

# High and Dry:

Poppy cultivation and the future of those that reside in  
the former desert areas of South West Afghanistan

David Mansfield  
November 2018





Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit

Issues paper

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Editing: Usman Shah Zahirzai

ISBN: 978-9936-641-13-6

Front and back cover photos: Solar panels on sale in Lashkar Gah, Helmand, May 2018

Photos: Alcis, OSDR, David Mansfield

AREU Publication Code: 1817E

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In 2018, AREU was awarded Best International Social Think Tank by Prospect Magazine.



International \* Social

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report would not be possible without the hard work of colleagues at the Organisation for Sustainable Research and Development who continue to conduct fieldwork under increasingly difficult circumstances. The dedication of the team in Kabul and colleagues in the field is commendable.

The value of the geospatial support of the team at Alcis Ltd—in particular Richard Brittan, Matt Angell and Madeline Alston—cannot be overestimated. The mapping and geospatial products that they provide are not only visual displays of the research findings; they are a fundamental part of the diagnostic work used to identify appropriate research sites and further explore the results of data collection on the ground. While data collected through both remote sensing and ground surveys offer valuable insights on current developments in rural Afghanistan, integrating the two methods throughout the entire research cycle has yielded far more information about why particular events occur.

Further thanks go to a group of esteemed colleagues for their comments on earlier drafts of this report. They are (in alphabetical order) Sultan Mohammed Ahmadi, Richard Brittan, Ghulam Rasool and two anonymous reviewers. The time they put into this task and their insights are very much appreciated; the work would not be the same without their valuable input. Thanks also go to the publishing team at AREU for their patience and skills in editing and making this an easier read than when they first received it. Needless to say, any mistakes made in the final report are those of the authors.

Finally, thanks go to the European Union for their continued support for longitudinal analytical work on the role of opium poppy in rural livelihood strategies in Afghanistan. Without the funding and moral support they provide for this work, our understanding of the different socioeconomic, political and environmental factors that shape the multiple realities in rural Afghanistan, and the impact of these factors on levels of opium poppy cultivation, would be severely constrained. We would then be left with the kind of simplistic quantitative data and metrics that all too often shape the drugs policy debate in Afghanistan and other source countries.

## FORWORDE

AREU is pleased to present our readers with this paper, which has been the culmination of the hard work and diligent efforts of our researchers and partners. We are grateful to them for their dedication to studying a subject matter that significantly impacts the lives of Afghan people. We are also thankful to the European Union for their continuous support of our research on Natural Resources Management (NRM).

The have experienced a drastic transformation with land that was once dry now cleared, irrigated, and planted with crops. This has led to an influx of new settlers, with around 3.6 million people residing there currently and since 2002, an additional 357, 885 hectares of agricultural land has been cultivated. This migration has primarily been to the former desert area north of the Boghra Canal in Helmand province. An increase in access to technology combined with relatively low land prices as well as the recovery of opium yields continue to draw new settlers to the area. However, despite the increase in productivity in this former desert areas, the lives of the population as well as the productivity itself is precarious.

The recent increase in access to technology such as herbicides and solar energy to power deep wells has helped farmers mitigate the perils of low yields and to lower productions. However, this technology comes with the heavy cost and is not sustainable in the long run because it is depleting groundwater levels and there have been signs of water contaminations due to the nitrates in the solar technology. Adding to the that, lower yields and falling opium prices has made the lives of the people in the former desert lands very difficult, particularly in the Bakwa area.

The population of this area expresses anger towards the government for being driven out of the Boghra canal by authorities. They not only blame security operations and air raids for displacing them but also for giving the authorities an opportunity to “loot their houses”.

Dr. Mansfield’s paper *High and Dry: Poppy Cultivation and the Future of Those Who Reside in the Former Desert Areas of South West Afghanistan*, uses detailed fieldwork and imagery to document the changes in the lives of the population in these former desert areas of the west. It tracks the changes in agricultural practice, governance, the experiences of men and women living in these areas, and the extreme fragility and vulnerability of the population. One of the most unique aspects of this paper that it delves into subject that little is known about, which is the lives of women in these areas given how secluded and inaccessible to researchers they are.

This paper, like many of Dr. Mansfield’s works, is critical to our understanding of the all-encompassing impact of opium poppy production in Afghanistan. The findings shared in this paper can bring much needed insight to development workers, civil society, and the Afghan government on this subject matter and help shape future efforts.



**Dr. Orzala Nemat**  
AREU Director

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Mansfield is a Senior Fellow at the London School of Economics. He has been conducting research on rural livelihoods and poppy cultivation in Afghanistan for twenty one consecutive growing seasons. He has a PhD in development studies from the School of Oriental and African Studies, London and is the author of *A State Built on Sand: How opium undermined Afghanistan*. David has worked for AREU since 2005.



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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The deserts of southwestern Afghanistan have been transformed. Land that was once dry and strewn with rocks, has been cleared, irrigated, and planted with crops by an influx of new settlers. The pace of the settlement of the former desert areas of the southwest is such that by 2018 there was an additional 357,885 hectares of agricultural land compared to 2002, and possibly as many as 3.6 million people residing there.<sup>1</sup> And at a time when the north of the country is experiencing a dramatic drought, a further 29,000 hectares of land came under cultivation in the former deserts of the southwest between 2017 and 2018. In fact, more land was cultivated in the former desert north of the Boghra Canal in Helmand in 2018 than ever before, and there were further signs of migration into the area from farmers looking to escape the uptick in violence in the canal irrigated area following the government's efforts to recapture parts of Nad Ali. The change is such that the former desert lands north of the of the Boghra in Helmand are almost indistinguishable from those areas to the south where US\$ 75 million, much of it provided by the United States, was invested in more than 200 km of irrigation canals over a three-decade period.<sup>2</sup>

Increased access to technology, relatively low land prices—and at least in the area north of the Boghra Canal—a recovery of opium yields—continue to draw people into these former desert lands. The population has dug in. The markets, that once straddled the Boghra canal, and thereby served both the populations of the desert to the north and the irrigated areas to the south, have lost their importance. Permanent markets have been established deep in the former desert area, north of the canal, reflecting the changing face of central Helmand, the growth in the settled population in these former empty spaces, and the increasing purchasing power of those that live there.

However, despite these obvious gains the productivity of these former desert places—and thereby the lives of the population that reside there—is precarious. In recent years the uptick in technology such as herbicides and the use of solar technology to power deep wells has helped farmers overcome falling yields and lower production costs. But at the same time these developments pose a threat to agricultural sustainability and the livelihoods of the population in these former desert areas. The ground water that the area relies on is falling at an increasing rate with the growth in solar-powered technology and there are signs that it is contaminated with nitrates.

This paper draws on detailed fieldwork and imagery in 2018 to document the changes in the lives and livelihoods of the population in these rapidly expanding former desert areas of the southwest. It traces changes in agricultural practice, governance and the experiences of the population, both men and women, to illustrate how fragile life is for those living in these former desert areas and the vulnerability of the population. The paper is pioneering in its efforts to document the lives and livelihoods of women in these former desert areas where prevailing levels of insecurity, the tradition of seclusion, and the challenges of conducting fieldwork in the remote former desert spaces mean that this is a population group whose voices are rarely heard.

1 Based on the body of data collected in the former desert areas of the southwest population densities vary from 1 person per *jerib* of agricultural land in Bakwa to 2 people per *jerib* of agricultural land in the area north of the Boghra in Helmand. This translates to a total population of between 1.79 million to 3.59 million people for the additional 357,885 ha of land cultivated. While this may appear to be high based on Central Statistics Office estimates of a Helmand population of 940,237 in 2017, a more sophisticated population model drawing on high resolution imagery has estimated the population of Helmand as 2,111,227 million and the population on Farah as 599,696, in contrast to the official estimate of 515,973 (WorldPop-Flowminder 2017; 51). High resolution imagery also shows that as of 2013 there were 26,032 individual household compounds north of the Boghra at a time when there were 45,660 hectares of agricultural land (Alcis 2013). This equates to an average of 1.75 household compounds per hectare of agricultural land. With the numbers of household members north of the Boghra typically ranging from 8 to 12, this equates to between 14 and 21 people per hectare or between 2.8 and 4.2 people per *jerib*, higher than the estimates here. This analysis of household compounds in 2013 also indicates there were 263,454 household compounds in Helmand as a whole, as such the area north of the Boghra, represented around 10% of all household compounds in the province. Since then there has been further growth in the amount of land and the number of households north of the Boghra.

2 Monica Whitlock, "Helmand's Golden Age," [http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/special/2014/newsspec\\_8529/index.html](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/special/2014/newsspec_8529/index.html) (date accessed: 1 November 2018)

The paper is divided into six sections. The first section outlines the methodology used to conduct research in such difficult and insecure terrain. The second section examines the contrasting histories of settlement of two former desert areas: the area north of the Boghra canal in Helmand and Bakwa, some 100 kilometers to the northwest. The third section looks at the changing face of governance in these former desert areas. It highlights just how incidental the government is to those that live in places like Bakwa and north of the Boghra and provides evidence of the insurgency's growing influence over the population's way of life in matters of security, justice, education, and even environmental policy. The fourth section details agricultural production over the winter of 2017-18 and highlights the critical role that opium production plays in the economic viability of these former desert areas. The fifth section documents the experiences of those that live in these former desert areas, with a particular focus on those women that migrate to the area north of the Boghra Canal on a seasonal basis. Finally, a conclusion is offered.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This paper documents the results of the latest round of research conducted in 20 research sites in two former desert areas in southwestern Afghanistan (See Figure 2).<sup>3</sup> The research in 2018 consisted of in-depth interviews with 111 farmers in eight research sites<sup>4</sup> in the area north of the Boghra Canal in Helmand Province and 180 interviews with farmers in 12 research sites in Bakwa in Farah Province.<sup>5</sup> A further 25 interviews were conducted with individuals providing services to the population in the former desert areas in the cities of Lashkar Gah, Gereshk, Farah and Delarem, including those trading solar panels, diesel, pesticides and the leasing of drilling equipment for sinking deepwells.

