



WHERE HAVE ALL THE FLOWERS GONE?

Assessing the Sustainability of Current Reductions in Opium Production in Afghanistan

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Overview

Opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan is currently in decline. This is not just in the north, centre and east of Afghanistan, as has been the case in the past, but also in the south, where opium poppy cultivation has become increasingly concentrated since 2007. In fact, between 2008 and 2009 the amount of opium poppy cultivated fell by an estimated 34,000 hectares (ha) in the province of Helmand—often referred to as the most prolific opium producing area in the world. Reductions were also seen in some of the other more prolific opium-producing provinces in the south and west of Afghanistan in the last 12 months. Early indications suggest that cultivation will largely be maintained at this lower level in 2010 with the possibility of some further, albeit more marginal, reductions in production in areas close to the provincial centres of Farah, Kandahar and Lashkar Gah (in Helmand Province).

Reasons for the current fall in opium poppy cultivation differ by area. In the provinces of Balkh and Nangarhar, it is clear that the actions of the governors have been critical. In Balkh, Governor Atta Mohammed Noor has gained a level of control over the province by favouring his former jihadi commanders and offering them positions within the security ministries. He used his position to eliminate opium production in 2007 and has continued to maintain this ban into the 2009/10 growing season. In Nangarhar, Governor Gul Aga Shirzai has relied more on the informal relationships that he has established with tribal elders and local strongmen, who were appointed to positions of power by his predecessor, as well as the US military, to exert his influence over the province. He has drawn on the delivery of aid, inferences that he can direct the US military effort, and, where required, his own personal wealth to offer patronage and cement deals with local powerbrokers to impose a ban on opium poppy cultivation.

Reductions in opium production in other provinces are less to do with the actions of powerholders and more to do with economics and the priority farmers place on food security. The dramatic rise in the price of wheat—which began in the last quarter of 2007 but continued until the wheat harvest of 2009—along with declining opium prices

have been integral to the fall in opium poppy cultivation in a range of different provinces, including those as diverse as Helmand and Ghor (in the central region). The impact of high wheat prices on farmers continues to resonate in the 2009/10 growing season, particularly in the well-irrigated areas of the south. During the winter planting season in October and November 2009, many feared a further rise in wheat prices in early 2010 due to the deteriorating security situation and escalating wheat prices across the border in Pakistan (the major source of imported wheat flour to Afghanistan in the past).

What becomes clear from a detailed analysis of the continuing reductions in opium production is that they are not the result of a single action or intervention by an internal or external actor, but the outcome of a complex web of interrelationships and interdependencies that are constantly evolving and shaped by ongoing events. Consequently, successfully transferring an approach or “model” that has proven effective in one province to another, or even replicating that same approach over time in the same province, will typically prove elusive. Because the reasons for opium poppy cultivation are contingent and contextual—a function of where, who and when—and highly dependent on local factors, so are the factors that lead to its reduction.

While support for local strongmen appears to have paid dividends in Nangarhar and Balkh in terms of drug control, these provinces represent regional economic hubs with employment prospects and, more importantly, are places where local elites can extract rent from the large volume of official and unofficial cross-border trade. In these provinces there is a clear “peace dividend.” The same cannot be said for a province like Helmand, where the legal economy is limited and therefore there is a vested interest amongst local powerbrokers (on all sides) to continue the conflict and the extraction of rent from the drugs trade. However, even in Nangarhar and Balkh the political and economic environment is fluid and it remains unclear whether the governors will be able to continue to pursue another year of policies that are proving increasingly unpopular with the rural population. All deals would be off if these governors are moved on.

The sustainability of the current reductions is also highly dependent on the viability of the alternatives to opium. In areas near provincial centres, opium poppy has been replaced by a combination of a range of high-value horticultural crops, livestock and non-farm income opportunities. This strategy has served to reduce the risk of market or crop failure, as well as to diversify and in many cases increase household incomes. However, this process of diversification is in contrast to the majority of areas that have reduced opium poppy cultivation over the last three seasons. These less accessible areas have typically substituted opium poppy for wheat and consequently their current reductions in opium poppy cultivation remain fragile.

Ultimately, it is important to recognise that increasing levels of wheat production do not reflect a sustainable shift from opium production, but instead are a sign of market failure, growing concerns over food security, and coercion. Offering wheat seed to farmers as a way of encouraging them to abandon opium poppy is a distraction. Supporting these efforts through locally enforced eradication, with its associations with corruption and the targeting of the most vulnerable, can reinforce the public view that the state is predatory. Short-term investments by development organisations—be they national or international, government or nongovernment—do little to build farmers’ confidence that there will be the necessary long-term support required for the transition from opium production to more diverse livelihoods in which horticultural crops occupy a greater proportion of agricultural land.

Given this situation, a return to opium poppy cultivation in the future does not necessarily reflect a failure of the counter-narcotics effort, in the same way that reductions over the last three years do not necessarily represent a success. Instead, any resurgence in cultivation will be the result of an evolving economic and political environment, primarily due to shifting price expectations but also to changes in the political and security environment, which has in part been shaped by the economic impact of prohibition and the fall in the price of opium. Understanding the issue of attribution is important if we are not to see a return to the language and policies of comprehensive eradication and further attempts to reduce opium production through the provision of short-term agricultural inputs.

Introduction

Levels of opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan have fallen for two consecutive years and it now appears that cultivation will be maintained at this relatively low level for another year. While this allows for progress to be declared against more short-term, area-based counter-narcotics targets, the reasons for the continued decline in cultivation are far from clear.

This paper illustrates that current reductions are the result of complex economic, political and environmental processes that are both context-specific and difficult to maintain. It argues that the coincidence of actions and events that have led to the current fall in production have set in play their own dynamic that could further destabilise parts of rural Afghanistan if not held in check.

The paper is divided into three sections. Section 1 draws on detailed fieldwork in two distinct provinces as a way of exploring the different factors that lie behind the current reductions in opium production in Afghanistan. It shows how reductions in Nangarhar are largely a consequence of the concerted efforts of the current governor and the political deals he has struck with tribal leaders, local powerbrokers and to some extent the US military, whereas in Helmand the reductions in cultivation are primarily driven by shifts in the terms of trade between wheat and poppy and continuing concerns over food security.

Section 2 explores the resilience of these reductions. It initially examines what opium poppy has been replaced with and highlights that reductions based on wheat are precarious and unlikely to be sustained. The section goes on to analyse the unfolding political environment in Afghanistan and how it might impact levels of opium production in the future, suggesting that the current political settlements that have been critical for reducing opium poppy in provinces such as Nangarhar and Balkh remain fragile and highly dependent on incumbent governors.

The final section looks at the current policy environment for counter-narcotics. It suggests that counter-narcotics efforts and objectives have largely been relegated in Afghanistan, where counter-insurgency reigns supreme. This is not completely unwelcome because it has forced the drug control community to evaluate their interventions not simply based on the achievement of short-term, area-based targets but to consider the complex relationship between the achievement of counter-narcotics objectives and the broader goals of improving governance, security and economic growth. However, tensions still exist and this paper suggests that the trajectory of counter-narcotics policy is far from clear, particularly if production were to rise in the 2010/11 growing season.

1. Where Have all the Flowers Gone?

Early indications suggest that, at the national level, opium poppy is in its third year of decline in Afghanistan. The reasons for reductions are varied and differ between areas. This section explores both the political and economic factors that lie behind them in the provinces of Nangarhar and Helmand, drawing on in-depth fieldwork undertaken in both provinces over a number of years. Both provinces have been significant producers of opium. For example, throughout much of the 1990s Nangarhar consistently produced around 25 percent of Afghanistan's total opium crop, and between 1994 and 2004 there was only one year in which less than 15,000 ha of opium poppy were cultivated there—and that was in 2001 under the Taliban ban. Helmand has been even more prolific, typically cultivating as

much as half of the total area allocated to opium poppy in Afghanistan through the 1990s, culminating in the growth of an estimated 103,000 ha of opium poppy in 2007. The factors that explain the declining levels of cultivation in each province are distinct and specific, and highlight just how precarious the current reductions in opium poppy cultivation are.

1.1 Political settlements and poppy cultivation: Enforcing the ban in Nangarhar

Opium poppy production has undergone a series of booms and busts in Nangarhar in the first decade of the 21st century. Typically, a dramatic reduction in cultivation in the province has been matched

by a resurgence in cultivation, either the season immediately following a ban on opium production or after two seasons of low levels of opium poppy cultivation. The 2009/10 season may set a new record for the province with three consecutive years of negligible levels of opium poppy cultivation. While the political and economic consequences of sustaining such low levels remain far from clear, an analysis of the socioeconomic and political environment in which these reductions have been obtained, as well as the political settlements on which they are based, suggests the ongoing prohibition of opium in Nangarhar remains fragile and could prove destabilising for many parts of the province.¹

As noted, previous reductions in cultivation in Nangarhar have not been maintained beyond a year or two. For example, the dramatic reductions in cultivation achieved under the Taliban in the 2000/01 growing season were met with resurgence the subsequent year, following the collapse of the regime and the exponential rise in the price of opium that accompanied the almost nationwide prohibition that the Taliban had imposed. In late 2005, the then governor of Nangarhar, Haji Din Mohammed, used many of the same mechanisms and levers applied by the Taliban during their prohibition, and also drew on President Karzai's political capital following his inauguration, to reduce cultivation from an unprecedented high of 28,213 ha in the 2003/04 growing season to an estimated 1,093 ha in 2004/5.² Despite the transfer of Haji Din Mohammed to the governorship of Kabul and the arrival of Governor Gul Aga Shirzai, in the lower and more accessible areas of the province opium poppy remained negligible for a second consecutive year, while cultivation increased to an estimated 4,871 ha in the more remote areas.

By the 2006/07 growing season it was not possible to impose a ban. Fearing reactions from their

communities, local powerbrokers refused to deter cultivation and opium poppy once again flourished across every district in Nangarhar, except those adjacent to the provincial centre. For most farmers the respite was only brief. Many maximised the amount of land that they cultivated with opium poppy while they could. While the three districts adjacent to Jalalabad (Behsud, Kama and Surkhrud) continued to cultivate only a negligible amount of opium poppy in 2007, farmers in many of the more accessible and better irrigated parts of the province cultivated opium poppy extensively and established inventories of opium. In the more remote areas, where land is in short supply, higher levels of opium production supported improvements in the quality of food consumed, better access to health care, and allowed accumulated debts to be repaid.³

It only took Governor Shirzai one year to consolidate his position with local powerbrokers in the province, as well with the US military, and re-establish a ban on opium production. He could do so knowing that opium poppy cultivation in the 2006/07 growing season had helped establish an economic cushion for some, particularly the local elites that he relied on to implement the ban, and that the development assistance planned prior to and during his first year as governor was finally delivering a more significant effect in the lower-lying areas of the Kabul River valley.⁴ By the 2007/08 growing season, opium poppy cultivation was once more in rapid decline in Nangarhar, so much so that in 2008 the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) declared the province "poppy free,"⁵ down from almost 19,000 ha in 2006/07.

