last decade in Afghanistan, there have been a number of occasions when a significant annual reduction in the level of opium cultivation has not been sustained. The Taliban prohibition of 2001 was seen as a success, as were the 2005 and 2006 reductions in Nangarhar and Balkh. All have been heralded as evidence of successful counter-narcotics efforts. Even now, Nangarhar is once again being cited as a success story despite the deteriorating security situation. As with the return of cultivation in 2002 following the collapse of the Taliban, the 2007 increase in national levels of cultivation following both the resurgence in cultivation in Nangarhar and the deteriorating security situation in the south was viewed as symptomatic of a *failure* of counter-narcotics policy. In 2009, a return to cultivation in the province of Nangarhar or other provinces

identified as “poppy-free” in 2008 is likely to once again bring with it accusations of failure. There is no doubt some will call for the rethinking of counter-narcotics policy, perhaps once again resurrecting demands for the magic bullets of legalisation or aerial eradication.

The top-down, coercive means of imposing reduced cultivation and the subsequent impact on the household and wider economy have also left in their wake a growing discontent among much of the population. Opium poppy bans have often served to consolidate economic and political power in the hands of the relatively resource wealthy, some of whom are involved in the drug trade. The Taliban prohibition of 2001 led to an increase in the farm-gate price of opium, not only encouraging the return to cultivation the following year but also attracting new entrants. When cultivation rebounded in Nangarhar in 2007, it did so in an atmosphere of mistrust, broken promises, economic stagnation and higher opium prices. Addressing the underlying causes of opium poppy cultivation – and thereby delivering sustainable reductions in opium production – becomes much more difficult in such an environment.

Despite the negative repercussions of imposing such significant reductions on opium poppy cultivation over such a short period of time, these efforts are still described as successful. Some governors are individually commended for their efforts when significant reductions in cultivation are achieved and calls are made for other provincial leaders to follow suit.² Development assistance is even allocated based on falling levels of cultivation.³

This inadequate understanding of the reasons for changes in the level of cultivation is perhaps most pronounced in discussions regarding the southern region of Afghanistan. There, high levels of cultivation, despite falling farm-gate prices and particularly low net returns on opium, are blamed on failed counter-narcotics policy rather than a much deeper failure to deliver progress in security, economic growth and governance. This tendency to blame counter-narcotics policy reflects a wider failure of understanding that limits the

² United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), “Afghanistan Opium Poppy Survey, 2007,” (Kabul: UNODC/ Ministry of Counter Narcotics (MCN), October 2007), iii.

³ UNODC, “Afghanistan Opium Poppy Survey, 2008,” viii.

policy debate and constrains the development of more relevant measures of progress. Sustainable reductions in opium poppy cultivation will only be achieved by a wider process of improved security, economic growth and governance, rather than by a distinct and parallel set of more limited counter-narcotics activities whose success or failure is assessed against short term changes in opium poppy area.

The challenge is to define success measures that capture whether reductions in the level of cultivation actually reflect a durable process of movement out of opium poppy, or simply a short-term reaction to political pressures or physical intervention. Reductions in opium poppy area do not necessarily indicate progress if the land previously allocated to opium poppy is grown with wheat one year only to return to opium the next.

Measures of positive changes in security, economic growth and governance – together with declines in hectareage – better reflect a more sustainable shift out of opium poppy cultivation and progress towards the achievement of counter-narcotics outcomes. More appropriate measures for judging progress in the short and medium term might be improvements in rural livelihood security associated with basic security; social protection, including the achievement of food security; and economic growth. Further, it must be recognised that progress against these measures will vary by location, socioeconomic group and time. Those with better access to resources can reduce and ultimately abandon opium poppy more rapidly than those in more remote, resource poor areas that are more and more exposed to risk and uncertainty.

I. The Wrong Kind of Success?

It only takes a short time in Kabul or a brief conversation with many policy makers, journalists or other commentators on Afghanistan in western capitals to hear the statement that “counter-narcotics policy in Afghanistan is failing.” Almost universally, the measure used to justify this assessment is the area of opium poppy cultivation.

Using this crude performance measure, it is easy to see how some might reach the conclusion that counter-narcotics policy in Afghanistan is failing. In 2001, after the Taliban had implemented what is often described as one of the most successful prohibitions on illicit drug crop cultivation in history, opium poppy cultivation stood at an estimated 8,000 hectares (ha).⁴ But immediately after the fall of the Taliban, cultivation bounced

back to 74,000 ha in the 2001-02 growing season and by 2004 had increased, according to UNODC, to an estimated 131,000 ha across all 32 of Afghanistan’s provinces.⁵ Further increases followed, and by 2007, levels of cultivation had reached a record of 193,000 ha (although over fewer provinces and districts). UNODC has estimated a lower level of cultivation in 2008 (157,000 ha) compared to 2007, but cultivated area has increased by almost 20 times over the seven-year period since the Taliban fell and it is by this benchmark that all subsequent efforts continue to be judged.

Describing the Taliban ban and more recent prohibitions in Afghanistan as successes has given the impression that a dramatic reduction in cultivation is something to replicate and should be delivered regardless of its impact on the welfare and security of the rural population. For example, in 2007 the UNODC called for “other Afghan provinces to follow the model of [Balkh],” which had witnessed the collapse of opium poppy cultivation that year, in particular

⁴ Previously, the largest reported reduction in opium poppy cultivation in any one year was in Myanmar in 1987, where 16,279 ha of opium poppy were eradicated by spraying the chemical 2,4-D from fixed wing aircraft. The following year, US data showed an opium cultivation increase from 92,300 ha to 116,700 ha. See: US Department of State, Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, 1988 *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report*, (Washington, D.C.: US Government Printing Office, March 1988).

⁵ The United States Government also produces an estimate of the opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan. The statistics referred to in this paper are those of UNODC.

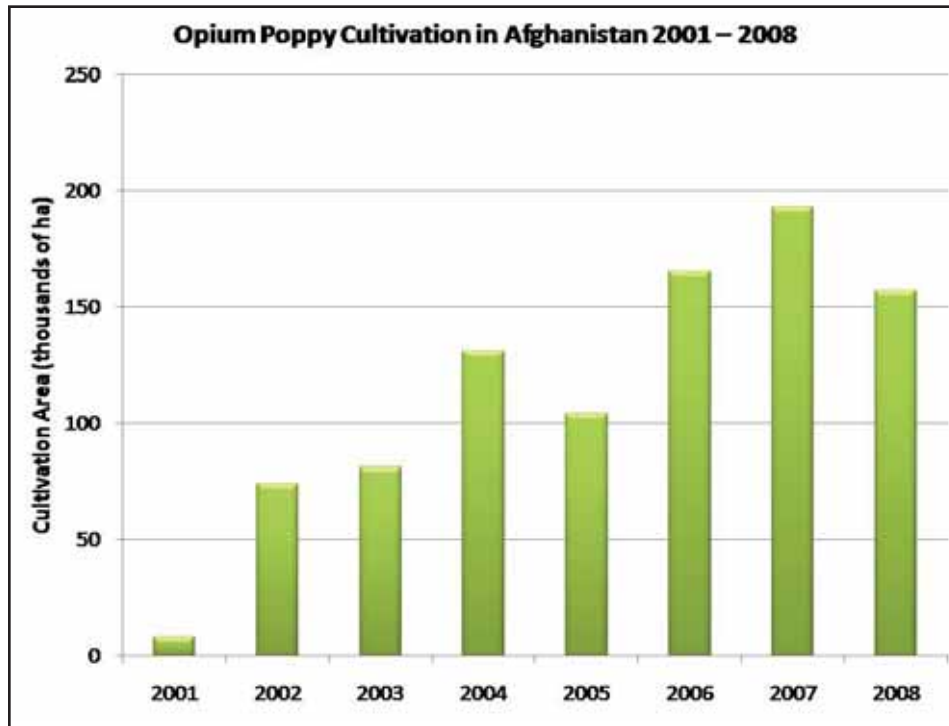
urging Nangarhar and Badakhshan to achieve “zero opium poppy cultivation” for the 2007-2008 growing season.⁶

The use of hectareage as the ultimate measure of performance of counter-narcotics efforts has resulted in success or failure being declared according to annual fluctuations in the level of cultivation in any given year. This gives no sense of why the area grown with opium poppy increased or decreased, or whether these

of development assistance. These have typically reinforced the underlying determinants of opium poppy cultivation and led to poverty, insecurity and resurging cultivation in subsequent years. This research suggests that dramatic reductions in cultivation imposed across a wide geographic area in a single season cannot automatically be labelled successful; rather, they can often prove counterproductive to establishing the necessary security, economic and political conditions required

to address the underlying causes of cultivation. This is a point recognised by the International Development Committee of the United Kingdom parliament⁷ but one that is often ignored by many in the media and some policymakers, both of whom may be keen to show quick results.⁸

The second section explores the confusion in directly attributing reductions in the level of cultivation in the north and centre – the phenomenon of “poppy-free provinces” – and increases in the southern region to counter-narcotics efforts. It argues that other factors are at play and



changes will be maintained into the next year. This paper illustrates the weaknesses of using the area of land allocated to opium as the key indicator by which to judge the success or failure of counter-narcotics efforts to control production and suggests alternative methods by which performance can be measured. The paper is divided into three further sections.