Another 51 interviews were conducted with women who resided in the desert on either a seasonal basis or who had lived in the desert throughout the year but had returned to the canal irrigated areas to live. This part of the research was seen as providing an invaluable insight into an important but hard to access population group who are an essential part of the labour force required to settle the former desert lands and bringing them under agricultural production, and who may have some authority over decisions over seasonal and permanent migration to the former desert areas and the livelihoods pursued once there.

High-resolution, satellite imagery was integral to the research design. Geospatial data on areas of vegetation was combined with multi-dated high-resolution imagery to examine the history of settlement in the former desert area. Research sites were then identified based on the duration of settlement, ranging from sites that showed evidence of agricultural production prior to 2003 to those settled in 2013. Satellite imagery was then used to verify that fieldworkers had been to the identified sites, and examine the results of primary data collection. High-resolution satellite imagery allowed further exploration of primary research findings including the identification of crops under cultivation and of new or damaged physical infrastructure, and measurement of changes in the cultivated areas. Finally, geospatial analysis supported the extrapolation of research findings over a wider geographic area beyond the research sites themselves.

Fieldwork was undertaken by a team of local researchers. Interviews were conducted during the opium poppy harvest or when it had just come to a close. The research addressed the inherent problems associated with primary data collection when researching an illegal or underground activity by focusing its enquiry on household livelihood strategies. The pressure to act against opium cultivation and trade has made illicit drugs a more sensitive topic for discussion with farmers and other stakeholders than was the case in the 1990s and early 2000s.<sup>6</sup> However, the rural household remains the most accessible unit of analysis when looking at the opium economy in Afghanistan; it offers a basis for cross-referencing findings both with other work on rural livelihoods in Afghanistan, and with other research on the specific role of opium production in rural livelihood strategies in Afghanistan and elsewhere.

Discussions in the field focused on the direct experience of respondents and their households rather than on a wider geographic area, where answers become increasingly speculative.<sup>7</sup> Individual interviews with farming households were conducted in the field as farmers tended their crops, since holding interviews in

3 This research dates back to 2011 in the eight research sites north of the Boghra and to 2013 in the 12 research sites in Bakwa.

4 Fieldwork in the research sites of Dashte Ab Pashak and Shorawak north of the Boghra had to be curtailed due to a “security operation” mounted from Gereshk between 15 to 25 April 2018 at the height of the opium harvest. Farmers complained that this operation largely consisted of the “looting of houses.” It did however lead to violence including fighting between government forces and Taliban, as well as air strikes. This meant that only 6 interviews were possible in Dashte Ab Pashak and fieldwork in Shorawak had to be abandoned altogether.

5 The research in the former desert areas was also supported by longitudinal fieldwork in 12 sites in the main canal-irrigated area of Helmand where many of those that have settled north of the Boghra originate from. The results of this work can be found in several other publications, including most recently, David Mansfield, “Truly Unprecedented: How the Helmand Food Zone Supported an Increase in the Province’s Capacity to Produce Opium,” (Kabul, Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2017).

6 David Mansfield, *A State Built on Sand: How Opium Undermined Afghanistan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

7 Swedish Committee of Afghanistan, 1.

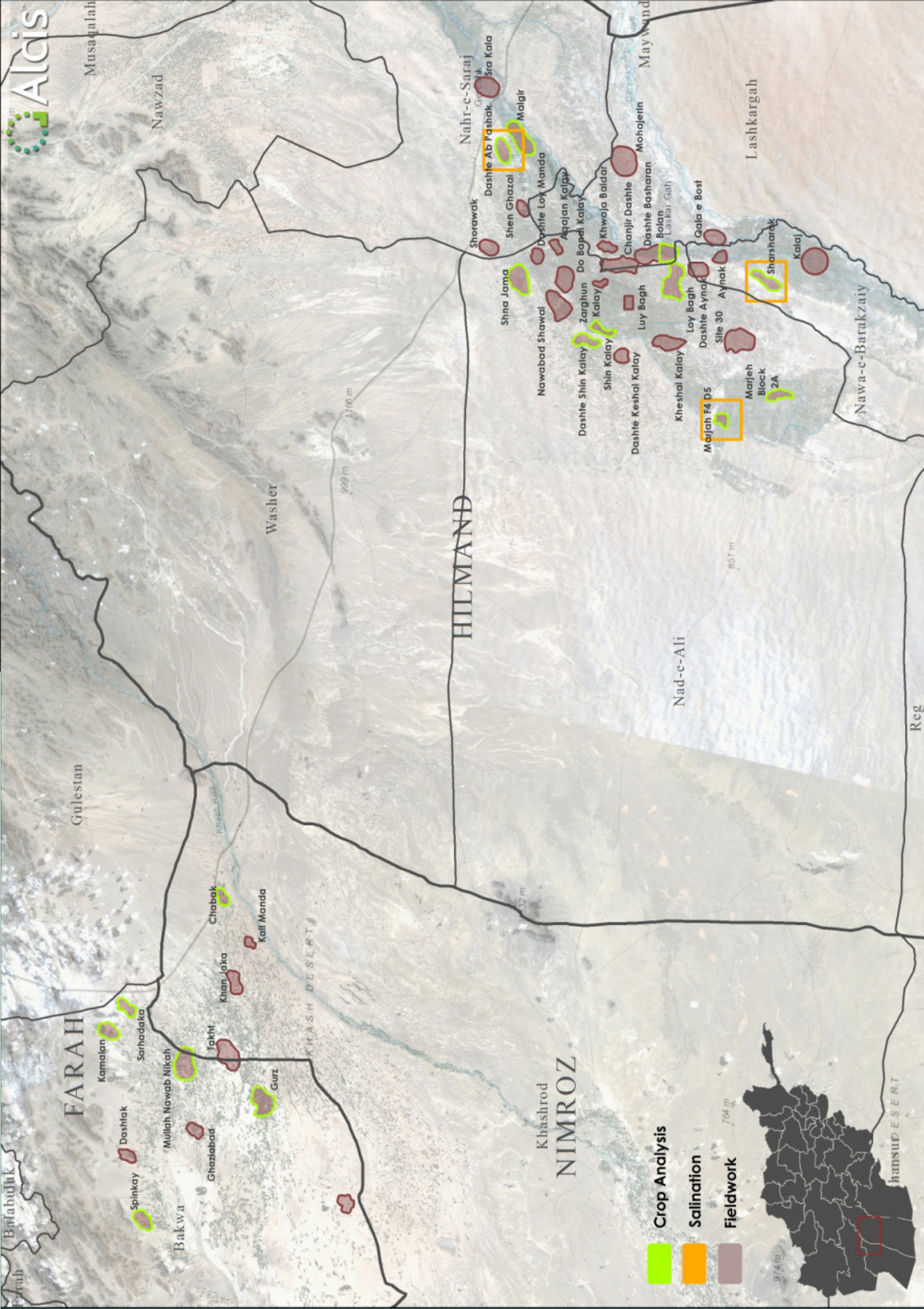
the household compound can attract attention from others and become subject to repeated interruptions and biases. Group discussions with farmers were avoided, as they: a) tended to be dominated by community elites; b) were inappropriate for discussing sensitive issues; and, c) represent a security threat in rural Afghanistan, particularly in the south.<sup>8</sup>

Interviews with women were conducted by a father and daughter team. This research focussed on those families that had lived in the former desert areas north of the Boghra Canal on either a seasonal basis or had lived north of the canal for a number of years but had moved to the canal-irrigated area in 2018. The reason for this particular focus was practical. Insecurity and the cultural restrictions on the movement of women in the areas north of the Boghra in Helmand and in Bakwa made it impossible to deploy a suitably educated female researcher to the former desert areas. Instead, research had to be conducted in the canal-irrigated area of Helmand, targeting the female members of those families that had returned from the former desert area after the opium poppy harvest was finished north of the Boghra. It is recognised that this more limited sample does not represent the views of those women who live in the former desert area year round and on a permanent basis. However, the inclusion of a number of women who had recently returned to the canal command after living there for some years, and having abandoned their farms north of the Boghra, offers some insights into the lives of those women living in the former desert areas on a permanent basis.

Finally, water samples were collected from a total of forty deepwells, 20 of which were from the 12 research sites in Bakwa and a further 20 from the 8 research sites north of the Boghra in Helmand. Both sets of samples were transported to Kabul to be tested. The samples from Helmand were tested for both chemical and biological content. The samples from Bakwa were only tested for chemical content as they could not be collected from the research sites and transported to Kabul within the 24 hours required.



Figure 1: Research sites in the deserts of Southwest Afghanistan



### 3. LET THE DESERTS BLOOM

The settlement of the desert land in the southwest of Afghanistan was rapid. It was governed by existing patterns of settlement and tradition. In some areas land that was initially captured by neighbouring communities and local politico-military actors, was followed by the sale or lease of land, further facilitating the development of these desert areas. In others land ownership was retained by the dominant tribe. Improved access to technology, such as diesel, then solar-powered deepwells, as well as herbicides, allowed farmers to further develop their lands in the face of low opium yields, and spurred further encroachment when yields recovered. The pace of the settlement has been such that by 2018 there were 501,192 ha of land under agriculture in southwest Afghanistan, compared to only 143,357 ha in 2002. This represents a 250 per cent increase in the amount of agricultural land in the southwest over a 16-year period; propelled by the innovation of the local population and funded by illegal drug crop cultivation.