Governor Shirzai has certainly proven more resolute in his efforts to sustain reductions in Nangarhar Province than his predecessors. Some refer to his political ambitions as the primary motive and his personal wealth as critical to managing the political settlement required to maintain the ban. In contrast to the previous prohibition on

¹ This section is based on detailed fieldwork undertaken by the author in Nangarhar for AREU on an annual basis between 2006 and 2008, as well as for Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ) in 2005 and DAI in 2009. Outputs from the research for AREU can be found on the AREU website (www.areu.org.af).

² 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" (GTZ Project for Alternative Livelihoods in Eastern Afghanistan, 2005).

³ David Mansfield, "Resurgence and Reductions: Explanations for Changing Levels of Opium Poppy Cultivation in Nangarhar and Ghor in 2006-07" (Kabul: AREU, 2008).

⁴ David Mansfield, "Poppy Free Provinces: A Measure or a Target?" (Kabul: AREU, 2009).

⁵ The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) declares a province "poppy free" when it estimates that cultivation has fallen to 100 ha or less. In 2008, the United States Government (USG) estimated that cultivation in Nangarhar was 265 ha.



Opium poppy in upper Shinwar in 2007 (top left). The same land was used for wheat in 2007 and 2008 (top right), which was intercropped with melon in 2010 (bottom left). Bottom right, an example of potentially more sustainable mixed agriculture: onion, cucumber and sugar cane with citrus trees in Bati Kot, Nangarhar. Photos by David Mansfield.

opium production between 2005 and 2006, there was not a significant return to cultivation in the 2008/09 growing season, even in many of the more remote parts of the province, and for a second consecutive year negligible levels of cultivation were maintained—although it was not low enough for the province to maintain its “poppy free” status according to the UNODC’s criteria.

This second year of low levels of cultivation came at a price; not in those districts near Jalalabad, where diversification of on-farm, off-farm and non-farm income has largely been beneficial, but in those areas where there are currently few alternatives to opium production, such as Achin, Khogyani and upper Shinwar in the Spin Ghar piedmont.⁶

These areas typically do not have an alternative winter cash crop to opium poppy and are heavily

reliant on good precipitation and the possibility of getting a good summer crop, as well as off-farm and non-farm income, as a way of preventing a significant deterioration in living standards when opium production is banned. For example, in upper Khogyani summer cash crops of tomatoes and ground nut have helped reduce the economic impact of the loss of opium. In the summer of 2009, these crops fared particularly well due to the availability of irrigation water, which allowed for a greater area to be cultivated during the summer and better yields even in the lower, drier part of the district. In upper Achin, a summer marijuana crop and higher farm-gate prices have gone some way toward easing the economic burden of the ban on opium in 2009.

However, the income from summer cash crops and wage labour has not been enough to offset the losses incurred due to the opium poppy ban in the Spin Ghar piedmont, particularly after a very difficult year in 2008, during which the

⁶ The discussion on the impact of the ban in 2009 is based on work by the author for DAI and produced as an unpublished paper, dated 26 May 2009.

price of food almost doubled and summer cash crops⁷ suffered due to inadequate water supply. In response, many households further reduced their consumption of relatively expensive food items such as meat and fruit during the 2008/09 growing season, and minimised expenditures on areas such as health care, even for serious illnesses like hepatitis. In some cases teenage children were withdrawn from further education and tasked with finding employment, including in the Afghan National Army (ANA). The sale of long-term productive assets, such as livestock and land, was also reported to have increased in response to the opium ban in the southern districts of Nangarhar in 2009.

With limited on-farm income opportunities and assets to sell, the primary coping strategy in these areas has been the search for off-farm and non-farm income. Yet, as in previous years, the absence of opium poppy in 2009 also led to the loss of the wage labour opportunities associated with the crop, especially during the harvesting season when farmers previously earned as much as US\$8 per day in the eastern region. Lower disposable incomes also meant a wider economic downturn in the province, with reductions in employment opportunities in other legal sectors. The employment situation was made even more precarious in 2009 due to restrictions on Afghan migrant workers in Pakistan and growing levels of insecurity in Pakistan and in southern Afghanistan—where migrant workers from Nangarhar had often gone to work during previous bans on opium poppy cultivation. With such limited options and in the face of the costs of two consecutive years of a ban on opium poppy cultivation, the ANA has now become an increasingly important safety net for communities in districts like Khogyani, Achin and upper Shinwar. Claims that some of those enlisting in the ANA are younger than the statutory age of 17 and many are opting to be posted to the southern provinces to obtain higher monthly salaries further highlight the deteriorating economic situation in many of these areas.

Ultimately, concerns for the safety of these recruits and the belief that the provincial authorities have not delivered on promises of increased

⁷ Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock (MAIL), “Agricultural Commodity Price Bulletin Year 4, Volume 5” (Kabul: MAIL, 2008), 1.

“You’re a thief. You’re a corrupt person. You get some aid from the government and you take it to your own house. You don’t distribute it to the poor people. When some NGO comes to the village you introduce your relatives and people. What do you do for the poor people? You share in the ban on opium poppy. You support the government. You are the intelligence department of the government.”

- A young man to a *malik* in the main bazaar in Achin

development assistance have led to growing anger toward both the government and the *maliks* (community leaders) who are held responsible for the enforcement of the opium poppy ban. While the ban was never popular, in April 2009 feelings were running particularly high. Farmers often made verbal threats against the *maliks* during discussions and accused them of acting as “the spies of the government,” receiving bribes and appropriating the bulk of any development assistance that was delivered.⁸ There were even claims that an improvised explosive device attack in March 2009 was targeted at Haji Usman, one of the *maliks* from Mohmand Valley in Spin Ghar, due to growing anger at his involvement in the enforcement of the opium ban.⁹ In one incident in the main bazaar in Achin, a young man verbally abused a *malik* in public and was given considerable support for his comments from passers-by (see box quote).

The political situation had deteriorated further by October 2009, with a violent confrontation between one of the key *maliks* in the Shinwar tribe, *Malik* Niaz, and anti-government elements, who it was said had been residing in the area for some time. The murder of the *malik*’s nephews by Afridi insurgents, allegedly at the instigation of a tribal rival, and subsequent reprisals led to the formation of an armed tribal militia in Spin Ghar and the *malik* relocating to Jalalabad. In late

⁸ Examples were given of roadwork in Achin where labourers were compelled to work longer hours to allow for the payment of “ghost workers” who were related to the *malik*.

⁹ It was also reported that Haji Usman’s brother was killed by an IED attack in Bati Kot in February 2010.

January 2010, this relatively localised dispute had escalated and led to the elders of the entire Shinwar tribe signing the “Anti-Taliban Shinwari Pact”¹⁰ in return for a payment of one million dollars from the US military, allegedly bypassing the provincial government and Governor Shirzai altogether. By mid-March, the merits of this pact and the efficacy of favouring Malik Niaz were being questioned, with an ongoing dispute over land between different Shinwari subtribes, including *Malik Niaz’s* Sepoy, breaking out in armed violence and resulting in the deaths of 13 people.¹¹ This growing conflict is in addition to the murder of Haji Zaman, a prominent jihadi commander and political opponent of the former governor, Haji Din Mohammed, along with 14 others in the district of Khogyani, only a few weeks after he had returned to the province, demonstrating the potential for future instability. There was also continued speculation as to whether Governor Shirzai will remain in his post or will be promoted by President Karzai as a reward for his decision not to stand in the 2009 presidential election.

Yet despite this fluid political environment and the worsening economic position of many farmers in Nangarhar, opium poppy cultivation will remain limited to the more remote parts of the Spin Ghar piedmont in 2010, where the government has little access. Across much of the province an unprecedented third consecutive year of negligible levels of opium poppy cultivation will be maintained. During the planting season farmers still believed the government retained sufficient control “during the day” to enforce a ban on opium poppy—even in those areas where it “no longer has control at night.” Despite increasing opium prices and the absence of viable alternatives in many of the southern districts of Nangarhar, wheat will once again dominate the landscape across much of the province. However, it remains to be seen how long farmers, particularly those in the Spin Ghar piedmont, will endure the current economic situation and the degree to which maintaining the ban will exacerbate local political tensions and potentially destabilise the province.

¹⁰ Sgt Tracy J. Smith, “Afghan Border Police Enlist Tribal Leaders/Maliks to Protect Eastern Border,” *The Fighting 48th* 1, no. 5 (2010): 13.

¹¹ Alissa Rubin, “Afghan Tribal Rivalries Bedevil a US Plan,” *Associated Press*, 21 March 2010.

1.2 Prioritising food security: Reductions in Helmand

Opium poppy cultivation in Helmand fell by an estimated 34,000 ha between 2008 and 2009. The scale of this reduction has not been achieved in a single province over a 12 month period since the Taliban implemented its prohibition in the 2000/01 growing season. It is likely that cultivation may fall further in 2010, primarily in areas adjacent to the provincial centre of Lashkar Gah. During the 2008/09 and 2009/10 winter cropping seasons, wheat seed and fertiliser were distributed by the provincial authorities to farmers in some of the central districts of Helmand, including all of the district of Lashkar Gah, and large parts of Nad-i-Ali, Nawa-i-Barakzai, Garamsir and Nahri Sarraj—an area that has come to be known as the “Food Zone.” Those farmers who received seed and fertiliser were required to sign a declaration saying that they would not cultivate opium poppy. The Helmand governor has also issued threats that opium poppy will not be tolerated and that those who cultivate it within the Food Zone risk having their crop destroyed.

There may be a tendency to directly attribute the reductions in poppy cultivation in Helmand Province between 2008 and 2009 to the efforts of the governor and the Helmand counter-narcotics plan, particularly given that levels of cultivation were reported to have fallen by 37 percent within the Food Zone and to have risen by eight percent in those areas outside.¹² The increase in the estimated level of cultivation in the neighbouring province of Kandahar, from 14,623 ha in 2008 to 19,811 ha in 2009 (reported by UNODC), is cited as further evidence of the effectiveness of wheat seed distribution in Helmand for reducing opium poppy cultivation.

While confusion over the actual level of cultivation in Kandahar (the US has estimated that cultivation fell between 2008 and 2009 from 22,100 ha to 17,000 ha, contradicting the UNODC figure) is not easily resolved, a more detailed analysis of the divergent patterns of cultivation within Helmand is possible. Work by Cranfield University in the United

¹² Cranfield University, cited in UNODC, “Afghanistan Opium Poppy Survey 2009” (Kabul: 2009), 8. Also cited in Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, “International Narcotics Control Strategy Report Volume 1” (Washington, DC: US Department of State, 2010), 96.

Kingdom highlighted that while opium poppy cultivation rose by 8% between 2008 and 2009 in those areas outside the Food Zone, the amount of land allocated to wheat in this same area almost doubled from 24,689 to 48,902 ha (see Table 1). The rate of increase in the amount of land cultivated with wheat outside the Food Zone is almost identical to that experienced within the Food Zone, where agricultural inputs were provided to an estimated 22,850 farmers.