The first section looks at the process and impact of the Taliban ban of 2001 as well as more recent prohibitions on cultivation in Nangarhar in 2005 and 2008 as well as Balkh in 2006. The section draws on in-depth field research that shows these sharp declines in cultivation have been achieved through coercion and false promises

that describing these fluctuations in cultivation in terms of the success and failure of counter-narcotics efforts fails to reflect either the facts on the ground or a clear understanding of what these

⁷ “We believe that expectations that poppy cultivation will be reduced over a short period are misplaced. Given the heavy reliance on poppy cultivation for household income, any enforced dramatic reduction would have significant social, political and economic consequences.” The House of Commons International Development Committee, “Reconstructing Afghanistan,” Fourth Report of Session 2007-08, 1, 48.

⁸ “The full Opium Poppy Survey shows that the cultivation has reduced more than expected thanks to successful counter narcotics efforts in the northern and eastern provinces of Afghanistan.” (Source: UNODC, “Afghanistan Opium Poppy Survey, 2007,” 4.)

⁶ UNODC, “Afghanistan Opium Poppy Survey, 2007,” iii-iv.

counter-narcotic interventions can realistically be expected to deliver.

The third section suggests that (despite the political pressure and perceived convenience of assessing results based on hectareage) there is an urgent need to advance understanding of what success actually looks like and what is required to deliver it. It highlights some of the confusion and misplaced expectations regarding what is currently described as “counter-narcotics.” This naturally leads to outlining the importance of developing a set of indicators that reflect the improvements in security, economic growth and governance that are required to deliver sustainable reductions in opium poppy cultivation. Possible measures

to assess outcomes with respect to livelihood security are given here.

Finally, the paper argues that counter-narcotics needs to be integrated within the wider process of state building and economic development, and not treated as a parallel policy or strand of activity. Ultimately, recognising this and moving away from using hectareage as the ultimate barometer of progress in counter-narcotics will assist in implementing a more effective counter-narcotics strategy; this strategy should be more closely informed by the realities on the ground and less vulnerable to pressure to respond to short term fluctuations in cultivation levels.

II. The Failure of the Taliban Ban and its Successors

There have now been a number of sharp declines in the level of opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan. None have proven durable, yet each in turn has been described as a success. The most significant was that of the Taliban ban announced by decree on 27 July 2000. This called for the complete cessation of opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan. By August 2001, UNODC reported that cultivation in Afghanistan as a whole had fallen from 82,000 ha to 8,000 ha between 2000 and 2001, and – in Taliban controlled areas – had fallen from 78,885 ha to 1,220 ha. At the time this reduction was called “one of the most remarkable successes ever” by United Nations officials⁹ and since then has often been used as a benchmark against which to judge subsequent narcotics efforts.

Since the fall of the Taliban there have been significant reductions in the level of opium poppy cultivation – albeit restricted to specific provinces – which have also been labelled as counter-narcotics successes. The most obvious cases of this are: the 96 percent reduction in the

level of cultivation in the province of Nangarhar between 2004 and 2005 (from 28,000 ha to 1,100 ha); the dramatic reduction in the province of Balkh from 7233 to zero ha between 2006 and 2007, which remained for a second year; and the almost complete elimination of opium poppy in Nangarhar in 2008, following a resurgence in cultivation there in 2007.

Although spanning a larger geographic area, the Taliban ban of 2001 bears many similarities to the subsequent bans imposed on cultivation in the province of Nangarhar in both 2005 and 2008 and in Balkh in 2006. This section compares both the means of and motives for implementing these different bans on cultivation. It assesses the subsequent impact on rural livelihoods, the wider political economy and the security situation as well as levels of opium poppy cultivation the following season. This assessment ultimately challenges the presumption that such dramatic reductions in the level of cultivation are in fact counter-narcotics successes that should be replicated.

Bans on cultivation: Means and motives

The Taliban ban has been lauded as an irrefutable drug control success.¹⁰ Indeed, some who were

⁹ Cited by: Martin Jelsma, “Lessons Learned from the Taliban Ban: A response to ‘Where have all the Flowers Gone? Evaluation of the Taliban Crackdown Against Opium Poppy Cultivation in Afghanistan’ by Graham Farrell and John Thorne.” *The International Journal on Drug Policy* 16, no. 2, (March 2005): 1.

¹⁰ At the time, Bernard Frahi, UNODC Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, referred to the ban as “one of the

critical of the Taliban during their rule have sounded like apologists for the regime by describing the dramatic reduction in opium poppy cultivation achieved under their rule and the subsequent upswing in cultivation that followed their fall. Implicit within this narrative is a critical view of the failure of the post-2001 administration and the international community – most notably the governments of the United States and the United Kingdom – to control the level of opium poppy cultivation to the same extent.

In countering the claim that the Taliban had been successful in implementing counter-narcotics policy, the officials of various governments (including that of Afghanistan) have often focused on the motives for its implementation. They typically suggest that the main rationale for the ban was to raise the farm-gate price of opium and increase the value of any inventory held by senior Talibs or their associates. The evidence behind such claims (and whether this was in fact the primary motive of the ban or an externality) is far from clear. It is likely that the reasons for the prohibition in 2001 are as numerous and divergent as the factions within the Taliban at the time.¹¹

most remarkable successes ever.” Cited in: Jelsma, “Learning Lessons from the Taliban Opium Ban.” in *International Journal on Drug Policy* 16, no. 2, (March 2005): 98.

¹¹ “While the Taliban ‘central government’....may be obstructive to the aims and principles of international organisations, the movement comprises many tiers of influence, not all of which present the same front. The religious authorities in the urban areas of Kabul, Herat, Kandahar and Jalalabad are notoriously more extreme in their interpretation of Talib ‘ideology’ than the authorities in rural areas. Hence many agencies have found that projects which would never be allowed in urban areas, such as home schooling for girls or health and hygiene instruction for women, are perfectly possible in rural parts.” Source: Edward Girardet and Jonathan Walter, *Afghanistan: Essential Field Guides to Humanitarian and Conflict Zones*, (Geneva: Crosslines Communications, 2008), 243. “In many provincial areas, central administrative control was and is still indifferently imposed; policies are unclear; and individual attitudes among local authorities reflect a wide spectrum of personal opinion, from the ultra conservative to moderate. In the cities, hard line conservatives dominate and strict adherence is demanded, although the influence of moderates at lower levels can be detected and even called upon. This has led to frustrating contradictions and inconsistencies.”

Behind the reduction on cultivation associated with the Taliban ban was a complex political process of persuasion, negotiation and coercion determined by local circumstances and the political influence of the tribes involved. The faltering popularity of the Taliban at the time and the fluid nature of the deals struck with specific tribes illustrate just how fragile the Taliban ban was, raising questions over its sustainability and the role that it played in the regime’s eventual downfall.

It should be remembered that, just as they do now, in the late 1990s the Taliban represented a coalition of regional power brokers that ruled largely by consensus.¹² They had largely gained territory through negotiating with regional powerbrokers and they maintained their rule in the same way. Edicts were rarely enforced uniformly, with local circumstances and culture often leading to considerable pragmatism in the interpretation and eventual implementation of policies. In Pashtun areas, the local level *jirga* – the traditional decision making body – still maintained a high degree of autonomy in deciding on matters of concern to the local population.

Furthermore, at the time there was a high level of resentment and dissent against Taliban rule even in Pashtun areas.¹³ As with their predecessors, conscription had made the Taliban increasingly unpopular. Its inability to bring economic stability despite improvements in physical security had led to growing frustration among the population. Incidences of corruption had become more widespread and there had been a number of armed rebellions throughout their rule, even in those districts that are considered to be the heart of Taliban territory, including Arghandab in the province of Kandahar and Kajaki in Helmand.¹⁴

Nancy Hatch Dupree, “Afghan Women under the Taliban,” in *Fundamentalism Reborn? Afghanistan and the Taliban*, ed. William Maley, (Karachi: Vanguard Books, 1998), 146.

¹² See John Butt, “The Taliban phenomenon,” in *Afghanistan: Essential Field Guides to Humanitarian and Conflict Zones*, ed. Edward Girardet and Jonathan Walter, (Geneva: Crosslines Communications, 1998), 26.

¹³ See Ahmed Rashid, “Afghanistan: The Year in Review” in *Eurasia Insight*, (22 January 2001).

¹⁴ At the time of the fieldwork for the Taliban ban, a Taliban commander was killed in the Pacha valley in Achin and the Taliban advised team members not to go to the area. “The

There was little dissent regarding the ban at the time of its announcement in July 2000 or during its implementation. Emphasis was placed on persuading and coercing farmers not to plant in the first place. It was widely held by the Taliban leadership, farmers and many of the development institutions in the country that international development assistance would likely follow the successful implementation of the ban, especially where little had already been provided in response to the ongoing drought and conflict.¹⁵

Responsibility for the implementation of the ban fell to the administrators and security commanders in each district. This approach proved successful. The result was limited eradication with reports suggesting as few as 230 ha of opium poppy destroyed and around 350 people arrested countrywide.¹⁶ Much of this action was in Nangarhar, where the resistance to the ban was greatest. In Nangarhar province, the Shinwari tribe was thought to be pivotal to the successful implementation of the Taliban ban.¹⁷ Not only is the Shinwari tribe large and influential, but its members inhabit some of the lower lying areas which are among the first to be planted. Persuading them not to plant served as an important demonstration effect deterring other tribes within the province from cultivating opium poppy. At the time, reports of payments being made to the elders of the Shinwari tribe to ensure compliance with and enforcement of the ban were commonplace. The Taliban also gave elders from the Shinwari districts preferential access to the international community to make specific requests for assistance.¹⁸

Yet, despite direct compliance with the ban, dissent among the Shinwari tribes was evident

Impact of the Taliban Prohibition on Opium Poppy Cultivation in Afghanistan,” 25 May 2001, (paper prepared for the Donors Mission to Afghanistan, 23 April - 4 May 2001), 28.