#### 3.1. THE FORMER DESERTS OF HELMAND

In Helmand, the settlement of the former desert areas was driven by those tribes who consider themselves local to the area, the Ishaqzai, Barakzai, Alikozai, Alizai and others. North of the Nahre Boghra in Helmand, the desert lands were initially grabbed by powerful actors linked to former Governor (2001-2006), now Senator, Sher Mohammed Akhundzada. These lands were then gifted through tribal and military patronage networks, and subsequently sold off to farmers from the canal irrigated areas of central Helmand.

A further phase of settlement came with the uptick in violence in 2007 and 2008 and the prohibition of opium poppy in central Helmand in late 2008. The ban on opium poppy, under the auspices of the Helmand Food Zone, led to a particularly rapid rise in the amount of land under agriculture in the former desert areas north of the Boghra, much of it poppy. This program and its focus on substituting poppy with wheat, through a combination of coercion and the provision of wheat seed and fertiliser to land owners, resulted in large numbers of the land-poor relocating to the former desert areas.

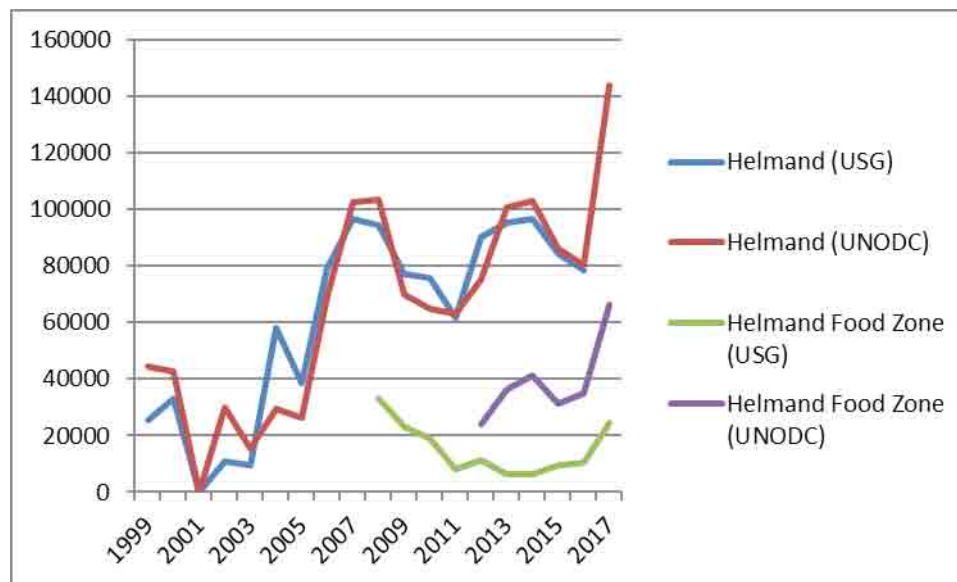
Since the 1990s the labour intensive nature of opium poppy cultivation had provided the land-poor in the canal irrigated area with access to land, shelter, water, loans, and both on-farm and off-farm income. Without the opium crop, the land-poor found themselves with little option but to look for pastures to the north of the Boghra Canal. Once there, this group found life more difficult than it had been in the canal area, and with the influx of large numbers of people in the same position, much more competitive. Consequently, whereas these farmers had received one-third of the final opium crop as sharecroppers in the canal command area, they received only one-fifth of the final crop in the former desert areas. As such, economics dictated that once north of the Boghra these farmers had to grow more opium just to maintain a level of income commensurate with life in the canal command area. The influx of settlers and the rules that determined the distribution of the crop led to a dramatic increase in agricultural land and the area cultivated with opium poppy (see Figure 2).







**Figure 2: Levels of opium poppy cultivation inside and outside the Helmand Food Zone**



The Helmand Food Zone finished in 2012. By 2013, the amount of land cultivated in the area north of the Nahre Boghra and south of Highway 1 had increased to 45,660 hectares, up from 870 hectares in 2003 and 15,143 hectares in 2008 (see Figure 3), much of which was poppy. While the rate of increase in the amount of land cultivated slowed between 2014 and 2017—and even fell in 2014—due to repeated low opium yields—by 2018 the total amount of agricultural land had reached 59,920 hectares, the largest amount reported to date.

### 3.2. THE FORMER DESERTS OF BAKWA

Settlement in the desert lands of Bakwa in neighbouring Farah, took a different form from that of Helmand. In Helmand the process of encroachment was from the settled land to the south of the canal proceeding northwards over time. As time passed almost all the land within five km of the Nahre Boghra was under agriculture and fields could be found as far north as the highway and Camp Bastion, which is located 13 km from the Boghra. Figure 4 shows that by 2018 the density of agricultural land immediately north of the Nahre Boghra was no different from the canal irrigated areas to the south.

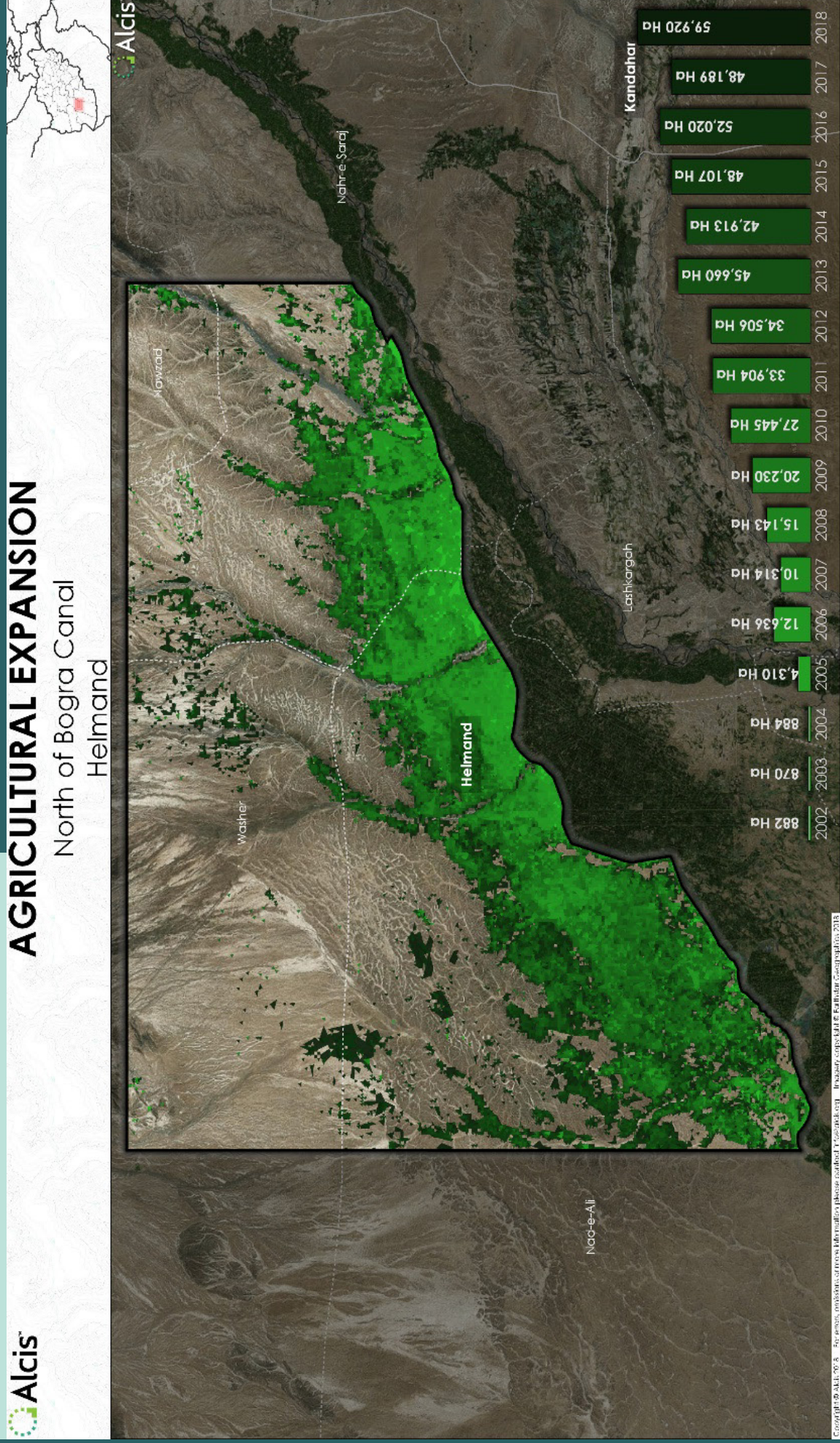
In contrast, in Bakwa encroachment into the desert lands was shaped by an outward movement from 13 villages—the sources of the original settlers in the area. Each of these original villages was irrigated by up to 300 underground water systems known as *karez*<sup>9</sup> and surrounded by desert land. By as early as 1900, as few as 60 of these *karez* were still operating,<sup>10</sup> and by the 1990s, following a period of prolonged drought, shallow wells were dug to compensate for the fall in the amount of water available from the remaining *karez*. In time, this practice led to both the *karez* and the shallow wells drying up. With further technological advances in the late 1990s and early part of the 21st century, most notably the access to deepwell technologies, the desert lands of Bakwa, like the desert areas of Helmand, became viable.