What this more detailed analysis of cropping patterns reveals is that while the 97 percent increase in wheat cultivation within the Food Zone was achieved through lower levels of opium poppy cultivation and some reductions in cultivation of annual horticultural crops, outside the Food Zone the increase was predominantly on land that had not been cultivated in 2008 but was planted in 2009 due to better precipitation. In total a further 21,370 ha of land outside the Food Zone was under active agriculture in 2009 compared to 2008—the vast majority of which was cultivated with wheat. Increases in opium poppy cultivation largely seem to have been at the expense of lower levels of annual horticultural production and fodder crops. This suggests that wheat was given priority both inside and outside the Food Zone, regardless of whether farmers were recipients of wheat seed or not. The fact that so much of the additional active land outside the Food Zone was allocated to wheat and not opium poppy also raises questions over claims that opium poppy continues to be the most lucrative crop.¹³

If the provision of wheat seed and other agricultural inputs does not adequately explain the divergent trends in opium poppy cultivation within and outside the Food Zone, what does? Some might suggest that the threat of eradication was more significant in areas within the Food Zone, given their proximity to Lashkar Gah and the provincial authorities, and that this may have led to farmers

¹³ Many of these claims are due to commentators focusing on gross returns on opium and other crops rather than net returns. While it may be the case that “none of Afghanistan’s licit agricultural products can currently match the gross income per hectare from opium” as UNODC claim in their “Winter Rapid Assessment” of February 2010 (p. 14), the net returns on opium are much less favourable due to the labour-intensive nature of the crop.

Table 1: Cultivated area inside and outside the Helmand “Food Zone,” 2007-2009 (hectares)

	2007	2008	2009	Change 2008 to 2009	Change 2008 to 2009 (%)
Inside the Food Zone					
Opium poppy	38,235	33,937	21,452	-12,485	-37%
Cereal [#]	15,924	18,603	36,591	17,987	97%
Other [*]	40,488	45,514	36,685	-6,829	-15%
Active agricultural land	94,646	98,054	96,728	-1,326	-1%
Outside the Food Zone					
Opium poppy	50,418	49,872	53,624	3,752	8%
Cereal	23,339	24,689	48,902	24,213	98%
Other	111,105	114,557	107,962	-6,596	-6%
Active agricultural land	184,681	189,118	210,488	21,370	11%

Source: Cranfield University, “Poppy and Cereal Cultivation in Helmand 2007 to 2009” (unpublished, 2009). [#]“Cereal” includes wheat. ^{*}“Other” includes crops that were cultivated during the winter season as well as land that was prepared for cultivation in spring (such as for cotton, melon and watermelon) but left fallow at the time that the imagery was taken.

preferring wheat cultivation. Fieldwork in May 2009 indicated that there was some truth to this claim in the environs of Lashkar Gah, particularly in the areas around Bost and Bolan, where opium poppy cultivation all but disappeared in 2009 and had shown a downward trend since 2007. Communities in these areas were aware of the governor’s plan to reduce opium poppy cultivation and believed that it would be implemented. In fact, it is possible to see a move out of opium poppy cultivation into both wheat and high value horticulture in Bolan and Bost over the last two years. Both these areas are on the outskirts of the city of Lashkar Gah and vegetable traders in the city report that they purchase crops directly from the farm gate, offering a stimulus to crop diversification.

The population in other parts of the Food Zone did not believe that the threat of eradication was credible. For example, farmers in much of Nadi-Ali, Nawa-i-Barakzai and Nahri Sarraj perceived that there was little threat of eradication in 2009 and in many areas there was little evidence of crop destruction in either the 2008 or the 2009 eradication campaigns.¹⁴ Information campaigns

¹⁴ This included Governor-Led Eradication (GLE) and the centrally managed Poppy Eradication Force (PEF).

warning that the opium crop would be destroyed were typically viewed with disdain. For most farmers the fact that the government was not in a position to disseminate these messages, or indeed agricultural inputs, in situ simply reinforced the view that the provincial authorities were not in control of the rural areas in these districts. Despite the fact that they did not fear eradication, farmers in these areas still reported that they had reduced the amount of land that they cultivated with opium poppy between the 2007/08 and 2008/09 growing seasons and had cultivated more wheat. Even in November 2009 there were farmers in the more insecure parts of Nad-i-Ali, such as Chanjir and Doh Bandi, where the government's writ is limited, who had never had their crop destroyed and had nothing to fear from eradication and yet still reported a preference for cultivating wheat.

This analysis suggests that, almost regardless of location and circumstance, there was a preference for wheat cultivation in Helmand in the 2008/09 growing season. Those outside the Food Zone typically cultivated significantly more wheat in 2009, even though they had the opportunity to increase the amount of land that they cultivated with opium poppy by much more than the eight percent that was actually recorded. Farmers inside the Food Zone allocated more land to wheat regardless of whether they perceived the risk of eradication as credible or whether they received agricultural inputs. Therefore, the divergent trends in opium production in areas inside and outside the Food Zone would appear to have less to do with the interventions implemented under the auspices of the Helmand counter-narcotics plan and more to do with the particular socioeconomic and environmental conditions that prevail in these different areas.

This is perhaps best seen in Nad-i-Ali along the Boghra Irrigation Canal (see Figure 1), which serves as the demarcation line for the Food Zone. Farmers outside the canal typically have smaller landholdings and higher population densities per unit of irrigated land than those inside. It is an area that is typically irrigated by tubewells or pumps, with the substantial capital and recurrent costs these involve. The areas outside the canal mostly do not get a second agricultural season (see Figures 2 and 3) and are reliant on their winter crops to meet a significant part of their

needs in terms of both cash and consumption. There are also claims that this land has been “grabbed” or purchased by commanders from the northern districts of Helmand and is largely farmed by sharecroppers.

Under these circumstances, farmers will retain a commitment to opium production despite significant increases in the price of wheat and concerns over food security. With such small landholdings, high population densities and no summer cash crops, farmers need a reliable winter crop that can be used to purchase the inevitable shortfall in wheat production that the household experiences each year—even in years such as 2009, when there was more active agricultural land under wheat. Wheat deficits are all the more acute for those farmers cultivating land under a sharecropping arrangement, who only receive up to half the winter crop after harvest. Sharecroppers can also get preferential access to loans by cultivating opium, which assists them during the winter months when food scarcity is at its most acute. For landowners—the people who ultimately decide what is planted—opium poppy is favoured as it allows them to accrue a greater share of the final crop through inequitable tenure and credit arrangements. Finally, opium is also highly responsive to irrigation and a good yield will cover some of the capital and recurrent costs associated with running a tubewell or pump.

The situation north of the canal stands in stark contrast to areas south and downstream, where farmers typically get a good winter crop each year as well as a good summer crop (see Figures 2 and 3). Landholdings are typically larger and due to the second crop, population densities per unit of agricultural land cultivated are much less acute. Farmers are not solely reliant on opium as a cash crop but have, to varying degrees, a potential second crop of watermelon or cotton (both planted in the spring) as well as mung bean. Moreover, higher wheat yields due to the availability of water and lower population densities per unit of land mean that households can cultivate enough wheat to meet their household food requirements. There is also little variation in the amount of active agriculture in the canal-irrigated area each year—even in 2009, when there was significantly more water available for irrigation. Consequently, within the canal and the Food Zone, farmers can only grow more wheat in