¹⁵ Donor Mission, pers. comm., May 2001.

¹⁶ “The Impact of the Taliban Prohibition on Opium Poppy Cultivation in Afghanistan,” 7.

¹⁷ David Mansfield, “The Displacement of Opium Poppy Cultivation: A Shift in the Regional Threat?” (report for the Drugs & International Crime Department of the Foreign & Commonwealth Office, September 2001), 11.

¹⁸ Donor Mission, pers. comm., May 2001.

even in 2001. Demonstrations mounted in Achin district highlighted to the authorities that the support for the ban was by no means unequivocal. Many farmers and individuals in authority within the Shinwari districts (as well as across the province as a whole) indicated that their compliance for a second consecutive year was contingent on the provision of development assistance. Neighbouring tribes, in particular the Khogiani, expressed their discontent at the Shinwari for what they saw as siding with the Taliban and providing the necessary political support for the enforcement of the ban across the entire province.

In the southern provinces of Helmand and Kandahar, the population largely accepted the ban. There were reports of a delegation of tribal elders from Nad-i-Ali visiting Mullah Omar to present their case against the prohibition of opium poppy, but these did not yield a change in position. However, fieldwork during the period of what would normally have been the opium poppy harvest season revealed an underlying resentment toward the authorities that had imposed the ban. Implicit threats were common.

Recent efforts at drug control, such as those in Balkh and Nangarhar, have mimicked the implementation of the Taliban ban of 2001. These efforts have all been implemented prior to the planting season in order to dissuade cultivation from the beginning. Typically, responsibility for the implementation of these more recent bans has also shifted down from the provincial authorities, with ultimate responsibility for low levels of cultivation being delegated to the district authorities. In Balkh, it appears that instructions were sent through provincial government channels to stop cultivation and these carried sufficient force of persuasion.¹⁹ In Nangarhar, tribal structures and representatives were used not only for the delivery of counter-narcotics messages but to serve as a “demonstration effect” to farmers. Tribal *maliks* and *khans* were recruited and convinced not to plant opium poppy; in turn they were to persuade their tribal members to follow suit. While the provincial authorities often

¹⁹ Adam Pain, *Water Management, Livestock and the Opium Economy: The Spread of Opium Poppy Cultivation in Balkh*, (Kabul: AREU, 2007), 35.

promised to provide development assistance to those areas where tribal elders were willing to take on this task, those within the tribe made allegations that direct cash payments were made to their *maliks* and *khans*.

Eradication in these campaigns, as with the Taliban ban, was limited in hectareage and largely restricted to those areas where the authorities need to show strength early on in the season if other districts are to adhere to the ban on cultivation. In Nangarhar, this has typically been the districts of Khogiani and Achin, where resistance to bans on cultivation and to eradication can be organised and violent. Arrests are often made, but typically farmers are held only for a short period until they agree to return to their land and destroy their crop. This proved to be yet another valuable demonstration effect used by the Taliban in 2001.

In addition to the geographic coverage of the bans, a second contrast between these campaigns is in Nangarhar in 2008. Here, the provincial authorities allegedly sought to conflate the counter-narcotics campaign with efforts to deter the activities of anti-government elements (AGE), particularly in the districts of Achin and Khogiani on the Pakistan border.²⁰ While there is often a tendency to blame foreigners for efforts to reduce opium poppy cultivation, there were reports that the provincial authorities in Nangarhar had already inferred that they could draw on foreign military action if required during the eradication season in 2007.²¹ In 2008, raids on household compounds resulted in the confiscation of opium and arrests. These raids as well as claims that United States forces were directly involved in delivering counter-narcotics messages appear to have compounded the perception among the local population that counter-narcotics was the primary purpose of the

²⁰ David Mansfield, "Responding to Risk and Uncertainty: Understanding the Nature of Change in the Rural Livelihoods of Opium Poppy Growing Households in the 2007/08 Growing Season," (report for the Afghan Drugs Inter-Departmental Unit of the UK Government, July 2008).

²¹ David Mansfield, "Water Management, Livestock and the Opium Economy: Resurgence and Reductions: Explanations for Changing Levels of Opium Poppy Cultivation in Nangarhar and Ghor in 2005-2007," (Kabul: AREU, May 2008).

increased United States military presence in key districts in Nangarhar.²²

Ultimately, with each campaign, coercion has been the dominant tool used to deliver the kind of dramatic reductions in cultivation seen during the period of the Taliban ban and, subsequently, in more regional prohibitions in Balkh and Nangarhar. While development assistance has had its role in implementing these bans, it has not typically delivered the necessary improvements in welfare required to support the movement out of opium poppy cultivation. Instead, the promise of assistance has largely been used as leverage by which to negotiate reductions in cultivation with local powerbrokers and the delivery to "backfill" some of the losses experienced as a direct result of the dramatic falls in opium area imposed by the authorities. Not only does this approach run contrary to the Afghan National Drug Control Strategy, but it has also deeply affected the welfare of much of the rural population in these areas and consequently the durability of the reduction in the amount of land grown with opium poppy.

The impact of the bans

Regardless of the means of or motivations behind the Taliban's imposition of the ban, its impact on rural livelihoods and the wider economy is often missed in discussions of its success, as is the role that it subsequently played in establishing the conditions for a rapid rise in cultivation following the Taliban's fall. Not only did the Taliban prohibition lead to the rise in farm-gate prices (increasing from around US\$100 to US\$500 between September 2000 and July 2001), but it also led to an exponential rise in the level of opium denominated debt. Faced with the ban, farmers were unable to repay in opium the advance payments that they had received on their crop. Traders swiftly converted these opium denominated debts into cash at the prevailing market price of US\$500 per kilogram (kg). For these farmers, an advance payment of just US\$50 per kg of opium, agreed prior to the planting season of 2000-01, had risen to a debt of US\$500 per kg at harvest time.

²² Mansfield, "Responding to Risk and Uncertainty," 26.

For those farmers saddled with high levels of accumulated debt, maximising the amount of land they allocated to opium poppy in the next (Fall 2001) planting season was their only means of raising sufficient repayment.²³ For those without debt, the high market price for opium following the ban encouraged them to cultivate. At such high prices, cultivation was taken up even by those in more marginal areas such as the northern and central provinces, where poorer yields would have discouraged cultivation when farm-gate prices had been lower. Following the end of the drought of 2001, these high farm-gate prices and opium denominated debts combined with an increasing availability of wheat, falling food prices and the absence of a national authority that was able to impose its will on the population. It should have been of little surprise, then, that opium cultivation became an attractive option across many parts of Afghanistan following the Taliban's fall in November 2001.

The Taliban ban more widely impacted the economy by leading to increasing levels of rural unemployment. Groups of young men were left idle by the loss of work as itinerant harvesters at a time when there were far fewer wage labour opportunities than there are today. Migration to Pakistan was a common response to the imposition of the ban in both the southern and eastern provinces. The increase in opium denominated debts in areas cultivating opium poppy prior to the ban led to the mortgaging of land and the exchange of daughters as payment for outstanding loans.²⁴

While no one will ever be sure whether the Taliban would have been able (or indeed willing²⁵) to maintain a low level of cultivation for a second year in succession, the pressure to return to cultivation was intense. At the time, senior Taliban leaders recognised the impact the ban had on the

²³ UNODC, "Opium Poppy Cultivation in a Changing Environment: Farmers' Intentions for the 2002/03 Growing Season," strategic study 9, (Kabul, Afghanistan: UNODC, 2004).

²⁴ UNODC, "Opium Poppy Cultivation in a Changing Environment," 22.

²⁵ Particularly, it is uncertain whether the Taliban would have been willing had they not obtained recognition from the General Assembly in October 2001.

population; they saw that a second consecutive year would require a far more draconian approach and would lead to even greater hardship. Mullah Mohammed Hassan Akhunde, Governor of Kandahar and widely considered one of the most influential leaders in the regime, claimed a second year of the ban would be pursued but implementation would require "many people to be killed and others to face starvation."²⁶ The Taliban ban used a combination of negotiation, promises and coercion to bring about a temporary halt in production. The ban subsequently established the socioeconomic conditions for a dramatic rise in the price and level of cultivation, not just in areas where opium poppy had been entrenched for some years but also where cultivation had – until 2001 – been rather marginal. The senior leadership of the Taliban may have hoped that this act would result in the massive flow of development assistance that they needed to show that they could deliver an improvement in the economic prospects of the rural population. This did not materialise, however, and the ban did little to bolster support among the rural population in the strategic Pashtun provinces once the events of September 11th, 2001 unfolded.

In terms of the means of achieving such significant reductions in cultivation, the bans on opium production in Balkh and Nangarhar are comparable to the Taliban ban. Few lessons were learned, though, about the potential impact such bans would have on the livelihoods of the rural population and the wider economy. While it was only possible to analyse the more immediate impact of the Taliban ban in 2001, longitudinal work in Nangarhar between 2005 and 2008 and in Balkh between 2006 and 2008 has allowed a more detailed review of the effect of these latter bans on opium poppy cultivation. In the case of Nangarhar, this work has explained the reasons for the return to widespread opium poppy cultivation in 2007.