9 Historical and Political Gazetteer of Afghanistan, Vol. 2, Farah and Southwestern Afghanistan, Edited by Adamec, L., 1973, page 30. <https://www.scribd.com/document/243566461/1973-Historical-and-Political-Gazetteer-of-Afghanistan-Vol-2-Farah-and-SW-Afghanistan-s-pdf>.

10 Adamec, *Gazetteer of Afghanistan*, 30. Ibid.



Figure 3: The expansion in the agricultural area north of the Boghra in Helmand province, 2003-2018



It was tradition that guided the division of desert and settlement of the desert lands of Bakwa. Due to the dominance of a single tribe in Bakwa, the original Noorzai settlers, this was less of the free-for-all found in the deserts of Helmand. Tradition and tribal unity required that the land surrounding each village was distributed amongst the landowners, based on the share of the total land they owned in the original village. With thousands of *jeribs* of desert land surrounding each village, some farmers received 100 *jeribs* or even more.

With such large landholdings and with a preference for the original Noorzai settlers retaining ownership, there were few of the land sales. In fact, in Bakwa, an initial flurry of sales to outsiders was soon stopped under tribal agreement. Instead, land settlement in Bakwa relied heavily on sharecroppers and tenant farmers. Those landowners with capital sunk a deepwell or two, and then recruited sharecroppers from within the district, or beyond, to work the land in return for a payment of one-fifth of the final opium crop. As with the desert lands north of the Boghra Canal there was an influx of the land-poor willing to work the land, as well as those fleeing opium bans in Farah district near the provincial centre, and from within the Helmand Food Zone, grateful to find land that they could work and plant poppy.

However, in Bakwa there was also a group of wealthier farmers, those with capital, who were looking for land to farm. These farmers typically worked as tenants for those landowners in Bakwa who had insufficient capital to develop their newly allocated desert lands. These wealthier tenant farmers paid all the costs of production—even the costs of installing the deepwell—but received five-sixths or six-sevenths of the final crop. This tenancy system is particular to the desert lands of the south west, in particular Bakwa, and is known as *lekha*.

The *lekha* system offered opportunities to both tenant and land owner. To spread the costs the tenant incurred for clearing the land and installing a deepwell, the leasehold was for up to five years. After the five years were up those working under a *lekha* arrangement could move on but during the period of the lease they had received the lion's share of the opium crop. The landowner received only a small proportion of the annual yield of the land for the first five years. However, once the lease ended they had a viable farm that could be worked by the family or by a sharecropper on an annual basis, who would receive only one fifth of the final crop. Most importantly land ownership was retained by the original settlers in Bakwa, the Noorzai.





Figure 4: The density of agricultural land north and south of the  
Boghra Canal in Helmand



## 4. IN THE ABSENCE OF THE GOVERNMENT

As the previous section has highlighted traditional patterns of land ownership governed the settlement of the former desert spaces of the southwest. In Bakwa the dominant Noorzai and the initial *karez* irrigated villages shape local decision making and mediate grievances within communities. The same village-based decision-making processes could be seen at work in the former desert spaces of the area north of the Boghra Canal despite the atomized and increasingly tribally mixed nature of the communities found there. This is not dissimilar to other parts of rural Afghanistan.

Once decisions over resource allocations or disputes rise above the level of the village, external mediation may be required. In other parts of Afghanistan, government officials might be requested to intervene and mediate disputes once other avenues have failed, or provide services across a number of communities or an entire district. In contrast, in the former desert areas of the southwest it is the Taliban that holds sway. Farmers often explained the government's weak position and the dominance of the Taliban in the starkest of terms, showing complete disdain for the government's authority in these former desert areas.<sup>11</sup>

### 4.1. NOT PRESENT, JUST AN IRRITANT

The extent to which the Taliban imposes its rule on the local population, as opposed to reflecting local values, aspirations and, perhaps most importantly, tribal leadership and homogeneity, is debatable. Regardless, it is apparent that the Afghan government has little to no authority or legitimacy in these former desert areas, not even in the former district centre of Bakwa.

For example, discussions with farmers in Bakwa revealed that the government of Afghanistan was at best considered irrelevant in the area, and worst an irritant. In fact, to underline just how inconsequential the population viewed the government, most of those interviewed in these former desert areas referred to the government as not being present in the area, claimed they not know who local government officials were or even aware of the name of the provincial governor.<sup>12</sup> As one farmer in Chabak in Bakwa exclaimed “Here is no government, no governor, there is nothing here”;<sup>13</sup> a view that was widely held across the research sites in the district.

There was also little evidence of the government having a physical presence in Bakwa. Even in what was the official district centre of Sultani Bakwa some 51 miles from Farah city and that sits on the main Gereshk to Farah road the government was absent. The military bases once occupied by the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) and international military forces lay abandoned and there was little activity in the main bazaar (see Figure 6). Locally there were reports that the government had relocated its “district center” to a compound in Khairabad just off the Delarem to Herat road, an area where it had more control. This compound consisted of a few containers where officials are reported to process identity cards and register those wishing to be on electoral roll (see Figure 6).<sup>14</sup>

11 “The Taliban f\*\*\*\* the mother of the government, the government is finished here”. Dashte Shurawak #9.

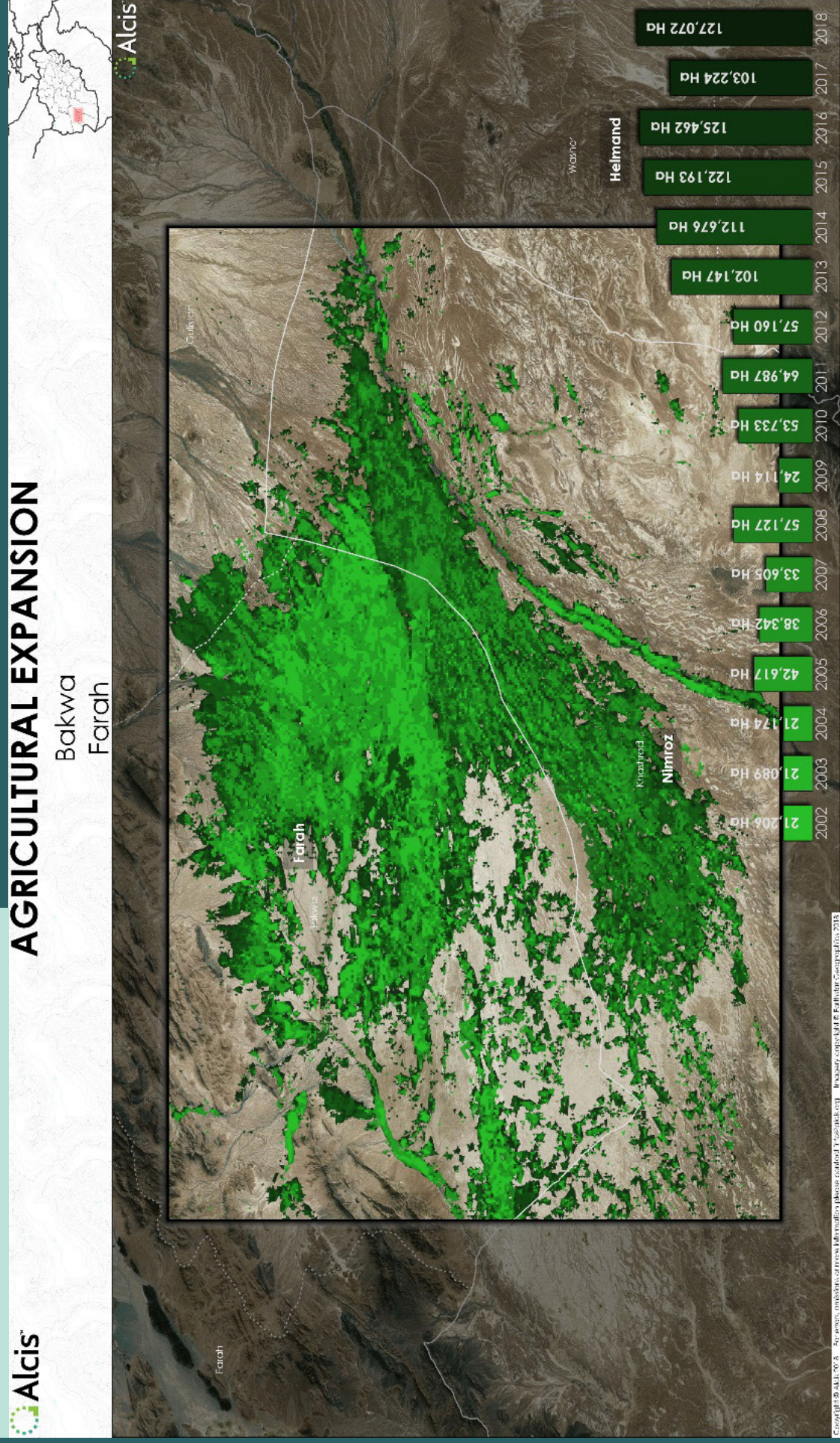
12 “The government is only in Farah city, they are not here and we don’t know them” (Kamalan #8); “The government does not think about the life of the poor people. [The government is] is not here and people do not accept them” (Sahadaka #11); “Here there is no government here; there is no role for them here. We don’t know about them” (Charbak #13); “The government doesn’t think about the people and we don’t think about them” (Chabak #3).

13 Chabak # 2.

14 Despite what might be considered a lack of government presence or influence on the ground Bakwa has been categorized as “contested” by USFOR-A. See SIGAR “Quarterly Report,” 30 July 2018, page 72, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2018-07-30qr.pdf> (date accessed 1 November 2018).