Figure 1: Helmand—Chahi Anjir Area with Agriculture and Poppy, 2009

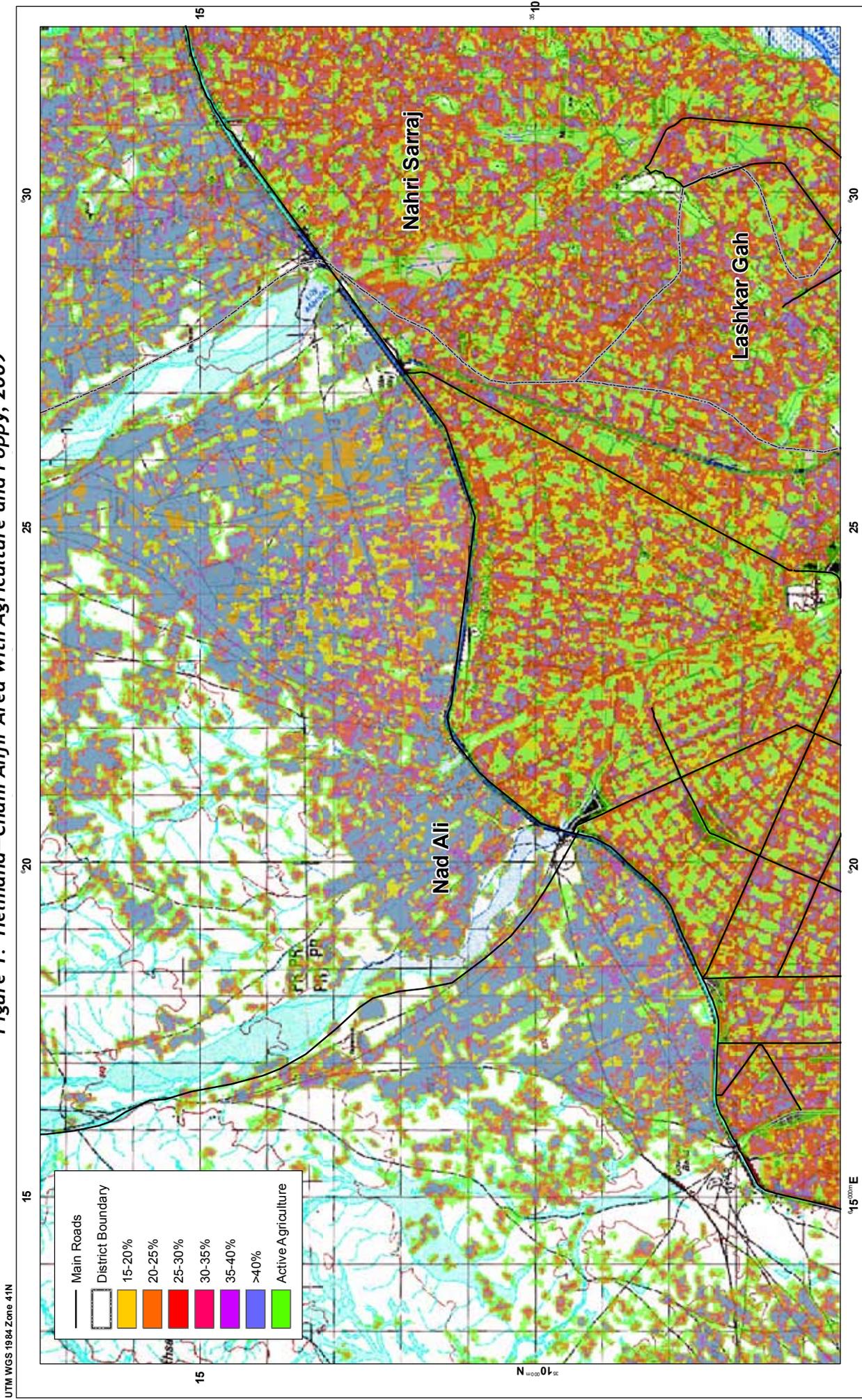
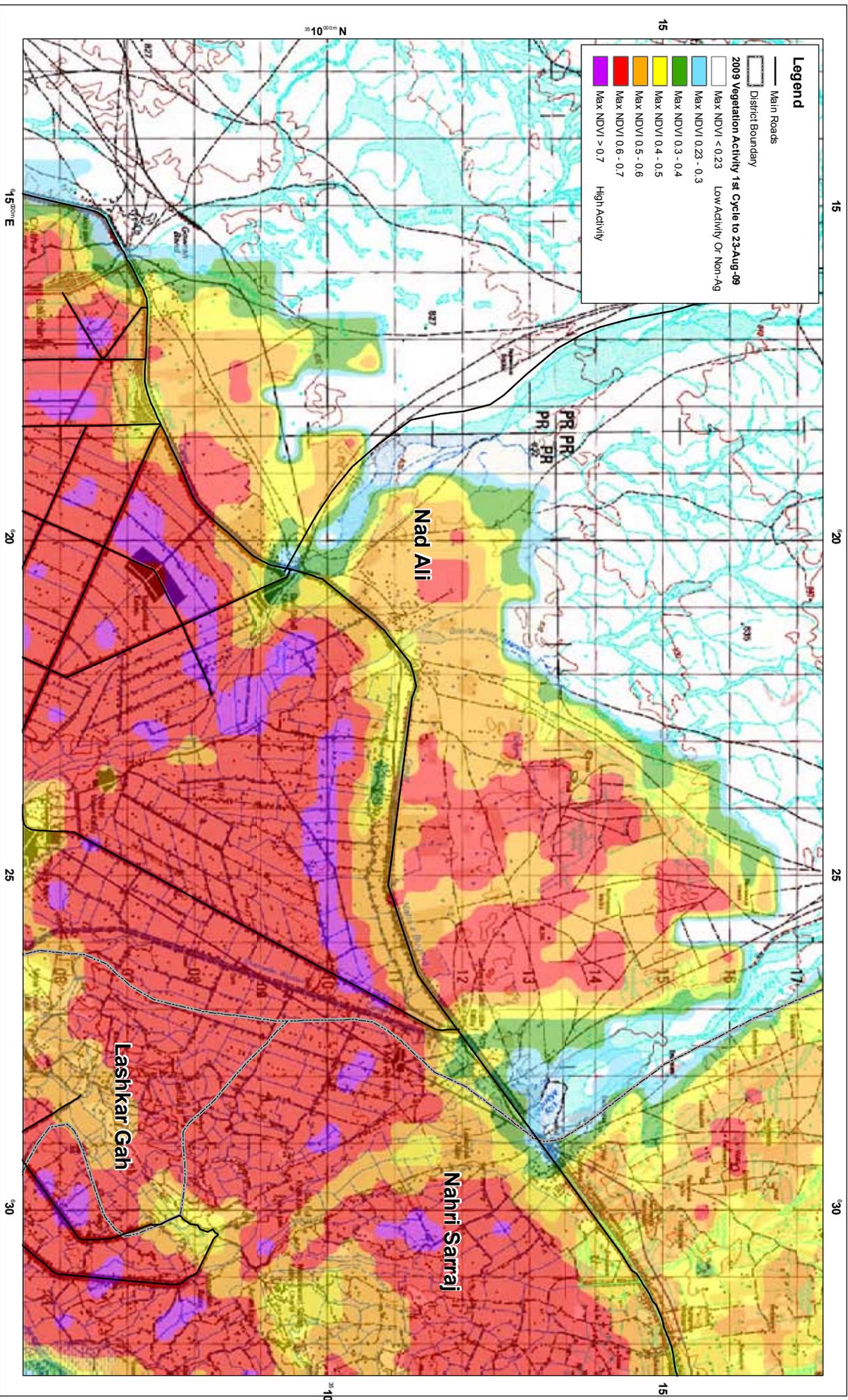


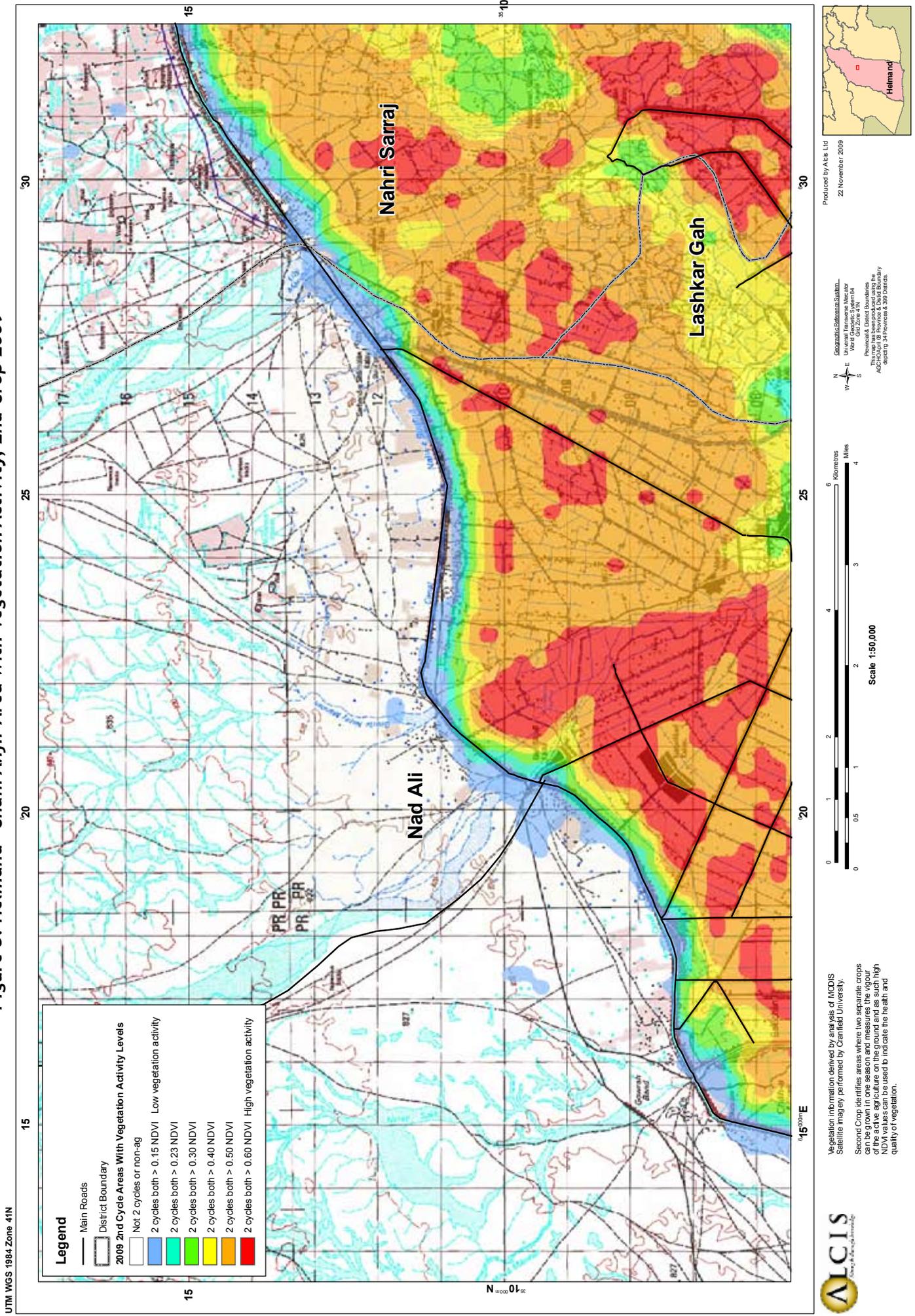
Figure 2: Helmand—Chahi Anjir Area with Vegetation Activity, 1st Crop 2009



Vegetation information derived by analysis of MODIS Satellite Imagery performed by Cranfield University. NDVI is a measure of the vigour of the active agriculture on the ground and as such high NDVI values can be used to measure the health and quality of vegetation.



Figure 3: Helmand—Chahi Anjir Area with Vegetation Activity, 2nd Crop 2009



the winter season by reducing the amount of land they cultivate with other crops. Given the low price of opium and the relatively small amounts of household land allocated to horticultural crops across much of the Food Zone during the winter, particularly in some of the more concentrated areas of opium production such as Nad-i-Ali and Nahri Sarraj, a significant increase in wheat cultivation is likely to come largely at the expense of opium production.¹⁵

With the price of wheat reaching as high as 35 Afghanis (Afs) per kilogram in Helmand in November 2008 and opium prices having fallen to 20,000 Pakistani Rupees (Rs)¹⁶ per *man*¹⁷ at harvest time in May that year, some reprioritisation in the 2008/09 growing season was inevitable (see box quote). The rise in the price of cereals due to growing insecurity in Pakistan and a continued ban on the export of wheat flour fuelled concerns that prices would rise further. The problems farmers faced purchasing wheat both locally and in Lashkar Gah in mid-2008 highlighted that many had overextended their opium crop and needed to give greater priority to ensuring that they cultivated enough wheat to meet their household needs. With higher wheat yields in 2009 due to better climatic conditions and greater investment in their wheat crop, many farmers found themselves less reliant on imported wheat flour than they were in recent years.

“In 2007/08, I cultivated my land with six *jeribs* of poppy and only one *jerib* of wheat. It was not enough wheat for my family. At harvest time I asked my neighbours to sell their wheat to us, as the price of wheat in the city [Lashkar Gah] was too high. At that time we didn’t have enough money to buy wheat in the city as our opium was still fresh and we would have received a low price. But my neighbours refused. I had to borrow money from another person to buy wheat flour in Lashkar Gah. In 2008/09, I decided to grow three *jeribs* of poppy and four *jeribs* of wheat so I never face this problem again. I have cultivated the same this year [2009/10].”

- A farmer in Helmand Province

The impact that prioritising opium production over wheat had on household food security in the 2007/08 growing season remains a vivid memory and continues to influence farmers cropping decisions in 2009/10. Although the price of wheat has fallen to as low as 15.5 Afs per kilogram, farmers typically expect it to rise in 2010 due to the relatively high price of wheat flour in Pakistan¹⁸ and the expectation that the security situation across the border will deteriorate in the coming months. Under these circumstances, concerns over food security continue to be the primary driver for lower levels of opium poppy cultivation in Helmand Province, even in areas outside of government control.