The impacts of the bans in Nangarhar and Balkh have differed by location and socioeconomic group. Typically, the loss of on-farm and off-farm income experienced by those involved in

²⁶ He also said the responsibility for this would lie directly with the international community if it failed to deliver sufficient development assistance to the people of Afghanistan. Donor Mission, pers. comm., May 2001.

opium poppy cultivation has been compounded by a wider deflationary impact across the area in which the ban has been enacted. The loss of on-farm income due to the cessation of opium poppy cultivation was exacerbated by the significant loss of wage labour opportunities associated with the opium harvest. The result was a surplus supply of labour seeking employment in provincial centres that in turn had a deflationary effect on wage labour rates.²⁷ In Nangarhar, the fall in disposable income over the period in which the ban was in place caused a downturn in the wholesale, retail and profits of a range of businesses with no direct links to the drug trade, including hotels and general stores. Increasing incidences and levels of debt were also documented in Nangarhar as a consequence of the ban in 2005, although these do not compare with the effect of the monetisation of opium-denominated debt following the Taliban ban in 2001.²⁸



The agricultural cropping response to the Taliban prohibition and the Nangarhar bans of 2005 and 2008 has typically been to replace opium poppy with wheat. In certain, more remote districts in Nangarhar, the size of landholdings and prevailing population densities allow few to be self-sufficient in wheat flour, even if they monocrop wheat.²⁹ Households need to sell crops or labour to meet

²⁷ David Mansfield, "Pariah or Poverty?: The Opium Ban in the Province of Nangarhar in the 2004-05 Growing Season and Its Impact on Rural Livelihood Strategies," German Agency for Technical Cooperation (GTZ) Project for Alternative Livelihoods in Eastern Afghanistan, Internal Document, no. 11, (2005).

²⁸ "The Impact of the Taliban Prohibition on Opium Poppy Cultivation in Afghanistan"

²⁹ In the provinces of Nangarhar, around 71 percent of those interviewed could not produce enough wheat to be self-sufficient even if they monocropped wheat, and only 10 percent could produce a marketable surplus. Mansfield, "Responding to Risk and Uncertainty," 37.

their basic needs. Access to labour markets from districts far from Jalalabad has also been constrained by skills, distance, social networks and the availability of sufficient males of working age. In Nangarhar, while there has been evidence of an expansion in high-value horticultural production between 2005 and 2008, these have only proven to be viable alternatives to opium poppy in districts adjacent to the provincial center (like Kama, Surkhrud and Behsud). In 2007, these districts maintained negligible levels of opium poppy cultivation, even when all the other districts in the province returned to widespread opium poppy cultivation. In 2008, they continued to focus on vegetable production while the rest of the province, experiencing yet another ban on opium production, adopted the time tested response of substituting wheat for opium poppy.

Similarly, in the districts of Chintal and Chahar Bolak in the province of Balkh,³⁰ those households with land located in areas with sufficient water responded to the ban on opium poppy cultivation in 2007 by returning to cotton and melon cultivation, some commercial vegetable production and (in a few locations) an expanded marijuana crop. While they saw a drop in farm income, livelihood security was not threatened. For those households that had derived income from on-farm labour, these employment opportunities dramatically declined, as labour requirements for cotton and marijuana are considerably less than those for opium. This led to a decline not only in on-farm labour opportunities but also in the wage rate paid for it in cash or kind.

Households that had achieved livelihood security from on-farm labour on opium appear to have lasted out 2007 by drawing on a combination

³⁰ See Adam Pain, *Water Management, Livestock and the Opium Economy: "Let Them Eat Promises": Closing the Opium Poppy Fields in Balkh and its Consequences*. (Kabul: AREU, December 2008).

of finding limited amounts of on-farm labour on wheat and cotton, looking for urban employment, and selling reserves of opium and nonessential assets like livestock that had been built up during the opium years. As in the Taliban and Nangarhar bans, many downstream, landless households in Balkh responded to the ban by migrating.

As in the rest of Afghanistan, the long, hard winter of 2007-08, followed by a dry spring, has had a harsh impact on the rural economy of Balkh. Livestock herds were directly affected by the cold and livestock losses ranged from 20 to 70 percent of household livestock holdings. The dry spring combined with the freezing of irrigation water during the early part of the year has led to a reduction in wheat yields, both upstream and downstream, where much of the wheat crop has failed. Fodder is in short supply and prices have risen. Downstream households with livestock, impacted by scarce and expensive fodder and acute water shortage (even for livestock), must also cope with falling livestock prices. Since last year, prices for sheep and goats have effectively dropped by 50 percent or more (from about 3000-4000 Afs per animal last year). At the same time there is little work available in Mazar, either on farm or off farm, and more households have looked for such work, meaning that wage rates have declined from an upper level of US\$10 per day two years ago to US\$2-3 per day. Grain prices have doubled or more than doubled over the last six months. Households have therefore been hit by an acute decline in terms of trade and have had to move quickly into a range of coping strategies including asset disposal, reduction in food consumption and migration. An estimated of 70 to 80 percent of labour from downstream villages are reported to have migrated to Iran and complete households are also leaving villages.

In short, the rural economy in Balkh has collapsed for those households in downstream positions. This collapse cannot be directly attributed to the closure of the opium poppy economy, given the subsequent hard winter and the rise in grain prices. The effects of the closure in reducing the reserves of poor households, though, has made these households extremely vulnerable to the effects of the subsequent shocks. Upstream households have also been affected, particularly those dependent on wage and in-kind payments for labour. The second crop of cotton in upstream areas has also been reduced in area.

The question remains as to whether Balkh is likely to see a resurgence of opium poppy cultivation next year, given the collapse in the opium economy. A direct comparison with Nangarhar's history of cultivation indicates it might be possible, but the conditions are different. The social divisions (based on ethnic identity) are probably much greater in Balkh than they are in Nangarhar. Power is held upstream by key villages and social groups that are in relatively well-resourced positions (comparable to the locations closer to Jalalabad in Nangarhar) and that have not been pushed into the degree of livelihood insecurity that downstream villages and households have. The key question is how long patronage networks will ensure that such villages are willing to maintain the ban on cultivation. Poppy cultivation is highly unlikely to restart downstream, but if upstream villages start cultivation again, then so will downstream locations where water is available. It is difficult to see the outcome of the opium poppy ban in Balkh as anything but a reinforcement of existing structures and patterns of inequality. This can hardly be claimed as success.

In 2008, the province of Nangarhar has once again seen a dramatic reduction in opium poppy cultivation. While UNODC has declared the province "poppy free" for the first time since the organisation has monitored levels of cultivation in Afghanistan,³¹ there is some debate over whether this is unprecedented.³² Many farmers in the province, even in the most remote areas, compare the low level of cultivation with that of the year of the Taliban prohibition, where there were as few as 200 ha of land under opium production.³³ Regardless of the final level of cultivation in the province, the 2008 ban in Nangarhar could not have been implemented at a worse time. Soaring wheat prices have left many households facing the escalating costs of meeting their wheat deficit despite allocating as much as 95 percent of their land to wheat. For example, in May 2008, a household with a deficit of two metric tonnes would have needed to spend US\$1400 to

³¹ UNODC, "Afghanistan Opium Poppy Survey, 2008," vii and 5.

³² The United States Government estimated that 265 ha of opium were produced in Nangarhar in 2008.

³³ Fieldwork by David Mansfield, April and October 2008 (forthcoming report for AREU).

purchase the wheat they required just to meet their consumption requirements.³⁴ The same amount of wheat would have cost around US\$480 in May 2007 or the equivalent of 3 kg of opium at the time. It is not only wheat that has seen such a dramatic increase in prices; other basic goods such as cooking oil, fuel and meat have all seen significant increases in price over the last year.³⁵

The impact of the significant increase in the price of food, transport and other goods and services has been compounded by lower precipitation and – in some of the drier areas, like Chapahar and the upper areas of Shinwar, Surkhrud and lower Khogiani – failing crops. The fall in the price of white onions from 2006 to 2007 and the huge losses some traders incurred have also left many vegetable traders unwilling to travel to the farm-gate and offer advance payments on these crops as they had in previous years. The loss of wage labour opportunities associated with the opium poppy harvest has not only reduced off farm income opportunities but has had a deflationary impact on non-farm income opportunities in the city of Jalalabad. While migration to Pakistan is still a possibility for those households with a sufficient number of working-age males, changes in the rules governing the residence of Afghan nationals in Pakistan have meant that those without a Pakistani identity card ordinarily have to pay bribes to secure employment across the border.

The political and security response that was seen to evolve over a two year period following the 2005 ban in Nangarhar is unfolding far more rapidly in 2008. Tribal elders who were previously instrumental in the implementation of the ban in the early part of the 2007-08 growing season became the subject of rumours that they had been secretly paid by the governor in April 2008. Some responded by publicly stating their opposition to the ban and the provincial authorities. Agreements to limit the passage of AGE though the Shinwari district of Achin bordering Pakistan were also reportedly rescinded. By July 2008, there were

³⁴ Mansfield, “Responding to Risk and Uncertainty,” 37-38.