Figure 5: The expansion in the agricultural area in Bakwa in Farah province, 2003-2018





The government's writ was just as negligible north of the Boghra Canal—although in this former desert area the population had much more negative views of the government than those interviewed in Bakwa. In fact, north of the Boghra the routine dismissal of the government with references to not knowing who the governor was were often interspersed with insults and expletives.<sup>15</sup> As one farmer in Dashte Shurawak exclaimed “I don’t know about the government. Who is in the government? I would be a k\*\*\*\*\* if I know the name of the [security] commander in Lashkar Gah.”<sup>16</sup>

While it is not uncommon for the population of this area to express anger towards the Afghan government due to the widely held view that they were driven out of the canal command by the authorities, emotions were particularly heightened by recent “security operations” north of the Boghra, including the air strikes launched against drug labs in November 2017.<sup>17</sup> By far the most enraged comments came from farmers in the desert area north of the Boghra stretching from Dashte Ab Pashak to Loy Manda. Farmers in this area claimed to have been subjected to a “security operation” during the period that fieldwork took place. This operation was alleged to have been conducted at the behest of Moallem Mir Wali, a parliamentarian and former military commander from Gereshk, further fueling resentment felt towards the Afghan government.

The security operation began on 15 April 2018 and ran until the 25th of April, in the midst of the opium harvest. Farmers complained that the operation was little more than an excuse to “loot their houses” and that despite the Taliban’s efforts to stop the intervention, it only came to a halt when villages agreed to pay officials a bribe, where payments were calculated at a rate of Pakistani Rs 4,000 for each deepwell.

Both those who had lived in these areas for some time as well as those who had moved more recently<sup>18</sup> argued that it was precisely this kind of corruption and violence that drove them north of the Boghra from the canal command area. To then be subjected to this kind of operation in the areas where they fled reminded them of their disdain for the Afghan government; those that represent it and those that work for it. As a farmer in Dashte Loy Manda who claimed to have lost 11 *man* of opium (the equivalent of 49.5 kg) during the campaign complained “This is not a government, they are thieves; they came here just for looting”.<sup>19</sup> Others also expressed considerable anger towards those involved in the campaign, including Moallem Mir Wali. The security operation also underlined a narrative that has often been associated with the government in central Helmand; a narrative that depicts the government as “foreign,” or under the influence of foreigners, such as the United States Government (USG), and “non-Muslim.” As one farmer in Dashte Ab Pashak affected by the campaign commented “The government is a thief and a *kafir*. They are happy the Muslim people suffer.”<sup>20</sup>

The air campaign against drug labs was seen as further evidence of both the influence of foreign actors on the Afghan government and the inability of the authorities to establish direct control over the area. The immediate impact of the lab strikes was largely viewed as inconsequential in terms of the losses experienced by those targeted. On the whole, farmers were of the view that these strikes had destroyed the buildings and equipment of the lab operators but that this would have little effect on the production of opiates. Most farmers talked of the number of processing facilities located in the area and therefore the futility of the

15 “I don’t know who the governor; I don’t know who he is; I don’t know his name. I have no information about him” (Dashte Ab Pashak # 5); “The governor is not working here, no one knows him” (Dashte Loy Manda #1).

16 Dashte Shurawak #12.

17 David Mansfield, “Heroin labs in Afghanistan,” <http://www.lse.ac.uk/united-states/Assets/Documents/Heroin-Labs-in-Afghanistan-Mansfield.pdf>.

18 “We have no interest in the government. We escaped from this government to come here” (Shna Jama #6); “Because of this government I escape to the desert; they are not a good government. They create problems for the people” (Nawabad Shawal #10).

19 Dashte Loy Manda #10.

20 Dashte Ab Pashak #4.



Figure 6: The old and new “district centres” of Bakwa,  
Farah province, 2010-2018





effort.<sup>21</sup> North of the Boghra a lab operator even referred to his own “factory” having been hit in an air strike and the loss of only one barrel of opium (around 30 Kilograms), leaving the rest unscathed, and prompting him to move his operation to another house nearby. In Bakwa it was reported that labs were destroyed in Takht Ghundai, Sya Ghala, Nisoo and Shar Surkh but that it had no impact on processing capacity.

However, this view that the air campaign against the drugs labs would not directly affect drug processing, was wedded to an increasingly hostile view of the Afghan government and the US military that farmers believed were behind the campaign.<sup>22</sup> Some of the anger was directed at a short-term fall in opium prices that occurred at the time of fieldwork and that most farmers blamed on the airstrikes on labs. However, amidst a counterinsurgency campaign that was increasingly reliant on air power it was also apparent that farmers were unable to distinguish between the effort to target drugs labs and the wider military campaign in the southwest, most notably in Helmand.

Many of those interviewed framed this campaign in terms of a fight against Islam and the Afghan populous driven by US interests. As a farmer in Shna Jama exclaimed “They just threaten the Muslim people, there is no benefit to this operation. The Americans and other *kafir* people have a plan to remove Islam from the world, but they are not able to do this,”<sup>23</sup> a sentiment that was shared by others.<sup>24</sup> Others viewed the air campaign itself as an acknowledgement of the government’s inability to control territory on the ground. To illustrate the point, one farmer in Dashte Shin Kalay angrily remarked on the air strikes against drugs labs “If they are strong, they will capture the district and bring security to the people. But all the districts are in the control of the Taliban.”<sup>25</sup>

## 4.2. TALIBAN RULE IN THE DESERTS

In the absence of the government in these former desert spaces it is the Taliban’s authority that typically prevails. Its role is primarily dedicated to security and the resolution of disputes. Locally the Taliban is clearly viewed as the dominant military force, although there is a recognition that when faced with overwhelming government force supported by air power – such as with the operation north of the Boghra in April 2018—the Taliban are, in the short-term, forced into a more defensive position.

With regard to resolving disputes, the Taliban are noted for running what is locally considered to be a more accessible and expeditious judicial system than that of the government. In the former official district centre of Sultani Bakwa there are Taliban courts, where cases are heard and adjudicated once referred by local commanders and village elders. North of the Boghra disputes are either settled locally by villagers and local commanders or referred to the sitting court where they are heard by Taliban judges. Farmers reported that few individuals decline when they are called by a Taliban official to appear as a defendant or to give evidence.

Other than security and justice service provision is minimal in the former desert areas. In other parts of rural Afghanistan, the Taliban have adapted, and in some cases improved government services.<sup>26</sup> The

21 There are too many factories everywhere. This will not have any benefit for the government” (Dashte Loy Manda #4); “In each village there is at least 10 factories - there is too much” (Dashte Loy Manda #5).

22 “The operation belongs to foreigners. We don’t know what they ask or what they want from this” Chabak #9.

23 Dashte Shurawak #1.

24 “The US comes here, they fire by planes and kill lots of civilians” (Dashte Loy Manda #3); “F\*\*\* the mother of the government they start the bombing with no benefit. Allah will move the foreigners from the country. All these problems are created by them,” (Shna Jama #7); “This is the government of the Kafir. By the name of ‘factory’ they destroy the houses of the people” (Dashte Shurawak #2); “The American are just Kafir, they just continue fighting here for different reasons” (Shna Jama #3).

25 Dashte Shin Kalay #3.

26 David Mansfield, “The Devil is in the Detail: Nangarhar’s continued decline into insurgency, violence and widespread opium production”, AREU, Kabul, February 2016, page 7 <https://areu.org.af/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/1724E-Understanding-Control-and-Influence1.pdf>; Ashley Jackson., “Life under the Taliban Shadow Government” ODI, London June 2018, page 11-14 <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/12269.pdf>.

opportunities to do this in the former desert areas is much more limited due to the history of settlement. In Bakwa, for instance, it is reported that government schools are allowed to operate in some parts of the district, initially up to 1st grade and in some places up to third. There were even claims that those government teachers that failed to attend class have had their salaries deducted by the Taliban education department in the district, a practice that is seen elsewhere in Afghanistan.<sup>27</sup> Government clinics also operate in Bakwa in Sya Ghala and Joy Safed. However, north of the Boghra Canal there are no public schools or health clinics and there never have been; a function of the fact that the area is viewed as government land that has illegally settled and therefore not entitled to services even during the height of the military and civilian “surge” between 2010 and 2012.

According to farmers, direct development assistance in the former desert areas was almost non-existent. The very few that declared they have received agricultural inputs in Bakwa report that it was obtained in the provincial capitals of Farah and that they gained access to support through relatives and contacts in government departments. None of those north of the Boghra report receiving any agricultural inputs.

Where the Taliban have a record of being more active is in the collection of taxes and most recently in looking to temper some of the worst examples of overexploiting ground water. In the case of taxes, farmers and key informants in the desert areas often refer to the “rule,” a standard rate of payment but from which actual rates will be negotiated with local Taliban representatives. As in government-held areas, rates of payment differ based on wealth and patronage—such as for those who have direct links to those in senior positions, or those with familial or personal relationships with those responsible for denoting the amount of taxes to be paid and/or those collecting it. In the desert areas these individual interactions often result in payments to the Taliban being reduced dramatically.