2. How Resilient are these Reductions?

These two studies in Section 1 present very different explanations for falling levels of opium production in the provinces of Nangarhar and Helmand. In Helmand, reductions in opium are largely a function of a preference for wheat in both the 2008/09 and the 2009/10 growing seasons,

due to the shift in the terms of trade between opium poppy and wheat and continuing concerns over food security. In Nangarhar, the governor’s efforts are credited with the largely negligible levels of cultivation. What remains less clear is whether the particular socioeconomic, environmental and political factors that have led to the current fall in cultivation can be sustained or whether these reductions remain precarious and cultivation will rise again in subsequent seasons. This section analyses the resilience of the current reductions in detail; initially it looks at the substitution of wheat for opium poppy and asks whether it is sustainable, before exploring the nature of the political bargains

¹⁵ David Mansfield, “Sustaining the Decline: Understanding the Nature of Change in the Rural Livelihoods of Opium Poppy Growing Households in the 2008/09 Growing Season,” a report for the Afghan Drugs Inter Departmental Unit of the UK Government (May 2009), 18; and unpublished fieldwork, May 2009 and November 2009.

¹⁶ Prices in southern Afghanistan are typically cited in Pakistani Rupees. In May 2008, US\$1 was the equivalent of 64 Rs.

¹⁷ A *man* is a traditional unit of measure in Afghanistan. In Kandahar, a *man* is the equivalent of 4.5 kilograms.

¹⁸ In November 2009, wheat flour was selling at the equivalent of between 18 and 32 Afs per kg in Peshawar, depending on quality.

established to ban opium production in Nangarhar and Balkh and how these could evolve over the next twelve months.

2.1 Is wheat a replacement for poppy?

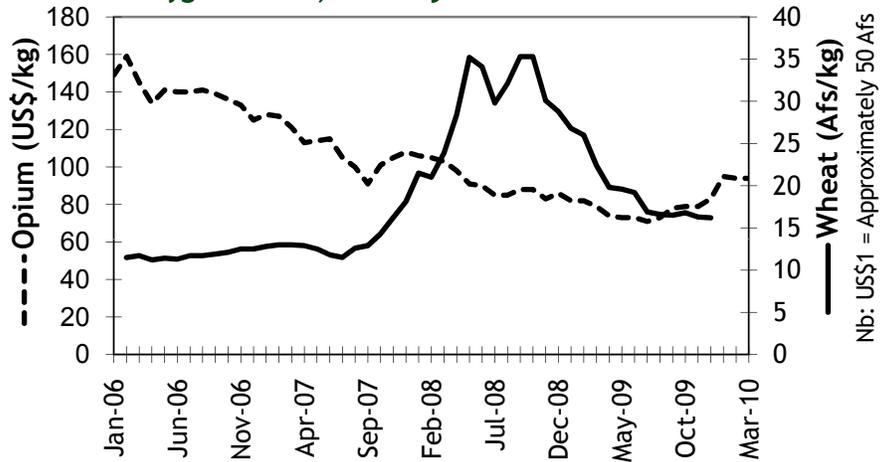
In the provinces of Nangarhar and Balkh, the actions of the governors have been critical to reducing opium production, whereas there is little evidence of concerted counter-narcotics efforts in many other provinces. In the province of Helmand, where the governor did mount a concerted counter-narcotics programme in the 2008/09 growing season, the writ of the state remains largely limited to the environs of Lashkar Gah and district centres. Despite this situation, opium poppy cultivation has fallen and wheat areas have increased, even in areas that are beyond the provincial authorities control in the districts of Nad-i-Ali, Nawa-i-Barakzai and Nahri Sarraj. According to data from the United States government, a similar pattern of reductions can be seen in the districts of Panjwayi, Zharay and Maiwand in Kandahar Province and Bakwa and Bala Buluk in Farah Province.¹⁹ None of these are districts where the government could be considered in control of the rural areas.

Evidence suggests that over the last two years opium poppy has largely been replaced by wheat. This shift can be seen not only in Nangarhar and Helmand but also in other provinces and dates back to the 2007/08 growing season.²⁰ This trend continued in the 2008/09 growing season, even in the southern provinces where opium poppy cultivation has become increasingly concentrated.

¹⁹ USG district-level poppy cultivation estimates for selected Afghan provinces, 2008-2009 (unpublished). UNODC data differs from these estimates.

²⁰ "In the 2007/08 growing season, 90 percent of those interviewed who reported that they had reduced the amount of land they had allocated to opium poppy had simply substituted all the land they had cultivated with opium poppy in 2006/07 to wheat in 2007/08." 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. A Report for the Afghan Drugs Inter Departmental Unit of the UK Government" (2008), 34.

Figure 4: Average price of dry opium and local wheat in Afghanistan, January 2006 to March 2010



In 2009/10, it appears as if levels of wheat and opium poppy will largely be maintained at current levels in the irrigated areas of the south.

However, the current move to wheat is not just evident amongst those who have previously cultivated opium poppy. Farmers have reduced the amount of land devoted to a variety of different cash crops and sown more wheat in the 2008/09 growing season.²¹ This preference for wheat is largely a rational response to the rapid increase in wheat prices that the country has seen since late 2007. The combination of high world food prices²² and growing insecurity in Pakistan led to an annual rise in the price of bread and cereals of 183 percent between May 2007 and April 2008.²³ At the same time, the farm-gate price of opium fell to levels that have not been observed since before the Taliban declared their prohibition on opium production in July 2000 (see Figure 4). The decline in the terms of trade between opium and wheat has been such that in parts of the central and northeastern regions, where opium yields are more marginal, farmers have been able to obtain more wheat by growing it on their own land than by producing opium and exchanging it for wheat, as had been the case in these areas since 2001.²⁴

²¹ David Mansfield, "Sustaining the Decline."

²² Joachim von Braun, "Food and Financial Crises: Implications for Agriculture and the Poor. A Food Policy Report" (Washington, DC: International Food Policy Research Institute, 2008), 3.

²³ MAIL, "Agricultural Commodity Price Bulletin Year 4: Volume 5" (Kabul: 2008), 1.

²⁴ David Mansfield, "Sustaining the Decline."

Cultivating opium poppy looks less attractive in the 2009/10 growing season than it has for some time. During the planting season in late 2009, farmers in Ghor, Baghlan and Balkh were unaware of the price of opium, an indication perhaps that the farm-gate trade in opium currently lies dormant in these areas. In the south, prices for wet opium were between 12,000 to 14,000 Rs per *man*, down from 16,000 to 18,000 Rs²⁵ during the early harvest period in April 2009 and from 20,000 Rs²⁶ in April 2008. Farmers did not expect prices to rise in the foreseeable future.²⁷ The same could not be said of wheat. In fact, concerns over the price of wheat continue to preoccupy farmers, even though the price has actually fallen from 35 Afs per kg to 15.5 Afs per kg over a twelve month period. Farmers anticipated that prices would increase in 2010 due to the high price of wheat flour in Pakistan, an increase in the cost of smuggling goods through the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) in Pakistan, and the expectation that there will be a further deterioration in the security situation in Pakistan (as mentioned, the traditional source of the bulk of wheat flour imports in Afghanistan).²⁸

For the vast majority of farmers, expanding wheat cultivation is not a strategy aimed at maximising the economic returns on their land. Small landholdings and large family sizes mean that only a minority of households are self-sufficient in wheat, even in a good agricultural year,²⁹ and few have a marketable

surplus.³⁰ In the south, high transport costs and commodity prices due to insecurity, as well as the inflationary effect of the concentration of opium production, typically renders those farmers that can produce a marketable surplus uncompetitive compared with better quality imports from Kazakhstan.³¹

Instead, the focus has largely been on guaranteeing a minimum level of food security. Those with enough land have cultivated a level of wheat that is commensurate with household requirements to attain self sufficiency. Those without sufficient land have increased the amount of land allocated to wheat to reduce some of the risks and costs involved in purchasing wheat flour at the market, but on the whole have incurred a dramatic increase in their cost of living due to their inability to grow enough wheat to meet their families' needs. It is clear that wheat is not a viable and sustainable alternative to opium poppy for most Afghan farmers and that some source of cash income is required from livestock, cash crops or wage labour.³²

Farmers in some districts have moved out of opium production and diversified their livelihood strategies. For example, in parts of Nangarhar some households have expanded their production of high-value horticulture, including intercropping

²⁵ In May 2009 US\$1 was the equivalent of 80.5 Rs.

²⁶ In April 2008, US\$1 was the equivalent of 64 Rs.

²⁷ In the south, farmers typically store and sell opium as fresh or wet.

²⁸ "Pakistan wheat policies have implications on both national and household food security in Afghanistan. Consistent and abundant supply of wheat and wheat flour from Pakistan keeps the prices stabilised and at an affordable level in Afghanistan markets." Famine Early Warning System, "USAID Pakistan Wheat Subsector and Afghan Food Security System" (FEWS NET, 2007), 6.

²⁹ "About 73% of all farms as estimated by the Winter Survey had less than 5 ha of arable land. The average size of these small farms was 1.59 ha (1.1 ha irrigated and 0.48 ha rain fed land). Such reduced land area is in most cases not nearly enough to feed a family. Considering the proportion of lands actually cultivated and average wheat yields, the average farm under 5 ha (if only wheat were grown) would supply only 200 kg of wheat per capita, not enough to cover seed reserves, post harvest losses and food needs." Cited in Hector Maletta, "Arable Land Tenure in Afghanistan in the Early Post-Taliban Era," *African and Asian Studies* 6 (2007): 13-52.

³⁰ "Most Afghan farmers do not have a marketable wheat surplus. Most are in fact net buyers of wheat (or flour). Many do not sell any straw or weeds either. Therefore many farmers do not derive any monetary revenue from growing wheat; many costs are provided from supplies originating in the family or the farm, or purchased with payment in kind; even commercial inputs may be purchased with payment in kind, either immediately or on credit until the harvest." In Hector Maletta, "The Grain and the Chaff: Crop Residues and the Cost of Production of Wheat in Afghanistan in a Farming System Perspective" (Unpublished, 2004), 4.

³¹ Wheat prices in the south are typically higher than the national average and in Kabul. See the "Agricultural Commodity Price Bulletins" by the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock.

³² "The characteristics of wheat—relatively low value, low labour intensity and correspondingly high usage of Afghanistan's scarce land and water resources—make it a poor and unsustainable alternative to poppy in the Afghan context. Moreover given that in good harvest years the country already comes close to self sufficiency in wheat and there are no export prospects, stimulating substantial increases in wheat production would be counterproductive." In Ward et al, "Afghanistan: Economic Incentives and Development Initiatives to Reduce Opium Production" (World Bank/DFID), 29.

and growing crops that produce multiple harvests. Similar patterns of change can be seen in other provinces, such as Balkh and Laghman. The adoption of less labour-intensive crops, such as onion, green bean and okra, has also freed up family members to search for employment. Consequently, diversification has allowed some farmers to both generate higher incomes and spread the risk of crop and market failure. However, as the Nangarhar example illustrates, this has not been the case for the majority of farmers in the province, particularly in the Spin Ghar piedmont, where the economic and political consequences of the ban on opium production are most acute.