³⁵ Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock, General Department of Policy and Planning, Marketing, Economics and Statistics Division. “Agricultural Commodity Price Bulletin,” year 4, 10, (Kabul: 15 October 2008).

reports of AGE presence in the upper parts of Achin, Nazian, Pachir Wa Agam and Dur Baba;³⁶ by September 2008, there was an increasing number of direct attacks on the district centres. There have been claims that individuals in the upper areas of those districts neighbouring the Pakistan border have been assured that they can grow opium poppy in 2008-09 and that some have “invited” AGE into the area in response.

In the third quarter of 2008, there were reports of armed AGE permanently residing in key districts along the southern border of Nangarhar as well as maintaining increased presence during daylight hours in other districts across the province.³⁷ By September and October 2008, there were reports of Taliban checkpoints in districts like Chapahar and Khogiani and even on the Jalalabad-to-Kabul road. Rumours also began regarding the return of Haji Zaman to Khogiani,³⁸ the Taliban announcing Eid in the district centre and the distribution of “night letters” in Bati Kot and Surkhrud threatening attacks on those employed by the government or sending their daughters to school. All this has added to a general sense of uncertainty within the province, with many farmers delaying planting this November to see whether the government has the capacity to prevent cultivation. Real concerns exist that,

³⁶ Fieldwork by Mansfield, April and October 2008 (forthcoming report for AREU).

³⁷ The Afghanistan NGO Safety Office Report, no. 11, (1-15 October 2008), 8.

³⁸ Haji Zaman is a commander from the district of Khogiani. In 2001, he was appointed police chief of Jalalabad and was subsequently expelled from Afghanistan after his alleged involvement in the bombing of former Defence minister Fahim’s convoy in that city in April 2002. His brother Haji Aman Kheri is accused of involvement in the murder of Haji Abdul Qadeer, former Nangarhar Governor (2001-2002), Vice President, brother of Haji Din Mohammed (Governor of Nangarhar from 2002-2005) and rival of Haji Zaman. Haji Aman Kheri was subsequently arrested in 2007. It is thought that Haji Zaman has not been in Afghanistan for two years. See: The International Crisis Group (ICG), “Afghanistan: The Problem of Pashtun Alienation,” *ICG Asia Report*, no. 62, (Kabul/Brussels: ICG, 5 August 2003), 23; and James Risén, “Afghanistan: Reports Link Karzai’s Brother to Heroin Trade,” *New York Times* (5 October 2008).

should they choose to ban opium production for a second consecutive year, particularly in light of high food prices and signs of continuing drought, the security situation is likely to deteriorate even further in 2009.³⁹

Consequently, as with the Taliban prohibition, the dramatic reductions in cultivation achieved in the post-2001 Balkh and Nangarhar have been followed by increasing political and economic insecurity. In Nangarhar, the potential for increases in the level of cultivation in 2008-2009 are particularly high, and Balkh is not immune given the particularly hard winter the population has experienced and

the failure of the wheat crop. Much will depend on first, whether the Governments of Pakistan and Kazakhstan elect to continue their ban on wheat exports and, second, the prevailing security situation in the two provinces. Given these conditions, it would seem difficult to claim that these respective bans on cultivation are counter-narcotics successes. Instead, they would appear to be more short term reductions in cultivation that are impossible to sustain and ultimately contribute to creating an environment that can prove counterproductive for those attempting to support farmers in a more durable and systematic transition out of opium poppy cultivation.

III. Confusing Correlation and Causality?

Historical data in Afghanistan shows that dramatic reductions in opium poppy cultivation in one year can be achieved but they are typically followed by a dramatic increase the next. Proclaiming counter-narcotics success based on a reduction in the level of opium poppy cultivation in a single year and attributing this to counter-narcotics efforts both is premature and reflects a fundamental failure to understand the different determinants of cultivation and how these vary by location and socioeconomic group.

The current story explaining changes in cultivation in the northern, central and southern regions of the country illustrates the problem of attribution. Significant weight is placed on counter-narcotics production control efforts as the driver of both the success of the rising number of “poppy free” provinces in the north and centre of the country and the failure of increasing concentrations of opium production in the south of the country.⁴⁰ The evidence of causality, however, seems far from clear. This section examines the underlying causes of the changing patterns of cultivation in these different parts of the country to establish whether such counter-narcotics efforts are truly the determining factor.

³⁹ Nangarhar fieldwork, pers. comm., October 2008.

⁴⁰ See UNODC, “Afghanistan Opium Poppy Survey, 2007,” iii; UNODC, “Afghanistan Opium Poppy Survey, 2008,” vii and 4; “Is Afghanistan a Narco State?” *New York Times Magazine*, 27 July 2008.

Increases in the number of “poppy-free” provinces

This year there has been an increase in the number of poppy-free provinces,⁴¹ up from 13 in 2007 to 18 in 2008. Many attribute this decline in opium area to the counter-narcotics efforts of the government.⁴² In some provinces, such as Balkh, the actions of the governor have been instrumental in eliminating cultivation; in other, more marginal provinces, though, is there evidence to support similar claims? It would certainly seem counter-intuitive that at a time when insecurity is increasing across the country, even in the northern and central regions, reductions in cultivation can be attributed primarily to farmers responding to the counter-narcotics efforts of a government whose power is becoming increasingly limited. In some areas, announcements banning opium poppy may have been made and limited eradication may have taken place later in the season. Are these, though, really the main driving force behind such low levels of cultivation in many of these provinces?⁴³ An alternative hypothesis is that

⁴¹ Defined as less than 100 ha: see UNODC, “Afghanistan Opium Poppy Survey, 2007,” 11.

⁴² UNODC, “Afghanistan Opium Poppy Survey, 2007,” 11.

⁴³ In 2007, Balkh, Bamyán, Ghazni, Khost, Kunduz, Logar, Nuristan, Paktika, Paktya, Panjshir, Pawran, Wardak and Samangan were reported as poppy-free by UNODC. In 2008, Ghor, Jawzjan, Nangarhar, Sari Pul and Takhar were added to the list of provinces estimated to be cultivating less than

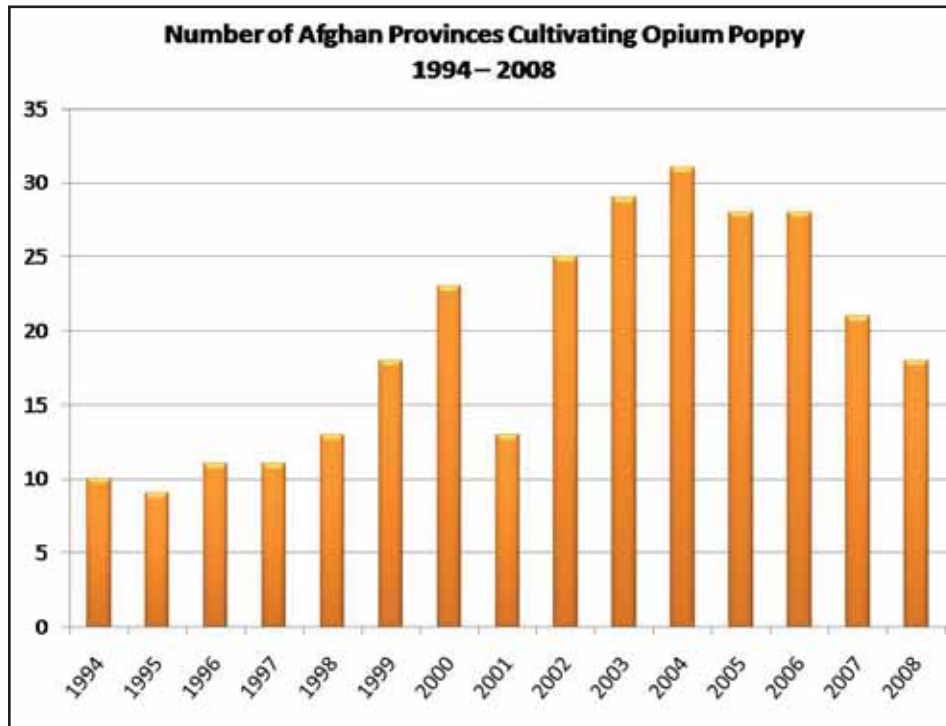
these events constitute a return to the opium prices of (and subsequently a similar geographic spread as in) the 1990s (see Figures 2 and 3). Many of those in provinces that increased cultivation in response to the exponential increase in the price of opium will likely mirror the Taliban ban, abandoning the crop in 2007 and 2008 in favour of wheat, migration to Iran and – where possible – investments in livestock. In fact, with prices as low as US\$60 per kg, opium poppy would no longer

they could have cultivated wheat instead. In districts like Chaghcharan in Ghor province, numerous farmers report that they already regret allocating even the small amounts of land that they dedicated to opium poppy this year.⁴⁵

In the two Ghor districts of Chaghcharan and Dawalat Yar, where opium poppy cultivation persists in 2008, it does so due to a lack of alternative sources of cash income. Typically, those

without livestock (many of those in Ghor lost between 40 and 80 percent of their herds during this year's winter) or those without sons of an age to travel to Iran illegally and find work continue to cultivate opium poppy. Some reported only cultivating a small amount of opium poppy on their irrigated land when they saw that their rainfed land was only going to produce a particularly low wheat yield, if it produced at all.