However, there are also conditions where the tax imposed by the Taliban might be reduced across the board—i.e. the “rule” is adjusted for all. This is most notably when agricultural production, in particular opium yields, are low. For example, following a fall in opium prices and subsequent land tax imposed in the canal command area in 2009 was the equivalent of only US\$90, compared to US\$170 in 2008.<sup>28</sup> In 2013, the tax on opium in Helmand was reduced to one *khord* per *jerib* (the equivalent of 0.56 kg/ha) from the standard two *khord* per *jerib* (the equivalent of 0.125 kg/ha) and the tax on wheat was not collected at all.<sup>29</sup> A similar situation arose in Bakwa where since 2017 the “rule” was adjusted over the last two years to cater for lower opium yields, falling from the equivalent of Pakistani Rs 1,000 per *jerib* of opium to Rs 300 to 375 per *jerib* in 2017 and 2018.<sup>30</sup> The tax on diesel powered tube wells was also adjusted to cater for the economic challenges experienced by the rural population of Bakwa, falling from Rs 3,000 each in 2017 to 2,500 in 2018.<sup>31</sup>

A further development with regard to Taliban rule in the former desert areas is the claim that they have begun to regulate and monitor the overexploitation of ground water. For example, some farmers use both diesel and solar power to run their wells in an attempt to maximise the amount of land under agricultural production. It is claimed that with solar power during the day and diesel power at night, as much as 50 *jeribs* of land can be cultivated using one deepwell. Similar examples can be seen in the former desert areas of Kandahar (see Figure 7).

27 Ibid.

28 David Mansfield, Alcis and OSDR, “Managing Concurrent and Recurrent Risk: Explaining the reductions in opium poppy cultivation in central Helmand between 2008 and 2011, AREU, Kabul, August 2011, page 32 <https://areu.org.af/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/1122E-Managing-Concurrent-and-Repeated-Risks-2011.pdf>.

29 David Mansfield, “From Bad they made it Worse: The concentration of opium poppy in areas of conflict in the provinces of Helmand and Nangarhar”, AREU, Kabul, 2013, page 61, <https://areu.org.af/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/E-NRM-CS6-ver-2-2.pdf>.

30 In Bakwa the tax on opium is calculated based on the number of labourers, known as *neshgars*, required to harvest the crop. Typically, the rate of tax is set at 1000 PR for 2 *neshgars*. Locally this is understood as the amount of labour required to harvest 1 *jerib* of land. With such low yields in 2017 and 2018 the tax fell to the equivalent of Pakistani Rs 1500 for 8 to 10 *neshgars*, the equivalent of 4 to 5 *jeribs* of land.

31 The tax on solar powered deepwell remained the same in 2018 at Rs 5,000.

There is however a local consensus that that the ground water in these areas is falling at an increasing pace largely due to the wholesale uptake of solar powered deepwells and the reservoirs associated with them. Farmers report ground water levels having fallen by as many as three meters per year since the proliferation of solar panels in the deserts of the southwest.<sup>32</sup> As a farmer in Kamalan in Bakwa put it: "The water is reducing year by year. This is not good for the life of our people, for our future."<sup>33</sup>

By 2018 there were more than 50,000 solar-powered deepwells, up from approximately 14,000 in 2016 (see Figure 8), and judging by the number of solar panels on sale in Lashkar Gah (see Figure 9) there is the prospect of yet further uptake in 2019, increasing the risk of even greater falls in groundwater levels. On top of these environmental concerns, there is also evidence of ground water contamination in the former desert areas north of the Boghra with higher than recommended doses of nitrates.<sup>34</sup>

It was reported that, sharing the concerns of the rural population over the viability of production in the former desert areas, the Taliban had imposed a ban on running diesel-powered pumps at night in the area north of the Boghra. This limited the amount of water that could be extracted. At the time of fieldwork those in Bakwa feared that the Taliban would do the same there. This would appear to be a new area of regulation for the Taliban to engage in. But as with the concessions on tax rates during economic downturns, and shifting attitudes to education, it also reflects the needs of the local population.

32 Farmers knowledge of the depth of their groundwater was attributed to the maintenance work they did on their deepwells. For example, respondents reported of having to replace their waterpumps and having to raise them from the well in order to do so. They also referred to the need to lengthen the pipes they used to draw water from the well.

33 Kamalan #9.

34 Ten of the 20 samples of ground water collected from the research sites north of the Boghra had nitrate levels that exceeded the World Health Organized recommended levels of 50 mg/l. All 20 samples exceeded WHO recommended levels of 300 mg/l for hardness. Eight samples exceeded the WHO recommended levels of sulphates, some by as much as four times.



Figure 7: A desert farm in Kandahar, 2018

## 5. DEPENDENT ON ILLEGAL POPPY

Illegal poppy cultivation remains the foundations on which life in the former deserts is built. The premium price associated with illegality, and in particular the high opium price that followed the Taliban ban in 2000-01 provided farmers with the necessary resources with which to invest in the desert lands and turn them into viable agricultural land. Installing a deepwell is expensive, more so with the advent of solar power. A full solar powered system can cost between US\$4,000 to US\$5,000. A diesel-powered system is less expensive to install but has much higher recurrent costs. This is because of the amount of diesel consumed (from 50 to 80 litres per *jerib*) and the cost of maintaining and replacing equipment, such as generators and pumps; which is in large part a function of the adulterants in the diesel.

The high sunken and recurrent costs of agricultural production in these former desert lands means that the lives of the population are dependent on illegal poppy cultivation with its relatively high prices and almost guaranteed demand. As such the lives of those who reside in the former deserts can be relatively good when both opium yields and prices are high. However, when either opium yields or prices are low, quality of life can deteriorate rapidly. If both opium yields and prices fall life can become much more precarious and can reach a point where losses are incurred and families must fall back on savings, if they have them, or look for other forms of income. Given the desert terrain this inevitably leads to some or all of the household relocating.

### 5.1. THE DOUBLE WHAMMY: FALLING YIELDS, AND PRICES

Life is at its most precarious in the former deserts of Bakwa. Opium yields have been low for some years but were particularly poor in 2018, ranging from only 0.3 to 0.9 kg per *jerib* (the equivalent of less than five kg/ha). Some farmers blamed the weather and the cold winds that whip through Bakwa in the spring, others said it was disease. Either way the problem was unrelenting; farmers complained that they had not had a good crop since 2013 and that over the last three years yields had been particularly low, prompting ever lower levels of opium poppy cultivation this season with cultivation in some research sites a third of what it was in 2017 (see Figures 10 and 11). There were concerns as to whether the crop would ever recover and few ideas as to how farmers could respond. One respondent explained that “the [opium] yield in Bakwa falls every year” yet resigned himself to growing opium next year “but we don’t have a choice. Where will we go?”<sup>35</sup>

The low yields in Bakwa were made all the worse by a dramatic fall in opium prices during the harvest time in 2018. At the time of fieldwork opium prices were as low as Pakistani Rs 25,000 to 30,000 per *man* (the equivalent of US\$45/kg to US\$54/kg), but rose towards the end of fieldwork in early May to Rs 45,000 to 47,000 per *man* (the equivalent of US\$81/kg to US\$84/kg). During the same period in 2017 prices had been between Rs 66,000 and 74,000 per *man* (the equivalent of US\$119/kg to US\$133/kg).

The reason for this fall in prices was far from clear. Some of it can be attributed to the temporary fall in prices that is often associated with the glut of the poppy harvest and the immediate sale by itinerant harvesters who are paid in-kind. However, most farmers blamed the air strikes on heroin “factories” announced in November 2017, and targeted on Farah and Nimroz just before harvest in April 2018.<sup>36</sup> While largely dismissive of the impact of the air strikes on the lab owners and processing capacity, those interviewed in Bakwa did believe the attack on the labs had led to a precipitous drop in opium prices, albeit a brief one.

35 Chabak #7.

36 Rod Nickel, “U.S., Afghan forces expand air strikes on Taliban drug labs,” <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-drugs/u-s-afghan-forces-expand-air-strikes-on-taliban-drug-labs-idUSKBN1HF0HQ>.