There is much less evidence of crop and income diversification in the south of the country, even in those districts around the provincial centres. In districts like Nad-i-Ali and Nawa-i-Barakzai, which both border the provincial centre of Helmand, or in the district of Nahri Sarraj, in which the city of Gereshk is located, as much as 90 percent of the land cultivated in winter is consistently cultivated with either wheat or opium. The remaining ten percent is either fodder or horticultural crops produced for household consumption. While the amount of wheat or poppy may vary each year according to relative prices and concerns over food security, the amount of land allocated to horticultural and fodder crops seems to vary little.

2.2 How does security influence farmers' crop decisions?

While the limited size of the market for horticultural crops in Afghanistan is clearly an issue, physical insecurity is a primary factor limiting the extent of agricultural diversification and constraining the move from opium into horticultural crops in these areas of Helmand. However, current discussions about the impact of insecurity on opium production tend to focus on the absence of governance allowing opium to “flourish,” or the Taliban encouraging production and offering the rural population protection against eradication efforts as part of a “hearts and minds” strategy. While there may be some truth to these claims, they offer a rather partial picture of household decision-making in areas of chronic insecurity. These explanations offer little if any insight into the constraints on the

transition to other cash crops or non-farm income opportunities. They infer that households are somehow wedded to opium poppy cultivation and that it is the presence of insurgents and the absence of government that allows them to realize their objective of cultivating the crop.

Farmers themselves report a more complex picture as to how the ongoing violence and conflict impact upon cropping decisions. They emphasise market constraints, high transaction and transportation costs, and how immobility impacts on plant husbandry. For example, in the provinces of Helmand and Kandahar, and even in districts like Khogyani in Nangarhar, farmers report that both fighting and the fear of leaving the household compound at night interrupts the tending of crops that require more attention and irrigation. This deters vegetable production and has led to the persistence of crops such as opium, as well as cotton and mung bean, which despite relatively low returns are considered relatively robust and can be easily stored for sale at a later date.

With regard to market constraints, both farmers and agricultural traders report that purchases at the farm gate are limited in Helmand, largely restricted to the areas of Bolan and Bost in Lashkar Gah district. In insecure districts like Nad-i-Ali, Nawa-i-Barakzai and Nahri Sarraj, there is little evidence of traders purchasing wheat, vegetables or fruit at the farm gate. An exception is the case of watermelon in Nad-i-Ali, which is considered premium quality. However, even here traders from Lashkar Gah and Gereshk are hesitant to buy at the farm gate unless they have good connections in the area, which allows them to better manage risk. Moreover, traders from Ghazni, Kandahar and Kabul have been increasingly reluctant to travel to the area to purchase watermelon in the last three years, preferring to work through local intermediaries. It is notable that even these local traders are unwilling to pay at the farm gate for fear of being robbed on the roads and instead require farmers to collect the money for their crop in Lashkar Gah or Gereshk.

Trade with the primary market in Kandahar is equally if not more problematic for both farmers and traders from Helmand Province. The main highway through Zahre in Kandahar is considered

particularly dangerous. There are even reports of some of the larger trucks veering off the main highway through the district and taking the “desert road” to avoid being caught in what is seen as regular firefights between insurgents and coalition forces. Trade continues but it does so at a cost. Haulers impose higher charges for moving freight in such a risky environment. The number of checkpoints has increased, with a corresponding increase in the “facilitation” fees to be paid, and the risk of crop losses due to delays or accidents is high.

Given this perspective, it is clear there is a more complex interaction between physical insecurity and opium production at work than one that simply asserts that insurgents are encouraging cultivation. While there is considerable talk of the abundance of well-irrigated land within the Food Zone of Helmand or the irrigated areas of Kandahar, there seems to be little understanding of how insecurity prevents farmers in these areas from realising their potential with regard to high-value horticultural crops.³³ The current prevalence of wheat in these areas does not reflect economic opportunity but highlights the continuing market failures that prevail in areas of chronic insecurity.

Similarly, the persistence of relatively widespread opium poppy cultivation in the south at a time when prices for fresh opium are so low suggests that farmers do not see many viable alternatives to opium production in the current environment. In fact, analysis of current cropping patterns in the more insecure parts of Helmand and Kandahar suggest that opium is less of a default as a result of it being the “crop with the highest returns,” as UNODC suggests, but more that it is possibly one of the only crops that provides a guaranteed source of cash income amidst the levels of insecurity that currently prevail in these areas.

³³ There is a tendency to refer to Helmand Province as “the bread basket of Afghanistan.” This is a description that is actually best reserved for the north of Afghanistan and not Helmand (Anthony Fizherbert, pers. comm., May 2009). Indeed, historical data suggests that wheat yields in Helmand were some of the lowest in the world in the 1970s and fell further once the Helmand Valley project had been in operation for a number of years. See Nick Calluther, “Damming Afghanistan: Modernization in a Buffer State,” *The Journal of American History* 89, no. 2 (2002): 535.

Yet, without a shift towards high-value horticulture and on-farm income the current reductions in opium production are unlikely to prove sustainable. Wheat is no replacement for opium. When the price of wheat is high, the majority of farmers simply do not benefit as they cannot cultivate sufficient wheat to meet their family’s food requirements. Consequently, while they can expand wheat production in an attempt to reduce the potential impact of higher food costs, ultimately most farmers will incur higher costs for wheat flour and require a source of cash income if they are to even meet their basic needs. Without some kind of economic cushion to mitigate the high price of wheat, the economic situation of the population and subsequently the political conditions in these areas are likely to deteriorate further. High wheat prices are not something to be welcomed.

At the same time, there is need to question how durable the impact of high wheat prices between late 2007 and mid 2009 will be on Afghan farmers. After all, prices are considerably lower than they were in mid 2008. With the increase in wheat flour imports from Kazakhstan this winter season, it is possible that prices in Pakistan will have less influence on wheat prices in Afghanistan than they have had in the past. Yet another year in which farmers in the south maintain existing levels of wheat cultivation might drive down price expectations for subsequent seasons. Much will depend on the impact of this year’s relatively dry winter in Afghanistan and its impact on wheat yields, as well as the productivity of cereals and imports of wheat flour from neighbouring states. An increase in opium prices this year in response to another season of relatively low levels of cultivation, as well as falling yields due to disease, could further shift the incentive to return to opium poppy in the 2010/11 growing season. In the south, the possibility of a return to more widespread opium poppy cultivation in 2010/11 would be limited by farmers’ memories of the impact opium overproduction had on their food security in the 2007/08 growing season, and to what extent agricultural diversification and job creation can be encouraged. However, if the security situation in the north, east and central regions continue to deteriorate and opium prices increase, the authorities would find their ability to prevent a return to opium production in the 2010/11 growing season further constrained—

after all, it is easier to enforce a ban when prices are low.

2.3 A foundation of shifting sands?

Much of the narrative in the media and amongst policymakers regarding the ban on opium production in Nangarhar focuses on the importance of the governor. Implicit within this explanation is the language of the governor's authority—"command and control"—over the province and his "commitment" to reducing opium production.³⁴ While some doubt his motives, no one doubts the results. A similar narrative is used in the description of reductions in opium production in Balkh and to some extent recent efforts in Helmand—although somewhat overstated in the latter case.³⁵ These discussions are often supplemented with claims of "good governance."³⁶ While this narrative sits well within the language of the "warlord" and the "strongman" so often synonymous with Afghanistan, it does not reflect the complex and multilayered bargaining processes that have been used to deliver reductions in cultivation in provinces like Nangarhar and Balkh, nor the limitations of any single actor in such a complex and evolving environment.³⁷

³⁴ "In some Afghan provinces we have seen that where political leaders have had the courage and foresight to weather short term criticism in favour of long term results, there has been progress." Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, "International Narcotics Control Strategy Report," 17.

³⁵ "Combined with economic factors, this reduction was a direct result of the leadership of Helmand's Governor, Gulabaddin Mangal." Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, "International Narcotics Control Strategy Report," 99; "The Governor's efforts in Helmand have been particularly effective in reducing and preventing poppy cultivation in that province," Statement for the Record of James A. Bever, Director of USAID's Afghanistan-Pakistan Task Force, US House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs, Hearing on Transnational Drug Enterprises (Part II): "Threats to Global Stability and US Policy Responses," 3 March 2010, 4.

³⁶ See Adam Pain, "'Let them Eat Promises': Closing the Opium Poppy Fields in Balkh and its Consequences" (Kabul: AREU, 2008); and UNODC/MCN, "Winter Rapid Assessment" (2010), 1.

³⁷ "As the moves of interdependent players intertwine, no single player nor any group of players acting alone can determine the course of the game no matter how powerful they may be." N. Elias, cited in C. Mowles, R. Stacey and D. Griffin, "What Contribution can Insights from the Complexity Sciences make to the Theory and Practice of Development

The truth is that falling levels of opium production cannot simply be attributed to the state's capacity and willingness to enforce the law, as some might suggest. After all, in a country like Afghanistan, or indeed any other major drug-crop producing country, the state does not have a monopoly of violence and many of those that have acquired formal positions in the government have a history as "violent entrepreneurs" and perhaps even previous involvement in the drugs trade.³⁸ Behind what would appear to be a province-wide ban enforced by a dominant governor lies a set of long and complex negotiations between former commanders and combatants, each seeking to maintain or strengthen their political and economic interests. These individuals in turn have rivals and adversaries who seek to undermine the position of the current dominant powerbroker with the local community to gain political and economic advantage.

Engaging in efforts to reduce opium production risks the political capital of local powerbrokers. Consequently, local leaders who are involved in counter-narcotics efforts have to be seen to be distributing political and economic favour if they are to maintain influence. The longer a ban on opium production is maintained, or perhaps the higher the opium price during the period in which the prohibition is enforced, the greater the cost incurred by those communities in areas where viable alternatives to opium poppy do not exist. Those local actors that do see some political and economic advantage in supporting the provincial governor in his efforts to reduce opium poppy will need to ensure that a critical mass of the rural population gain something for their loss if they are not to find themselves vulnerable to removal or acts of violence. It is for this reason that the international community has sought to bolster the influence of governors and those supporting poppy bans at a district or subdistrict level through development efforts and interventions such as the Good Performance Initiative (GPI), which specifically "rewards provinces in which poppy

Management?," in *Journal of International Development* 20 (2008): 804-820.

³⁸ Dipali Mukhopadhyay, "Disguised Warlordism and Combatanthood in Balkh: The Presence of Informal Power in the Formal Afghan State," *Conflict, Security and Development* 9, no. 4 (2009): 535-564, p. 546.

cultivation has been significantly reduced or eliminated.”³⁹

However, as the example of Nangarhar shows, the population in the Spin Ghar piedmont clearly find themselves economically disadvantaged. Efforts to bolster development assistance, including through GPI,⁴⁰ have often not matched the initial promises made to communities and have been delivered later than agreed. In fact, many of these areas have received lower levels of development investment per capita than the more prosperous parts of Nangarhar, where opium has played a far more limited role in rural livelihoods.⁴¹ With small plots of land, high population densities and currently limited opportunities for viable cash crops, much of the population in the southern districts of Nangarhar has had little choice but to search for non-farm income opportunities, which have been increasingly scarce.