The real test of the success of the counter-narcotics efforts will be what happens if there is an increase in the price of opium and,



seem viable in the drier central and northern provinces where the local population does not have the requisite skills and where the primary market for opium, in the south of the country, is such a long distance away.⁴⁴

This season's dramatic increase in wheat prices will certainly have led many in these areas to question the efficacy of cultivating a crop that obtains such low yields at such low prices when

perhaps more importantly, a shift in the terms of trade between opium and wheat. For example, last year one kilogram of opium sold during the harvest season in Ghor would have purchased around 250 kg of wheat. During the winter of 2008, when wheat prices were at their peak, the same amount would have purchased only 60 kg of wheat.⁴⁶ However, with the incidence of disease that has hit the opium crop in the province and subsequent opium yields of only 1-2 kg per jerib, it now makes more sense to cultivate wheat and

100 ha of opium poppy.

⁴⁴ Adam Pain, *Opium Trading Systems in Helmand and Ghor*, (Kabul: AREU, 2006); Bill Byrd and Olivier Jonglez, "Prices and Market Interactions in the Opium Economy," in *Afghanistan's Drugs Industry: Structure, Functioning, Dynamics and Implications for Counter Narcotics Policy*, ed. Doris Buddenberg and William Byrd, (Vienna and Washington, D.C.: UNODC/World Bank, 2006).

⁴⁵ The largest fields seen in the districts of Chaghcharan and Dawlat Yar in July 2008 were half a jerib. The majority of fields were around 1-5 biswa.

⁴⁶ The price of opium at the beginning of the harvest season in Ghor in 2008 was 2500 Afs/kg; the price of wheat was 38 Afs/kg.

obtain between 350 and 500 kg per jerib than to grow opium poppy to sell and purchase only 60 to 120 kg of wheat.

Some of the drier more marginal opium producing provinces in the north, such as Badghis, Faryab and Samangan, are likely to have seen similar shifts in cultivation this year. These shifts are in response to increasing wheat prices and lower opium prices and yields. Similar shifts will likely occur in those provinces with larger areas of rainfed land, such as Badakhshan.

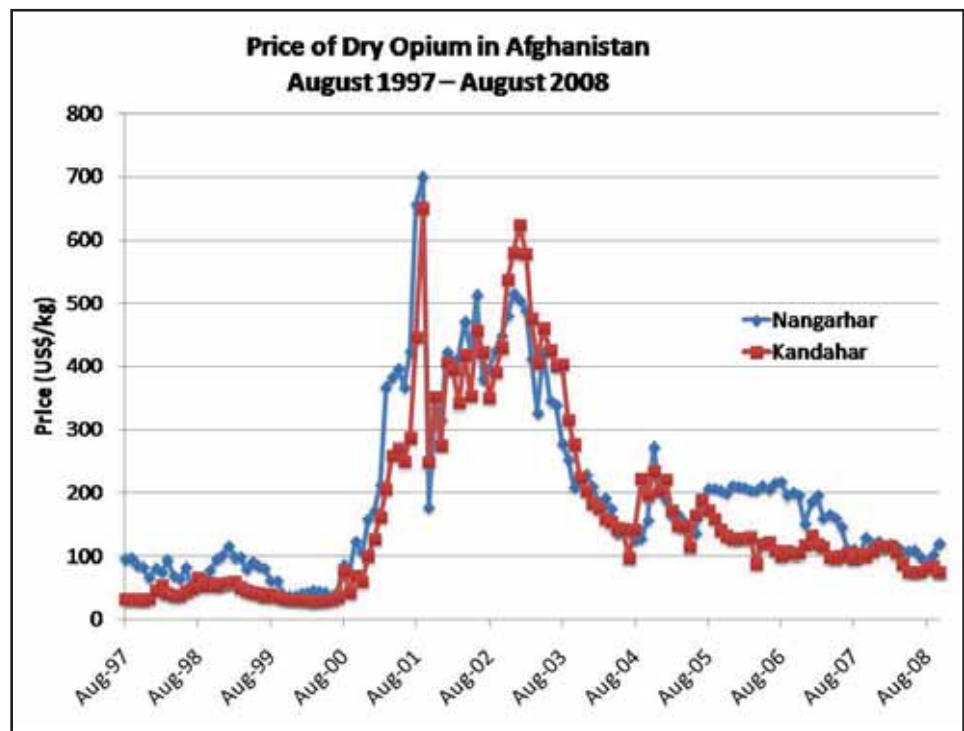
What remains unclear upon entering the 2008-09 planting season is whether these areas could sustain their poppy-free status or low levels of cultivation were the terms of trade on opium poppy and food crops or livestock to change? Certainly, if there were a reversal in the trend in opium and wheat prices, the provincial authorities would need to be far more robust in their counter-narcotics efforts than they have been in Ghor this year to reduce levels of cultivation and earn a payment under the Good Performers Initiative. Furthermore, it is unclear whether the provincial authorities would be willing or able to respond to a return to opium poppy, particularly in light of deteriorating security and the risk of losing additional rural support in the run up to the 2009 elections in Afghanistan.

Concentration in the southern provinces

In the southern provinces, opium poppy cultivation appears to be continuing unabated and counter-narcotics policy comes under its strongest accusations of failure in the international press and by organisations like the Senlis Council.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ See publications by the Senlis Council (now known as the International Council on Security and Development), and in particular: "Afghanistan – Decision Point 2008," (London:

While some districts may show reductions in the level of cultivation in 2008 as households respond to the increase in wheat prices, these decreases are typically offset by increases in others. In fact, with the reductions in opium poppy cultivation in the northern, central and eastern regions as described above, as much as 98 percent of total cultivation in Afghanistan in 2008 is concentrated in the south and southwestern provinces of Nimroz, Farah, Kandahar, Helmand and Zabul.



Perhaps most surprising is the continuation of high levels of cultivation in the south at a time when the net returns on opium poppy are at their least attractive for some years. In 2007, dry opium prices were as low as US\$100 per kilogram, and wage labour rates were as high as 1000 Afs. By harvest 2008, prices had fallen as low as US\$63 for fresh opium, wage labourers received one quarter of the final crop and the net returns on opium poppy were around US\$1000 per ha,⁴⁸ compared

Senlis Council, February 2008) 50; Paul Burton "Don't Destroy Afghan Opium Poppies – Use Them to Cultivate Peace," *The Scotsman*, (8 January 2008).

⁴⁸ This assumes inputs for one jerib (one fifth of one hectare) of 4 kg seed at zero cost, 2 hrs of tractor hire at 500 Afs/hr, 2x50 kg bags of DAP at 1500 Afs/bag and 2 50 kg bags of urea at 1200 Afs/bag and labour costs during the harvest of one quarter of the final crop. It also assumes a

to a potential US\$2100 for wheat.⁴⁹ This raises the question as to why opium poppy cultivation remains at such a high level in the south under such unfavourable prices?⁵⁰

Some favour an explanation of “greed,”⁵¹ suggesting – despite evidence to the contrary – that the farmers in the south are driven more by profit than those in other parts of the county and seek to add to existing wealth.⁵² However,

yield of 8.4 kg per jerib at a value of 3150 Afs/kg and 490 kg of seed with a value of 10 Afs/kg. Further costs of the *ushr* tax (at 10 percent) are included. Were the cost of a bribe to be included at 6000 Afs/jerib, net returns could fall as low as US\$680 per hectare

⁴⁹ This assumes inputs for one jerib (one fifth of one hectare) of 30 kg of seed at zero cost, 1 hrs of tractor hire at 500 Afs/hr, 0.5x50 kg bags of DAP at 1500 Afs/bag and 1.5 50 kg bags urea at 1200 Afs/bag. It also assumes a yield of wheat grain of 500 kg per jerib at a value of 33.3 Afs/kg and 1000 kg of wheat straw at a value of 10 Afs/kg.

⁵⁰ This contrasts with comparisons on the gross returns between opium poppy and wheat. For example, “The revenue from licit crops has improved in absolute terms and relative terms. The gross income ratio of opium to wheat (per ha) in 2007 was 10:1. This year it has narrowed to 3:1.” UNODC, “Afghanistan Opium Poppy Survey, 2008,” viii. Comparing gross returns on wheat (and here it is not clear whether UNODC includes the use or exchange value of wheat straw or solely focusses on wheat grain) and poppy is misleading given the significant difference in labour inputs for the two crops with opium poppy requiring as much as 360 person days per hectare compared to only 54 for wheat.

⁵¹ UNODC, “Afghanistan Opium Poppy Survey, 2007,” iii; United States Government Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, “United States Government, Counter Narcotics Strategy for Afghanistan,” (August 2007), 53.