Figure 8: The number of reservoirs in southwest Afghanistan, 2016-2018



## Reservoirs in South West Afghanistan 2016 - 2018

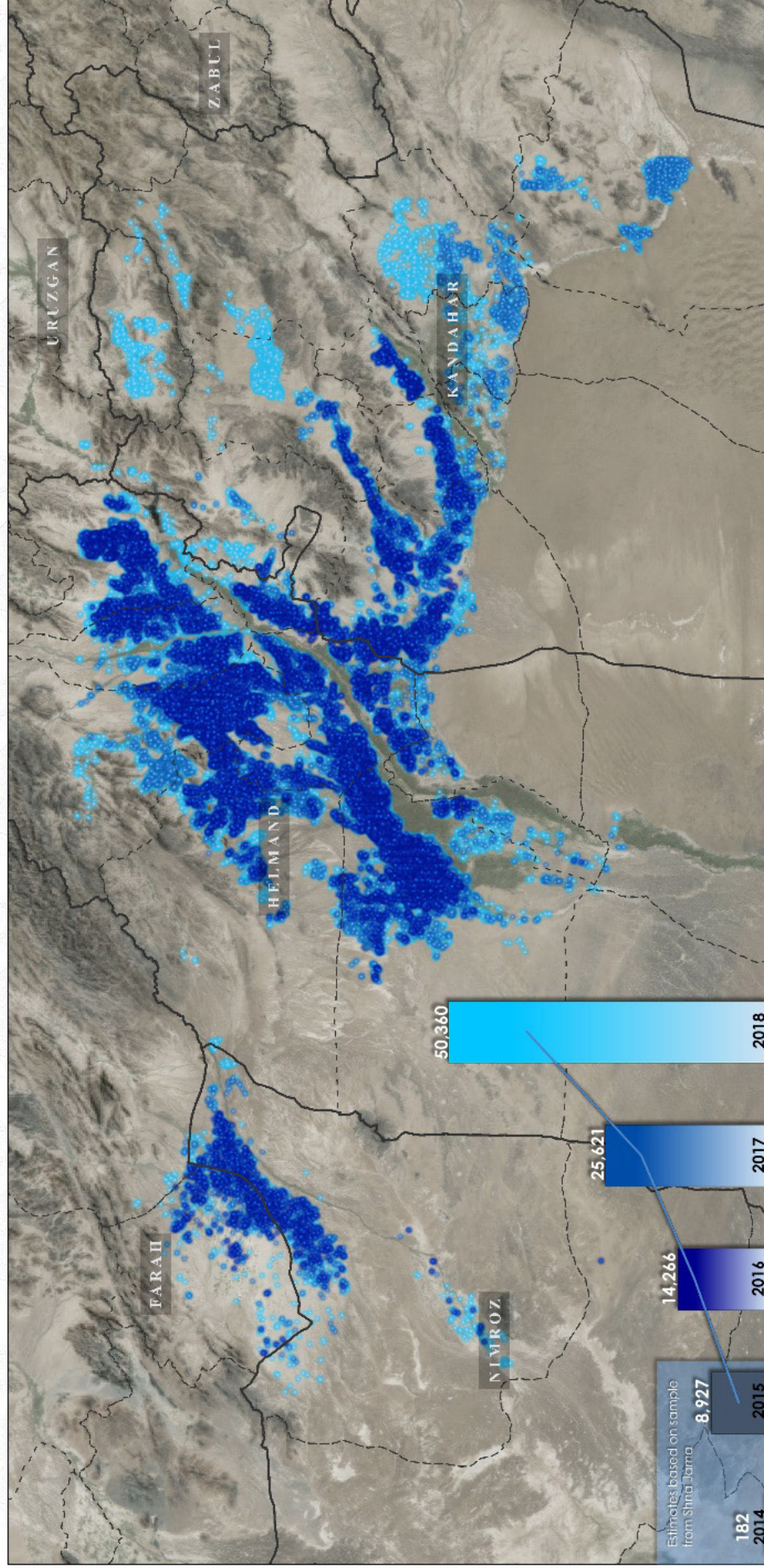
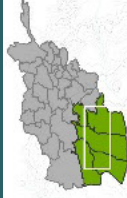




Figure 9: Solar panels on sale in Lashkar Gah bazaar, April 2018



Farmers also blamed the fall in prices on the depreciation of the Iranian *rial*, known locally as the *toman*, saying that it has led to a fall in the demand for opium. Key informants also pointed to the fall in value of the *toman*, and the perceived risk that it would happen again. They claimed that this had made cross-border traders from Afghanistan wary of buying the opium crop only to sell it to Iranian traders and receive a currency that was fast losing its value. In Bakwa there was no discussion as to how a rise in levels of opium poppy cultivation, more generally, might have contributed to the fall in opium prices. This was because local cultivation had decreased, and farmers were not aware about levels of cultivation in other places, like neighbouring Helmand.

In Bakwa concerns over low opium yields and falling prices were compounded by the prospects of a poor wheat harvest. At the time of fieldwork, prior to the harvest, the crop was small due to insufficient rain. Farmers commented that the crop was such that they would not hire machinery as they had in previous years but would reap the crop by hand. Most expected a yield half of that harvested in 2017.

In the absence of a productive opium crop and with falling opium prices farmers had to fall back on their savings, if they had them. However, after repeated years of poor yields many of those interviewed in Bakwa had depleted any inventory of opium they once had and now faced severe economic woes. Some farmers had borrowed money the previous year so that they could convert their diesel-powered deepwells to solar. Others had taken loans to replace a waterpump or generator, a common expense for those reliant on diesel. These farmers complained they had no means by which to repay their debts. Other expensive household items were also foregone. For example, bride payments remained unpaid<sup>37</sup> and weddings were postponed.

Most farmers looked to reduce their daily expenses in the wake of the economic downturn they were experiencing. The quantity and quality of food was the first expense to be curtailed, reducing their consumption of meat and fruit and switching to tea, bread, potato, yoghurt and the traditional soup. Farmers also limited their healthcare expenditures. Most complained that they could not afford for their family members to travel to see a doctor,<sup>38</sup> relying at best on “tablets” from the local bazaar.<sup>39</sup> Others looked for loans from their extended family and villagers, including their landlords.<sup>40</sup> Some argued that their economic circumstances were even more trying, “If someone is sick, we wait for Allah. We see if they recover or die, as we don’t have money for doctor.”<sup>41</sup>

The few in Bakwa that did not complain of rather dire economic circumstances had either livestock they could sell or some kind of non-farm income that they could draw upon. For example, a number of families owned a local shop<sup>42</sup> or had sons in Iran, working in the construction industry and earning the equivalent of up to US\$160 per month. One respondent had a family member with a shop in Iran earning up to \$US320 per month; and this made the difference, allowing the remaining family in Bakwa to eat meat and fruit, and financed sending the sick to Kabul or Kandahar.<sup>43</sup> One farmer in Bakwa even talked of his father selling land, something that Afghan farmers will look to avoid in all but the most desperate of circumstances.<sup>44</sup>

37 One respondent was owed Pakistani Rs 1.7 million for his daughter’s hand in marriage, the equivalent of US\$13,752 (Dashtak #4).

38 “Now my wife is sick but I have no money to take her to the doctor” (Sahadaka #13); “if someone is sick, they just lay in bed, we have no money for a doctor” (Takht #12).

39 “If someone is sick, we have no money for a bottle of syrup” (Kamalan #6).

40 “Once my wife was sick, so I got a loan from the landowner and went to a private clinic for medicine” (Takht #15).

41 Kamalan #3.

42 “I am happy with the business of my son. When he comes from *mela* he brings meat and fruit. There is good benefit from this and our life improves” (Sahadaka #1).

43 “Life is good because of the money from Iran” (Chabak #15).

44 Sahadaka #6.





Figure 10: Cropping in Gurz, Bakwa, 2017-2018



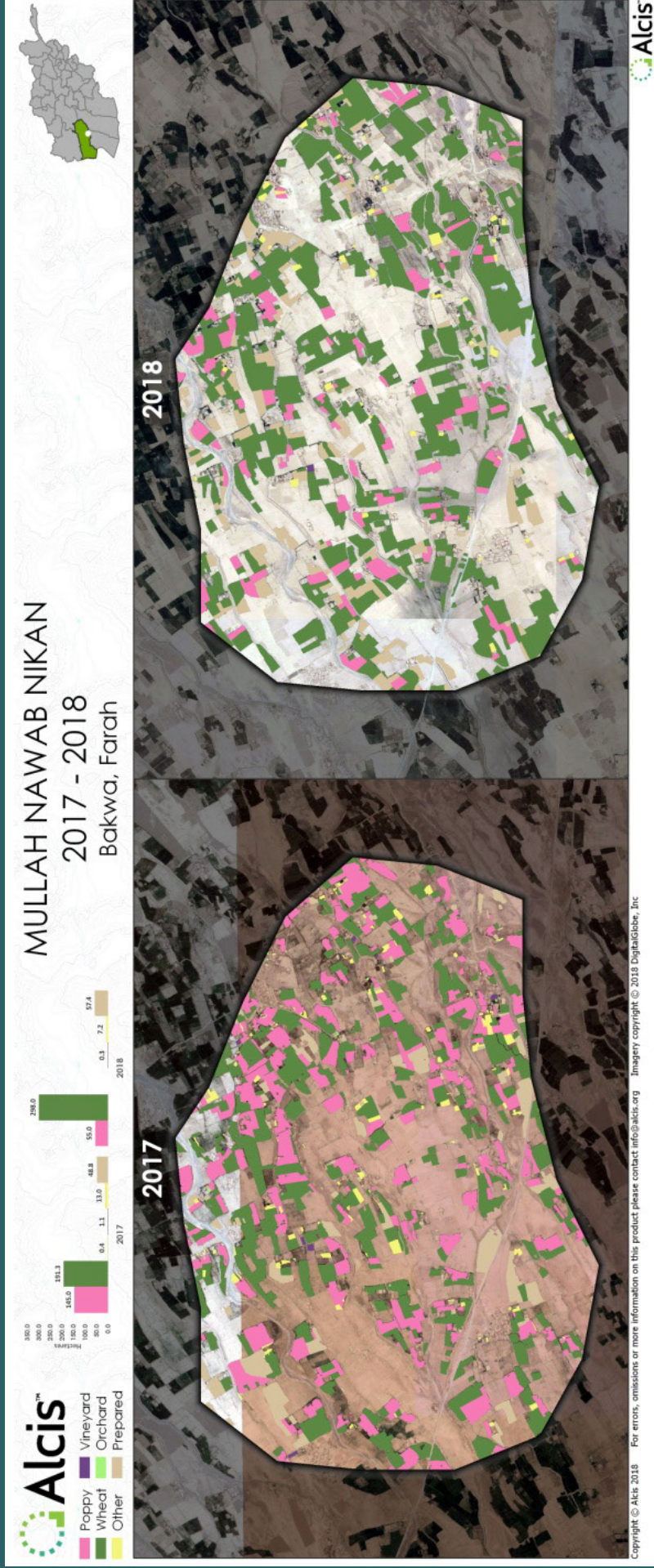


Figure 11: Cropping in Mullah Nawab  
Nikah, Bakwa, 2017-2018

For most of those interviewed in Bakwa there was only hope that the future would be better. They received assistance from neither the government nor the Taliban. Instead, their fate depended on an increase in opium prices and improved yields. There nevertheless remained concern over the impact the fall in ground water would have on the viability of agricultural production, and thereby the lives and livelihood of the rural population. A farmer in Khanjaka summed up these concerns rather succinctly “The reduction in water and the low yield will destroy our life in the future.”<sup>45</sup>

## 5.2. RECOVERY OF YIELDS BUT FALLING PRICES

Compared to Bakwa, life was much less precarious for those farmers living in the deserts north of the Boghra Canal in 2018. This has not always been the way. In Helmand, opium yields recovered in 2016 after four consecutive years of crop failure, with yields falling to as low as two kg per *jerib* (the equivalent of ten kg per hectare). When yields reached as much as two *man* per *jerib* in 2016 (the equivalent of 45kg per hectare) opium poppy cultivation began to rise again in the former desert areas in 2017.