While the ANA has proven to be an important safety valve in these more remote districts of Nangarhar, as well as other parts of Afghanistan that have given up opium poppy,⁴² it is not without its risks, given that many regional and local commanders have over the years found themselves increasingly unpopular and faced violent unrest due to forced conscription.⁴³ Although the current process of enlisting young men in the ANA is not conscription per se, it is seen as a direct response to the government’s ban on opium poppy cultivation and the economic shock that this has caused. It is not a choice that many would have elected to make had circumstances been different.

³⁹ Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, “International Narcotics Control Strategy Report Volume 1,” 101.

⁴⁰ “In Nangarhar province, thirteen micro-hydro projects that generate electricity for rural villages have been completed in areas where poppy used to be cultivated.” Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, “International Narcotics Control Strategy Report Volume 1,” 95.

⁴¹ Richard Brittan, “Livelihoods Data Analysis: Initial Nangarhar Province Report,” Unpublished Report for DFID (2008), 24-25.

⁴² Adam Pain cites examples in Badakhshan and Balkh, as does Paul Fishstein; pers. comm., 2009 and 2010.

⁴³ Neamatollah Nojumi, “The Rise and Fall of the Taliban,” and Robert Crews, “Moderate Taliban?,” in *The Taliban and the Crisis of Afghanistan*, edited by Robert Crews and Amin Tarzi (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 94, 262 and 265.

As such, some might argue that it is conscription by default, and were there to be an increase in the number of young men from these areas killed in the fighting in the south it might provoke increasing resentment and potentially resistance to the government and its policies.

Shifting political rivalries and alliances are overlying the economic stresses communities are experiencing in the Spin Ghar piedmont and the kind of precarious coping strategies that are being adopted. Long standing animosities between rival commanders are coming to the fore in the southern districts bordering Pakistan, exacerbated by the presence of insurgent groups and the tensions associated with accusations of political patronage and favouritism during the presidential elections. There is growing public resentment toward the *maliks* who are seen as instrumental in the implementation of the opium poppy ban. Accusations that they have received payments for their support, both in kind and in cash, are commonplace, as are complaints that development assistance has been appropriated by the *maliks* for themselves and their relatives.⁴⁴ Maintaining the support of the rural population in this environment of shifting and competing alliances is challenging. As such, it is unclear whether the recent Anti-Taliban Shinwari Pact is a genuine attempt to expel the insurgency from the five districts known as Loya Shinwar or an attempt by an increasingly unpopular rural elite to present a unified position and shore up further political, financial and possibly military support from the Afghan government and international community.

There are also complaints in Balkh about the lack of compensation for not planting opium poppy,⁴⁵ but here Governor Atta has exerted a higher degree of control over the security apparatus of the state than Shirzai has in Nangarhar.⁴⁶ The shift in the political sands for the Balkh governor lie more with his support for the losing candidate in the presidential election than with a groundswell of public opinion opposing the ban. The districts of Chimal, Chahar Bolak and Sholgara are

⁴⁴ David Mansfield, Unpublished report for DAI (2009).

⁴⁵ Paul Fishstein, forthcoming report on aid and security in Balkh (Ma: Feinstein International Center, Tufts University); and Adam Pain, “Let Them Eat Promises.”

⁴⁶ Dipali Mukhopadhyay, “Disguised Warlordism and Combatantism in Balkh,” 535-564.

considered markedly less secure than they were twelve months ago.⁴⁷ The police and army can only gain access to some parts of these districts if they go in force. The deterioration in security is largely attributed to the presidential election and the view that Pashtuns, Hazaras and Uzbeks are seen to have favoured President Karzai while the Tajik population largely voted for Dr Abdullah. Political patronage and the process of favouring particular commanders in order to secure the vote for the respective presidential candidates exacerbated existing tensions between commanders from different political parties. In some cases commanders have been killed or have sided with insurgents and each side has accused the other of arming opponents.

Uncertainty over the future political careers of Governors Atta and Shirzai fuels insecurity and the possibility of further shifts in the political alliances and rivalries in the provinces of Nangarhar and Balkh. In Nangarhar, the belief

that the governor enforced a second year of the opium ban in the 2008/09 growing season to gain the political support of the US government in case he decided to run in the presidential election in 2009 has only increased the population's resentment toward him. The political situation in the province remains tense and it is becoming increasingly unclear how events will evolve over 2010 and into the next growing season in 2010/11. In Balkh, the resurrection of Atta's political and military rival Abdul Rashid Dostum and the governor's public differences with President Karzai challenges the perception of the governor's authoritarian rule and creates an environment in which disgruntled commanders may look to exact more rent for their loyalty. It seems that even if both governors remain in their posts, the fluid political environments in Nangarhar and Balkh will challenge their capacity to maintain policies that are increasingly unpopular with the rural population. All deals would be off if these governors are moved on.

3. A Policy Refocused?

It is clear from the analysis presented so far that the reasons for the current reductions in opium production in Afghanistan and the responses are multifaceted and context-specific, differing from province to province and within provinces. It is also clear that these reductions remain precarious. They are largely built on the substitution of wheat for opium poppy. Only a few areas have replaced opium poppy with more diversified livelihoods based on high-value horticulture and non-farm income opportunities. In fact, many who have abandoned opium poppy are incurring a high cost and do not have viable alternatives. The terms of trade between opium poppy and wheat have already changed and once again favour opium. While we can see that price expectations currently lag behind this shift in the terms of trade, they may well adjust to lower wheat prices in the next growing season. While coercion not to plant has been effective in some provinces, it has not been the determining factor behind the move out of opium poppy across much of Afghanistan. Even in those provinces where governors have taken a proactive position on opium and reached political bargains with

local elites to create the conditions for the prohibition of opium, the economic burden imposed on much of the rural population, as well as political developments associated with the insurgency and the presidential elections, raise questions about the sustainability of such low levels of cultivation. It is unclear whether new political settlements could be established to continue effective prohibition if opium prices rise, governors change or security worsens.

Counter-narcotics policy is also evolving. The United States has refocused its efforts away from eradication and toward both rural development and interdiction. Particular emphasis has been given to targeting traffickers thought to be cooperating with insurgents. The metrics have also been refocused; away from the number of hectares of opium cultivated or destroyed, as has been the priority over the last few years, toward increasing licit crop production, the number of "poppy free" provinces and prosecutions of drug traffickers. There are, however, tensions between the new policy direction and the complex realities on the ground, particularly with the evolution in eradication policy as well as in efforts to counter what has been referred to as "narco-insurgent-

⁴⁷ Fieldwork undertaken in November 2009 for the UK Drivers Report 2010 (forthcoming).

criminal nexus.”⁴⁸ This section explores these two policy issues in more detail as a way of illustrating some of the limitations and consequences of attempting to narrowly define and “tame”⁴⁹ what are complex evolving problems.

3.1 “Poppy free” provinces: Eradication by another name?

With the current “move away from a focus on eradication,”⁵⁰ the relentless discussion on crop destruction, which seemed to occupy a disproportionate amount of time and effort compared to what it actually delivered, has certainly tailed off. Previous advocates of more aggressive eradication have even tempered their views.⁵¹ However, eradication has not been abandoned altogether—nor should it be.⁵² Instead, it has gone through a process of “Afghanisation.” The Afghan government is now in the lead, with Governor-Led Eradication becoming the only vehicle for crop destruction. Indeed, recent plans released by the Ministry of Counter Narcotics (MCN) estimate a budget of US\$2.2 million for eradication across 13 provinces this season.⁵³

⁴⁸ Commander of the NATO International Security Assistance Force / US Forces—Afghanistan, *ISAF Campaign Plan*, November 2009, Slide 12. Abbreviations in the original have been expanded.

⁴⁹ “Unintended consequences tend to occur even more frequently if the problem has been artificially tamed, that is it has been too narrowly addressed and the multiple causes and interconnections not fully explored prior to measures being introduced.” Australian Public Service Commission, “Tackling Wicked Problems: A Public Policy Perspective” (Canberra: 2007), 12.

⁵⁰ David Johnson, Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, briefing on the release of the 2010 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report (Washington, DC: 1 March 2010).

⁵¹ “Target rich criminals not poor farmers. In the past the focus was on eradication rather than interdiction. It did not work.” UNODC/MCN, “Afghanistan Opium Survey 2009 Summary Findings” (2009), ii.

⁵² For a considered discussion on eradication in Afghanistan, see David Mansfield and Adam Pain, “Opium Eradication in Afghanistan: How to Raise Risk when there is Nothing to Lose?” (Kabul: AREU, 2006); and David Mansfield and Adam Pain, “Evidence from the Field: Understanding Changing Levels of Opium Poppy Cultivation in Afghanistan” (Kabul: AREU, 2007).

⁵³ In these plans, the cost varies from zero in the province of Kapisa to US\$810,000 in Helmand. The budget for eradication in Nangarhar, a province that is considered almost poppy free, is \$270,000, while in Farah, where UNODC estimates

There are of course some risks associated with an eradication programme led by the provincial authorities. There is certainly considerable evidence in southern Afghanistan of the authorities primarily targeting those without the necessary finances and political connections to deter crop destruction. Some of those involved in rural development in the south have gone further, arguing that if eradication is the only face of the government in the rural areas and that face is sneering, partial and predatory, then crop destruction can undermine the legitimacy of the state. Hence, leaving eradication policy and implementation solely to the Afghan authorities might well stand contrary to other efforts to “increase Afghans’ confidence in their government.”⁵⁴

A further possible area of tension in the recent shift in eradication policy may lie in the redefining of the metrics for judging the counter-narcotics effort. While a fall in the number of hectares cultivated and the often related target of an increase in the number of hectares eradicated are no longer milestones in the current US administration’s counter-narcotics effort, they have been replaced by another area-based target, that of increasing the number of “poppy free” provinces. This could be inconsistent. In many cases a province will only attain “poppy free” status this year if the residual amount of opium poppy being cultivated is destroyed. In fact, this is precisely the position that UNODC is advocating, arguing for “timely elimination” in 2010 in the provinces of Badakhshan, Baghlan, Faryab, Kabul, Kunar, Laghman, Nangarhar and Sar-i-Pul.⁵⁵ But what is known about these areas where opium poppy cultivation persists?

In Laghman, for example, negligible levels of opium poppy are cultivated in the mountainous and remote areas of the districts of Alishing and Alingar, where landholdings are small and income opportunities are limited. The same is true of Nangarhar, where small amounts of opium are grown in the more remote parts of the districts of Achin, Hisarak, Sherzad, Khogyani and Lal Pur. In Baghlan, cultivation is reported to continue in parts of Andarab, a district where armed men can

that 12,405 ha of opium were grown in 2009, the estimated cost is only \$27,000. MCN, Survey and Monitoring Directorate, “Provincial Eradication Plans” (2010).