⁵² Confusion on this issue is often associated with the use of income as the measure for poverty. (See UNODC, “Is Poverty Driving the Afghan Opium Boom?” (discussion paper, March 2008), 9. “Of course the most direct way to determine whether opium poppy cultivators are poorer than other farmers is to compare income figures for both groups.” However, the Human Development Index uses income as only one indicator within the overall estimate, while the Human Poverty Index focuses on literacy, life expectancy, access to an improved water source and the percentage of children who are underweight for their age (see Afghanistan Human Development Report 2007, 154). The

physical insecurity in the southern provinces is at its worst for over a decade. It is a rare day when there is not a violent incident involving death or injury in the provinces of Kandahar⁵³ and Helmand. The impact of such high levels of insecurity should not be underestimated. It has led not only to deaths and injuries, but has also limited the potential for economic growth and employment, and reduced access to economic infrastructure and social services in many parts of the region. For example, fourteen health posts in Helmand province are closed due to concerns over safety of the staff.⁵⁴ In Kandahar, agricultural extension services are limited to only eight of the seventeen districts in the province; even in those districts that do receive some support, coverage is far from comprehensive due to the prevailing security situation.⁵⁵

Much more importantly, the predatory behaviour of corrupt officials and the proliferation of checkpoints and “nuisance taxes” that beset the *mujahideen* and fuelled the Taliban’s rise to power in the mid 1990s have returned. Consequently, the cost of travelling one kilometre in the south is three times that of travelling the same distance in the eastern, central or northern regions, making transporting legal agricultural crops to market cost-prohibitive.⁵⁶ For those who choose to travel on the roads, violence, intimidation

National Rural Vulnerability Analysis assesses poverty from a multidimensional perspective and based on 2005 data places Helmand as the 29th poorest of the 34 provinces (cited in Azerbaijani, et al, “Poverty, Gender and Social Exclusion Analysis,” in *Understanding Afghanistan*, forthcoming paper for DFID, 9 and 23). For a further discussion of the confusion over poverty and poppy cultivation as well as some of the data issues. See David Mansfield and Adam Pain, *Evidence from the Field: Understanding Changing Levels of Opium Poppy Cultivation in Afghanistan*, (Kabul: AREU, 2007).

⁵³ An official in the military reports (only) two days in the last ten months where a violent incident has not been reported in the province of Kandahar. Pers. comm., July 2008.

⁵⁴ See IRIN, “Afghanistan: Insurgency, insecurity threaten health progress,” <http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=79396>.

⁵⁵ Key informants in southern Afghanistan, pers. comm., February and April 2008.

⁵⁶ Mansfield, “Responding to Risk and Uncertainty.”

and extortion from state and non-state actors becomes the rule not the exception.

Under these circumstances, opium poppy has become the preferred crop – a low risk crop in an exceptionally high-risk environment. It is a high-value, low-weight, non-perishable crop. The crop allows farmers to remain in their villages and sell at the farm rather than risking travel to the district, provincial or regional markets to sell, potentially at a price that does not meet the costs of production. While the Taliban would appear to be actively encouraging cultivation for both political and financial advantages, they would also appear to be “pushing on an open door.” The incidence of corruption has not only constrained the functioning of markets for a range of goods and services including crops and labour; it has also increased the impression that cultivation is tolerated – if not encouraged – by corrupt government officials.

There is a growing impression in the south that those working for the government are more actively involved in the trade in narcotics than the Taliban,⁵⁷ suggesting that a credible counter-narcotics and counter-insurgency strategy would involve the removal of some of the government’s most senior representatives in the south. Many in the south argue that such an approach would not only make a dent in the narcotics trade but would also increase the rural population’s support for the government.⁵⁸

Given the causal factors of conflict, poor governance and poverty, it is misplaced to lay the increase in opium poppy cultivation in the south solely at the door of a “failed” counter-narcotics policy. While the Taliban prohibition of 2001 and subsequent bans illustrate how production and trade in opiates can exacerbate conflict and poor governance, counter-narcotics efforts that pursue dramatic reductions in opium poppy cultivation



when there are no viable alternatives in place can bring about similar results. This tendency to assess the success or failure of counter-narcotics efforts simply using the headline annual levels of cultivation has led to confusion over correlation and causality.

In summary, the claims that counter-narcotics efforts are responsible for reductions in cultivation – “success” – in the north and centre of the country and increases in cultivation – “failure” – in the south of Afghanistan are misplaced. In some cases, reductions are simply the consequence of the change in the comparative returns on agricultural crops and the poor environmental conditions for opium production, as is the case in some of this year’s poppy-free provinces. In other cases, increases in cultivation that are typically described as counter-narcotics failures, such as the concentration of cultivation in the southern provinces, are the result of a far more systematic failure to deliver improved security, economic development and governance.

Using the amount of land grown with opium poppy as the key indicator by which to judge counter-narcotics efforts highlights a confusion not only regarding what success might look like but what is actually required to achieve it. Even now, there is a tendency to see changes in opium poppy cultivation as the outcome of a separate strand of activities with their own distinct counter-narcotics budget, primarily made up of interdiction, eradication, information campaigns and so-

⁵⁷ Mansfield, “Responding to Risk and Uncertainty.”

⁵⁸ Key informants in southern Afghanistan, pers. comm., February and April 2008.

called alternative livelihoods interventions. Sustained decline in opium poppy area depends on far too many other factors, most importantly as an outcome of improvements in security, economic growth and governance. As such, counter-narcotics will always be seen to fail as

long as it is: conceptualised and implemented in such a limited way, undertaken parallel to (rather than as part of) wider development and if interventions are assessed against an indicator which is claimed to measure more than it actually does.

IV. The Way Forward

It is widely recognised that the drug economy penetrates the political and economic fabric of Afghanistan.⁵⁹ The recent arrest of Haji Juma Khan⁶⁰ and the prosecution of Haji Noorzai⁶¹ in the United States highlight some of the progress being made in other areas of counter-narcotics policy. Yet levels of cultivation still appear to be the ultimate barometer of performance across the spectrum of the counter-narcotics effort. The blind pursuit of the short-term success of reductions in hectareage of opium poppy across entire provinces or regions ignores the diversity of resources and circumstances experienced by those involved in its cultivation, and is counterproductive. The use of hectareage as a measure of performance and the attribution of any changes in cultivation in any given year to counter-narcotics efforts are based on a failure to understand what is required to deliver sustainable reductions in opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan. Two actions are required: the first is to fully integrate counter-narcotics into the wider development agenda, preventing it from being seen as a separate and

distinct strand of activities; secondly (and linked to the first), better measures of progress are needed.

Rescuing counter-narcotics from itself

There has been a tendency to see counter-narcotics efforts as synonymous with interdiction, eradication, information campaigns and alternative livelihoods interventions – all areas that are action-oriented and specifically labelled as counter-narcotics. This limited understanding of what constitutes effective counter-narcotics policy leads to an expectation that such interventions on their own will directly lead to the reduction in the production of opium. They cannot.

What are currently regarded as counter-narcotics activities are necessary – but not sufficient – to reduce the level of opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan. Isolating counter-narcotics efforts has given some in the drug-control community the illusion of control as well as the budget and policy lead; it has also given many in the development community the opportunity to avoid involvement in the issue, for fear of “contaminating” their programmes. This kind of approach has led those that see their primary aim as reducing opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan to push for the kind of effects seen in Nangarhar and Balkh and risk undermining the longer-term development effort in Afghanistan. Neither the drug-control community nor development actors have benefited from this artificial separation.

The reality is that counter-narcotics success can only come as an outcome of a wider process of state building and economic development. A combination of interventions is required to reduce the livelihood insecurity that led to increasing levels of opium poppy cultivation in the first place. Many of these interventions will be outside

⁵⁹ “The sheer size and nature of the opium economy means that it infiltrates and seriously affects Afghanistan’s economy, state society and politics. The opium economy is a massive source of corruption and gravely undermines the credibility of the government and its local representatives.” Christopher Ward, David Mansfield, Peter Oldham and Bill Byrd, “Afghanistan: Economic Incentives and Development Initiatives to Reduce Opium Production,” (report for the World Bank and Department for International Development, February 2008), 1.

⁶⁰ “Afghan Drug Kingpin Charged With Financing Taliban Terrorist Insurgency,” News Release no. 202-307-7977, (DEA Public Affairs, 14 October 2008).

⁶¹ “Top Taliban Associate and Former Mujahideen Warlord Found Guilty of Heroin Trafficking,” News Release no. 212 337-2906, (DEA Public Affairs, 24 September 2008).

what is so often described as counter-narcotics activity or strategy.

Sustained improvements in rural livelihood security require a coordinated effort to deliver security and development interventions. Investments in rural development alone cannot deliver these or produce sustained reductions in opium poppy cultivation. For example, interventions aimed at improving access to public goods and services, social protection and diversifying on-farm, off-farm and non-farm income will falter if security and governance are not improved. Corruption, insecurity and ineffective government institutions hamper the functioning of both agricultural commodity and labour markets, which in turn constrains licit livelihood options. The presence of AGE can prevent the delivery of all but the most limited development assistance.

The Government of Afghanistan has recognised that the production, trade and consumption of opium and its derivatives poses a significant threat to the country's overall development. It has also recognised that no single project or programme can address the multiple factors that have led to the expansion of opium poppy cultivation and that a more concerted and comprehensive effort is required. Evidence in other drug-crop-producing countries, as well as in Afghanistan, points to the fact that the combination of security, economic growth and governance is needed to deliver the development impact that will reduce overall dependency on opium poppy cultivation.⁶²

There are a range of government activities designed to directly tackle the narcotics issue in Afghanistan, including: law enforcement efforts, such as support to the Counter Narcotics Police of Afghanistan (CNPA); institutional strengthening for the Ministry for Counter Narcotics (MCN); and demand-reduction efforts. All of these, though, require a wider institutional framework and more integrated approach to be both effective and sustainable. For example, interdiction efforts require investments in the judicial system to result in successful prosecution; demand-reduction efforts need to operate within a functioning

health system to address the underlying causes of drug use while avoiding high rates of recidivism; and the MCN has to operate within a coherent government ministerial structure and a wider programme of public administrative reform to be able to deliver effective leadership on counter-narcotics.

There are also many other interventions not specifically aimed at reducing the production, trade or consumption of illicit drugs in Afghanistan that will nevertheless make significant contributions to delivering drug control outcomes. Many of the interventions that are anticipated to have a less direct effect on the drug-control effort relate to rural livelihoods interventions; programmes in sectors such as transport, public works and vocational training could also contribute to reducing the threat that narcotics poses to Afghanistan's development.

Within this framework there are few projects or programmes that should be considered discrete, stand-alone counter-narcotics interventions and none that would result in the elimination of either the production, consumption or trade of illegal drugs. Instead, counter-narcotics needs to be integrated within the wider process of state building and economic development. This is not to suggest that the drug issue can be ignored and considered simply an externality of development. There is a clear need to consider the effect different interventions in each of the main sectors (security, governance and economic growth) have on the cultivation, trade and consumption of illegal drugs and ensure efforts maximise counter-narcotics outcomes.

The foundation for such an integrated approach already exists, although at this stage in aspiration rather than reality, with drugs being recognised as a "cross-cutting issue" in both the Afghanistan National Development Strategy and National Drug Control Strategy (NDCS). Such an approach is not one that seeks to downgrade or ignore the drug issue – far from it. It attempts to put counter-narcotics at the front and centre of policy and operational planning and give it the recognition required to deliver the improvement in lives and livelihoods that the Afghan population both is desperately seeking and deserves. This recognition has proven to be the key determinant elsewhere for sustainable reductions in opium poppy cultivation. It follows that if counter-narcotics is

⁶² GTZ, "Development in a Drugs Environment: Towards a Strategic Approach to 'Alternative Development.'" (discussion paper, Development-Oriented Drug Control Programme, February 2006), 9-10.

to be handled as a cross-cutting issue, the use of opium area as an indicator of counter narcotic success is insufficient.

Developing better measures of progress: focusing on livelihood security

The NDCS clearly identifies the problem of using the area grown with opium poppy as a measure by which to judge progress on counter-narcotics.⁶³ Its position is fully supported by the evidence presented in this paper. However, there is a second problem in using hectareage as a performance indicator for counter-narcotics. There is a failure to robustly distinguish between the use of an indicator to measure development outputs or results over the short term⁶⁴ and its use in measuring development outcomes or goals over the long term. The Afghanistan NDCS uses opium area as an impact or goal indicator – something that will be achieved in the medium to long term, and an outcome of a wider process of transition, including progress on security, rule of law, and development. Much of the use of opium area as an indicator claims that the reduction in area is evidence of policy success, thus ignoring how the reduction has been achieved. Rapid reductions in area through coercion, enforcement or a change in the terms of trade of opium poppy and food crops are not necessarily durable. These shorter-term causes of area reduction transform the usage

⁶³ MCN, “National Drug Control Strategy,” 26. “To date, the Government has measured progress on CN by year on year reductions in levels of opium poppy cultivation. This has been - and remains - an important measure. But it suffers from considerable draw-backs. Focusing on cultivation levels tells us little about the sustainability of any decrease in cultivation and tends to obscure the complexity and implications of differing cultivation patterns within and between provinces. Thus it fails to identify problems associated with very rapid or uneven decreases in cultivation, be they through self-restraint or eradication.”

⁶⁴ A distinction is made, following the OECD (2006, Management for Development Results - Principles in Action: Sourcebook on Emerging Good Practices) between a) outputs, which are products resulting from a development intervention and are short term deliverables; b) outcomes, which are the short to medium term effects of the intervention’s outputs; and c) goals or impacts, which are the long-term effects produced by a development intervention.

of the area statistic from a goal to an output indicator. As an output indicator, area changes simply tell you how effective the coercion or eradication has been and nothing more.

This indicates a fundamental weakness of opium area as an indicator – that it can be either an indicator at the goal level or at the output level. Lack of clarity regarding the level the indicator is used for leads to unfounded claims regarding the effects of counter narcotic policy, largely because the measure itself does not capture how the goal or the outcome has been achieved. Hence, better indicators that provide evidence of how a reduction has been achieved are needed; these should complement the area statistic to provide evidence of the wider changes occurring that would support and drive a durable shift out of opium poppy cultivation. The significant (and arguably positive) role that opium poppy has played in the rural economy – in providing social protection (food security, access to credit⁶⁵), economic growth and, more controversially, as a contributor to conflict resolution processes⁶⁶ – identifies the areas where change could potentially substitute for the benefits of the opium economy.

Table 1 summarises a proposed set of outcomes of contextual change that could be used to indicate the achievement of a supportive environment conducive to the sustained movement of households out of opium poppy cultivation. These should be assessed alongside opium area changes in order to critically understand the underlying dynamics of change. Note that these are essentially outcome measures to be added. They are also minimalist requirements, and do not identify the activities and outputs necessary to deliver them. These will need to be developed according to context.

The matrix deliberately calls for an assessment of context that is differentiated by spatial location in order to capture different geographical and

⁶⁵ Adam Pain, *Opium Poppy and Informal Credit*, (Kabul: AREU, 2008).

⁶⁶ Jan Koehler and Christoph Zürcher, “Statebuilding, Conflict and Narcotics in Afghanistan: The View from Below,” *International Peacekeeping* 14, no. 1 (2007): 62-74.

CN Relevant Relevant Rural Livelihood Security Indicators

Goals and Outcomes		Objectively Verifiable Indicators	Means of Verification	
Goal	Sustainable decrease in cultivation and production of illicit drugs	Multiyear national decline in opium area	UNODC and other surveys & statistics	
		Increasing physical security	Participatory security assessments	
		Increasing Food security	NRVA & other surveys	
		Rising rural incomes		
Outcomes	Land- & Water-Rich Households	Personal safety assured	Participatory security & conflict assessments reports	
		Basic conflict resolution systems in place & functioning		Conflict assessments
		Viable & inclusive commodity markets functioning	Assessments of market participation & returns	Commodity market assessments of volume & price
		Diversification of cropping system & increase in off-farm sales	Farm and household income surveys	Survey reports
		Declining opium poppy area	Multiyear decline in opium area at local level	UNODC & other surveys & statistics
	Land- & Water-Poor Households	Non-opium sourced food security assured	Food security assessments	NRVA, WFP documentation; terms of trade analysis
		Personal safety assured	Household assessments	Participatory security & conflict assessment reports
		Basic conflict resolution system in place & functioning	Conflict assessments	
		Off & non-farm employment food security achieving	Increasing wage rates, employment rates	Rural labour market reports
		Declining opium poppy area	Multiyear decline in opium area at local level	UNODC & other surveys & statistics

economic constraints. A broad division is made between those areas that are of high and medium potential (with respect to resource quality, including land and water, and market proximity) and those that are low potential (distant from markets and/or with limited irrigation). A further distinction is made between those household that are land and water rich (primarily located in areas of high and medium potential) and those that are land and water poor (to be found in areas of high, medium and low potential).

As noted above, there are three dimensions to improving livelihood security: gaining social protection, experiencing basic security and benefiting from economic growth. It has to be recognised that the social protection and economic needs of land- and water-rich households and land- and water-poor households are different. The former likely obtain a significant part of their household food security and income from on-farm production. The latter will be primarily dependent on off- and non-farm activities for food security. Both groups, however, require basic security: the

assurance of personal safety and equitable access to functioning conflict resolution systems.

On *social protection* outcomes, a minimalist position is encouraged: the basic function of protection, and achievement of minimum acceptable consumption levels should be sought. The means by which this can be achieved are variable, ranging from food provision to cash transfers to employment schemes, but they will require targeting. The point is that these must be of sufficient scale, duration and reliability to provide effective protection for assuring food security. Food security assessments, undertaken through the NRVA, for example, would provide one means of evaluation.

On the *governance* front, a minimalist position is again advocated:⁶⁷ the provision of basic security through assurance of personal safety and functioning, conflict resolution systems would provide both equity of access and outcomes. Little systematic data appears to be collected on this, and there is a clear need to develop participatory security and conflict assessments as a systematic part of evaluating household experiences of basic security.

Finally, with respect to *economic development* for high and medium potential areas, the existence of viable and inclusive commodity markets will offer resource-rich farmers opportunities to exit opium poppy cultivation. This will require assessments of

⁶⁷ Drawing on Merilee Grindle, "Good Enough Governance Revisited," *Development Policy Review* 25, no. 5 (2007): 553-574.



market participation and returns to producers as well as farm and household income surveys achieved through detailed examination of commodity markets, prices and terms of trade analysis. For all other areas and households, the key issues are functioning labour markets, wage rates levels and sufficient employment to provide household security. Here, robust analysis of rural labour markets is needed to evidence greater employment opportunities and positive changes in wage rates.

All of the above argue for a more systematic and routine survey and analysis of the rural economy than is currently undertaken.

Finally, opium area as an indicator should be used as a health check on counter-narcotics policy and no more, and should not be accepted as an indicator unless other changes are shown to be taking place as well. If there is a year by year decline in opium area and positive progress is detected and evidenced in households gaining social protection, basic security, incomes and employment, then this would constitute evidence of progress toward counter-narcotic success.

Finally, attention is drawn to the fact that the measures proposed are not specifically drug indicators but are measures of changes in rural livelihood security. They reflect the necessary preconditions for a sustainable shift out of opium poppy cultivation. This is consistent with the need for counter-narcotic policy to be fully embedded in rural development policy and is supportive of mainstreaming drug policy into development policy and programming.

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