⁵⁴ Statement for the Record of James A. Bever, 4.

⁵⁵ UNODC/MCN, “Winter Rapid Assessment,” 2, 24.

be seen in the main bazaar and where the writ of the government has never been strong. In Kabul Province, opium persists in Uzbeen in the district of Surobi, and almost every district in Kunar has just a few hectares. None of these areas would be considered benign from a security perspective, nor are they areas where farmers have viable alternatives.

In these circumstances, one has to wonder what the marginal benefits of the destruction of a few hundred hectares would be. The gain would be an additional “poppy free” province—an incremental milestone that currently represents counter-narcotics progress. But what would be the loss, particularly in areas that already appear to be remote and insecure? If there is indeed a growing recognition amongst policymakers that crop destruction will only deter future opium poppy cultivation if households have viable alternatives, it could be counter-productive to pursue an increase in the number of “poppy free” provinces regardless of the circumstances of those persisting with opium production in these areas. Is such a target consistent with a position that has argued that “eradication undermined the counterinsurgency effort by targeting Afghan farmers?”⁵⁶

3.2 Targeting the insurgency-narcotics nexus: A way to further undermine governance?

Much of the discussion in media and policy circles focuses on the role that the drugs trade plays in funding and motivating the Taliban in Afghanistan—with continuing debate over the proportion of their total funds that is derived from the illegal opium economy and what the appropriate response might be. Estimates of the revenue generated by the Taliban (although it is often unclear which insurgent groups are included under this heading) range from US\$70 million to \$500 million per year,⁵⁷ suggesting that there is a need for further refinement of these calculations. There are suggestions that the Taliban are directly

⁵⁶ Office of the Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, *Afghanistan and Pakistan Regional Stabilization Strategy* (Washington, DC: US Department of State, 2010), 16.

⁵⁷ “Afghanistan’s Narco War: Breaking the Link Between Drug Traffickers and Insurgents. A Report to the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate” (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 2009), 10.

involved in the production and processing of opiates themselves and have become no more than criminal organisations, discarding their political or religious doctrines in favour of the pursuit of profit and market share.⁵⁸ UNODC has even suggested that the Taliban are engaged in market manipulation, retaining stocks of opium so as to prevent further reductions in the price of opium and looking to impose a further ban on opium poppy cultivation to increase the value of their inventories.⁵⁹ As such, the Taliban are now increasingly seen as synonymous with drug traffickers and an increasing number of reports use these two terms as if they are one and the same thing.⁶⁰ The policy response to these claims has been to target for kill or capture those traffickers with links to the insurgency. This has resulted in some high profile arrests, seizures and subsequent destruction of opiates.

Yet, while perhaps attractive to some, and undoubtedly there is some degree of truth to the claims, this image of the Talib as drugs trafficker and the drugs trafficker as Talib is not the one that is most recognisable to the bulk of the Afghan population. In fact, there is a growing belief in the south that those working for the government are more actively involved in the trade in narcotics than the Taliban.⁶¹ Even in other parts of the country, accusations are made against senior government officials and are widely believed by rural Afghans. Indeed, farmers in some of the most remote rural areas often claim that it is only those in positions of power in their area that can trade illegal drugs. These farmers will typically go on to make allegations against local, provincial and even national government officials. Governors that have banned opium production are also accused of market dominance and the manipulation of prices for self-interest. Regardless of the evidence (or lack of) to support any of these claims, they are widely believed to be true by the rural population. The implications for the legitimacy of the state and its institutions are clear.

However, despite what would appear to be attempts to portray the drugs trade as partisan

⁵⁸ Gretchen Peters, “How Opium Profits the Taliban,” United States Institute of Peace (Washington, DC: 2009).

⁵⁹ UNODC/MCN, “Afghanistan Opium Survey 2008” (Kabul: 2008), 3.

⁶⁰ “Afghanistan’s Narco War.”

⁶¹ Mansfield, “Responding to Risk and Uncertainty.”

and dominated by either “the Taliban” or “the government” (but typically the former), there is a growing recognition of the role that both insurgents and corrupt government officials play in the drugs trade. There are even concerns over the level of cooperation that might exist between state and anti-state actors in provinces like Helmand, not only in facilitating the movement of drugs from one part of the country to another but also in engineering a level of instability in a given area so that the production and trade of opium can thrive. More recently, there have also been attempts to provide a disaggregated picture of the insurgency and to differentiate between the various groups within what has often been too simply labelled as “the Taliban.”⁶² This is welcome. However, the issue that needs much more attention, both in terms of analysis and policy response, is the question of how much the insurgency has become “demand led,” driven in part by the rural populations perception of unparalleled levels of corruption within the Afghan administration, including their involvement in the drugs trade.

If this is the case, surely the highest priority should be to improve the quality of governance in Afghanistan and tackle corruption (including government involvement in the drugs trade) rather than prioritise the targeting of traffickers with links to the Taliban? In fact, a strategy that

prioritises the “kill or capture” of traffickers with links to the insurgency is most likely to eliminate competition and increase the market power of those government officials involved in the trade. Moreover, it is unlikely that this course of action would achieve much with regard to reducing the flow of opiates out of Afghanistan if those in government were not also pursued. But more importantly, it could prove counter-productive in terms of improving the legitimacy of the Afghan government in the eyes of the local population.

In summary, counter-narcotics policy in Afghanistan is moving on. The good news is that it is learning from some of the evidence that has been presented regarding what has worked and what has not. However, the bad news is that it remains confined by its partial understanding of what is a complex and dynamic problem with multiple causes and emergent behaviour. The metrics used to determine progress still fail to reflect a durable process of movement out of opium production and instead largely focus on outputs. There is a danger that were policy to become target-led, be it in the number of “poppy free” provinces or the prosecution of narco-traffickers cooperating with the insurgency, it could well lead to unintended consequences that might negate recent attempts to better locate counter-narcotics policy, as well as the overall Afghan strategy, with a population-centric approach.

4. The Way Forward

Although counter-narcotics policy is not static, it clearly lags behind the constantly evolving realities of rural Afghanistan. This is no surprise. The production and trade of illegal drugs is highly adaptive and responds to multiple economic, political and environmental stimuli. Counter-narcotics policy, on the other hand, is typically developed far from the field through a political dialogue between different organisations with different mandates and with different definitions and understandings of the problem to be

addressed. Distance and a lack of exposure to the primary stakeholders involved in illegal drug production allows policy positions to become embedded, built on articles of faith rather than evidence from the field. Moreover, the discussion is often led by individuals with strong ideological or institutional positions and interests. The polemic nature of the public debate on illegal drugs only serves to undermine efforts to present a more nuanced understanding of those involved in opium production in Afghanistan and to develop a policy that better reflects ground realities. Some progress is being made but much more needs to be done if resurgence in cultivation is not to provoke knee-jerk policy responses in subsequent seasons.

There is a clear need for a more dynamic process of counter-narcotics policy development to be put

⁶² See Michael Semple, *Reconciliation in Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: United States Institute for Peace, 2009); and Thomas Ruttig’s work, including “The Other Side: Dimensions of the Afghan Insurgency: Causes, Actors and Approaches to Talks” (Afghanistan Analysts Network, 2009), and his critique of the Taliban and drugs narrative, “UNODC sees Drugs Cartels Emerging with One Eye Closed” (Afghanistan Analysts Network, 2009).

into practice. The diverse and constantly evolving nature of the drugs issue in Afghanistan, combined with a high turnover of Afghan and international staff involved in the counter-narcotics effort, many of whom are restricted to Kabul or behind Hesco barriers, can prevent policy from responding to the new and multiple realities on the ground. This process can be housed in the planned review of the Afghan National Drug Control Strategy but it needs to engage with a broader community of development, law enforcement and health practitioners and not limit itself to those labeled as the “drug control community.” This should not be a one-off exercise but a constant process of review that is informed by evidence of what works and why.

Related to the subject of informed policy development is that the counter-narcotics targets need to be revisited regularly. Opium production in Afghanistan is not a well-defined and well-structured problem with a specific solution that can be worked out. It is evolving and our understanding of it needs to evolve too. While institutions need targets to report against to justify their budgets, they also need to understand whether the delivery of these targets is actually achieving objectives, leading to adaptations that require further evolution in counter-narcotics policy and practice, or are undermining the wider Afghan effort.

As part of this work, more emphasis needs to be placed on qualitative shifts in indicators. For example, statistics that focus on the quantity and location of opium production tell us little about why cultivation changes and how sustainable the changes are. Direct questions to farmers that reduce the reasons for cultivating or not to a range of nominal data (often not mutually exclusive) are misplaced. There is a real need to capture not only that opium poppy has been abandoned or relocated but what has replaced it. If it is wheat then it is clear that the reductions are unlikely to be durable; if it is a range of different high-value crops, this constitutes evidence that there is a more permanent shift out of opium production. With developments in commercial remote sensing, the measurement of the proportion of land allocated to horticultural crops is becoming more feasible, allowing assessments of both investments in the rural development effort and the sustainability of counter-narcotics efforts to be conducted at the same time.

There is a real need to recognise opium poppy cultivation as contextual. It is a symptom of poor governance, lack of security and the absence of viable economic opportunities, rather than the cause of these problems. Therefore, blindly pursuing area-based targets—be they the crude hectare targets of old or the repackaged “poppy free” provinces that we are now becoming increasingly familiar with—may only worsen the socioeconomic and political conditions on the ground. Much more needs to be done to understand why opium poppy persists in these areas if the pursuit of more “poppy free” provinces is not to subsequently reinforce the conditions that lead to increasing levels of opium poppy cultivation.

Bearing this in mind, it is also important to recognise that a return to opium poppy cultivation in the future does not necessarily reflect a failure of the counter-narcotics effort, in the same way that reductions over the last three years do not necessarily represent a success. Instead, any resurgence in cultivation will be the result of an evolving economic and political environment, primarily due to shifting price expectations but also to changes in the political and security environment, which has in part been shaped by the economic impact of prohibition and the fall in the price of opium. Understanding the issue of attribution is important if we are not to see a return to the language and policies of comprehensive eradication and further attempts to reduce opium production through the provision of short-term agricultural inputs.

Finally, the drugs issue, as a complex and evolving social phenomenon, does not sit comfortably within the responsibility of any one organisation in Afghanistan—national or international. While counter-narcotics is recognised as a crosscutting issue, it largely remains the bastion of the drug control community and is often ignored by others or reduced to a set of activities: eradication, interdiction and wheat seed provision. The MCN has failed to engage others within its own government and the international community. Typically, counter-narcotics remains a parallel strand or objective in most bilateral programmes. Like other crosscutting issues in Afghanistan, counter-narcotics is better suited within a presidential commission with cross-ministerial ownership.