With improvements in yields came an increase in the amount of opium cultivated north of the Boghra. In fact, cropping analysis shows that in each of the research sites in the former desert areas levels of opium poppy increased between 2017 and 2018 (see Figure 12, 13 and 14), a finding borne out by fieldwork. In 2018 yields also increased north of the Boghra, where some farmers claimed they obtained up to 3.5 *man* of fresh opium per *jerib* (the equivalent of 78.75 kg per hectare).

With higher levels of cultivation and improved yields, the fall in opium prices experienced across southwest Afghanistan were not felt so acutely by farmers in the former desert areas north of the Boghra Canal. Furthermore, the opium from the former desert areas sells at a premium price compared to that produced in the canal command area, where traders often complain that the opium contains too much water. Therefore, while prices fell to Pakistani Rs 22,500 per *man* (the equivalent of US\$40/kg) immediately after the harvest in early May 2018, they did not fall as low as they had in the canal command area of Helmand where farmers received as little as Rs 16,000 per *man* (the equivalent of US\$29/kg). Moreover prices, soon recovered rising to between Rs 50,000 to 60,000 per *man* (the equivalent of US\$100 US\$121/kg) in the former desert areas in early June before settling at Rs 25,000 to 40,000 per *man* (the equivalent of US\$50 to US\$80/kg) in early August 2018.

It was only the sharecroppers and tenant farmers that showed signs of economic stress in the areas north of the of the Boghra Canal. Complaints were rife regarding the “security operation” and the air strikes on labs but with regard to the latter, this was primarily due to the impact it was believed to have had on opium prices. On the whole, those with land continued life as before, consuming meat and fruit once or twice a week; and using the health facilities in Lashkar Gah or for more serious conditions travelling to Kandahar or Quetta.

45 Kamalan #11.

## 6. DESPERATE EVEN WITH POPPY

All this is not to say that life in the former desert areas north of the Boghra Canal is good, far from it. In fact, the women interviewed for this research painted a particularly bleak picture of what life is like in these former desert areas; a life where choice and opportunities are severely limited. As one woman exclaimed: “When you got to the desert there is no proper house, no tree, it is a hot burning desert. But it is our obligation.”<sup>46</sup> Others spoke of the hostile environment and the hardships it imposes: “In the desert you will see wind and dust and nothing more.”<sup>47</sup>

The men north of the Boghra Canal seem to have a rather functionalist approach to life, looking upon most of their problems as being resolved after they had lived in the former desert areas for a number of years. Once the land was cleared, a deepwell sunk, a house built, and some trees grown for protection from the harsh desert sun, most men north of the Boghra Canal spoke of life being “fine.”

But men are not restricted by the same social and cultural mores as women. Men can travel; they can visit the bazaar, or the local market, call on neighbours and friends in the area, and travel to the canal irrigated area and to the cities of Lashkar Gah and Gereshk. For women, life in the former desert areas is much more restrictive. Once the initial challenges of having shelter and viable agricultural land are resolved, the problem of mobility and the burden of work remain.

Living in more atomistic communities away from their extended families, amongst a population where the education levels must be some of the lowest in the country and attitudes some of the most conservative, women find their mobility severely restricted. A visit to the local *mela* or bazaar is unheard of; calling on neighbours who are not family or possibly not even from the same tribe, is unlikely. Travel to the canal irrigated area to visit close family and relatives is rare. In fact, a number of women complained of not being able to attend the funerals of close family members,<sup>48</sup> including fathers,<sup>49</sup> due to limited communication, travel restrictions, and insufficient spare time.

Some women referred to the restrictions on their mobility “like being in a prison.”<sup>50</sup> Others talked of isolation, loneliness,<sup>51</sup> of having “an individual life but no social life.”<sup>52</sup> There were women who talked of “too much sadness,”<sup>53</sup> referred to their own depression,<sup>54</sup> and that of others.<sup>55</sup> There were even reports of suicide.<sup>56</sup> The absence of clinics or hospitals north of the Boghra canal meant there was little in the way of treatment for any health conditions without recourse to travelling to Gereshk or Lashkar Gah, with all the challenges that these journeys represent. One woman described her move to the desert as such: “When we arrived in the desert I was under a lot of pressure. Life is never easy there. If you become sick you stay at home, there is nothing for that.”<sup>57</sup> Another stated: “life is not good. We don’t have access to anyone. We can’t go to the doctor.”<sup>58</sup>

46 FI#2.

47 FI#12.

48 FI#34.

49 FI#1.

50 FI#1.

51 “We were most alone there” FI#4.

52 FI#3.

53 FI#47.

54 FI#10.

55 “There is more depression amongst the people” #6; “I know there are some women in the desert who have depression” FI#26.

56 There was a report of a suicide in the former deserts of Nad Ali. It was claimed that a woman there had eaten opium in order to end her life.

57 FI#13.

58 FI#27.



Figure 12: Crop mapping in Shna Jama, North of the Nahre Boghra in Helmand, 2008-2018

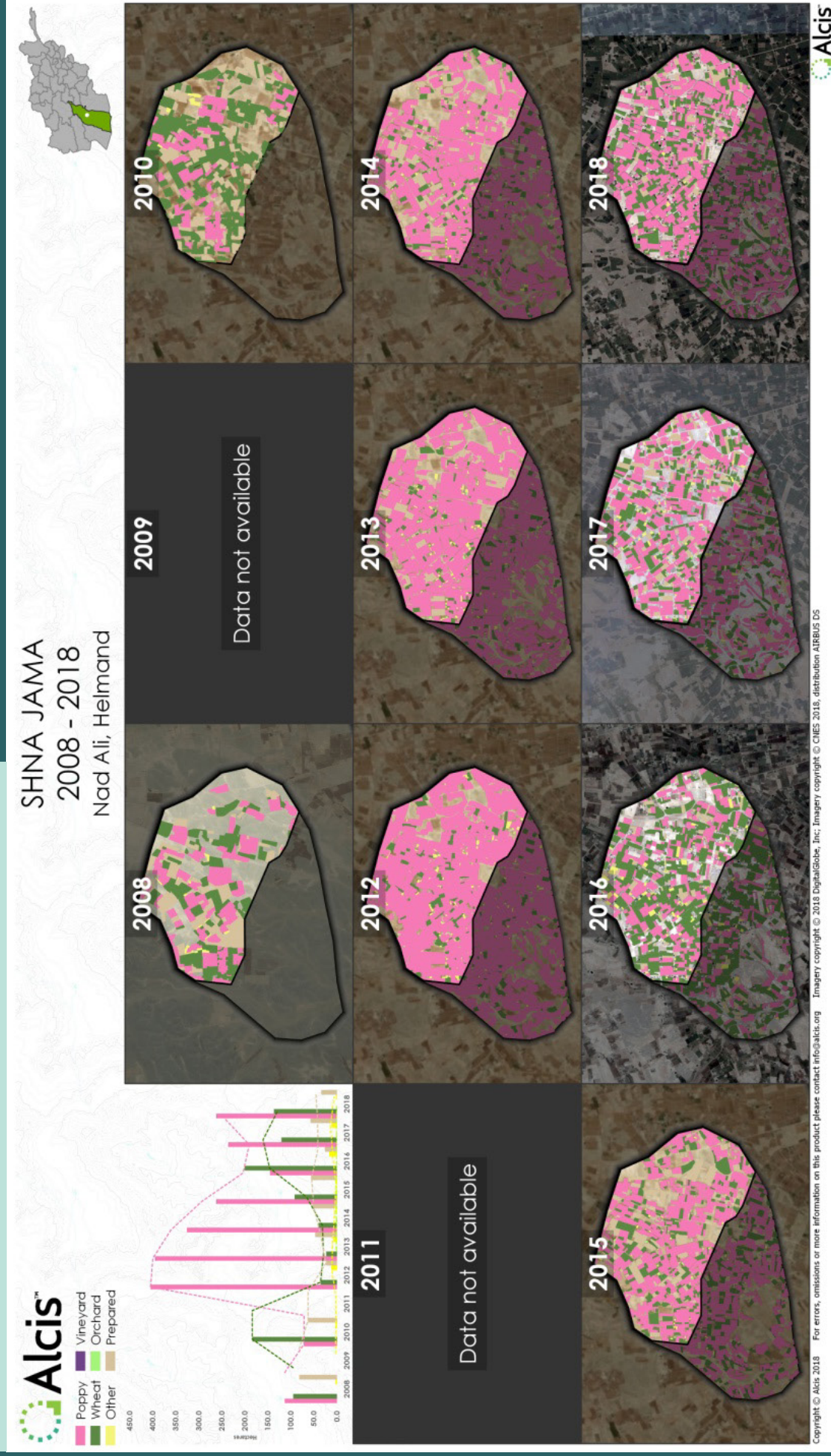


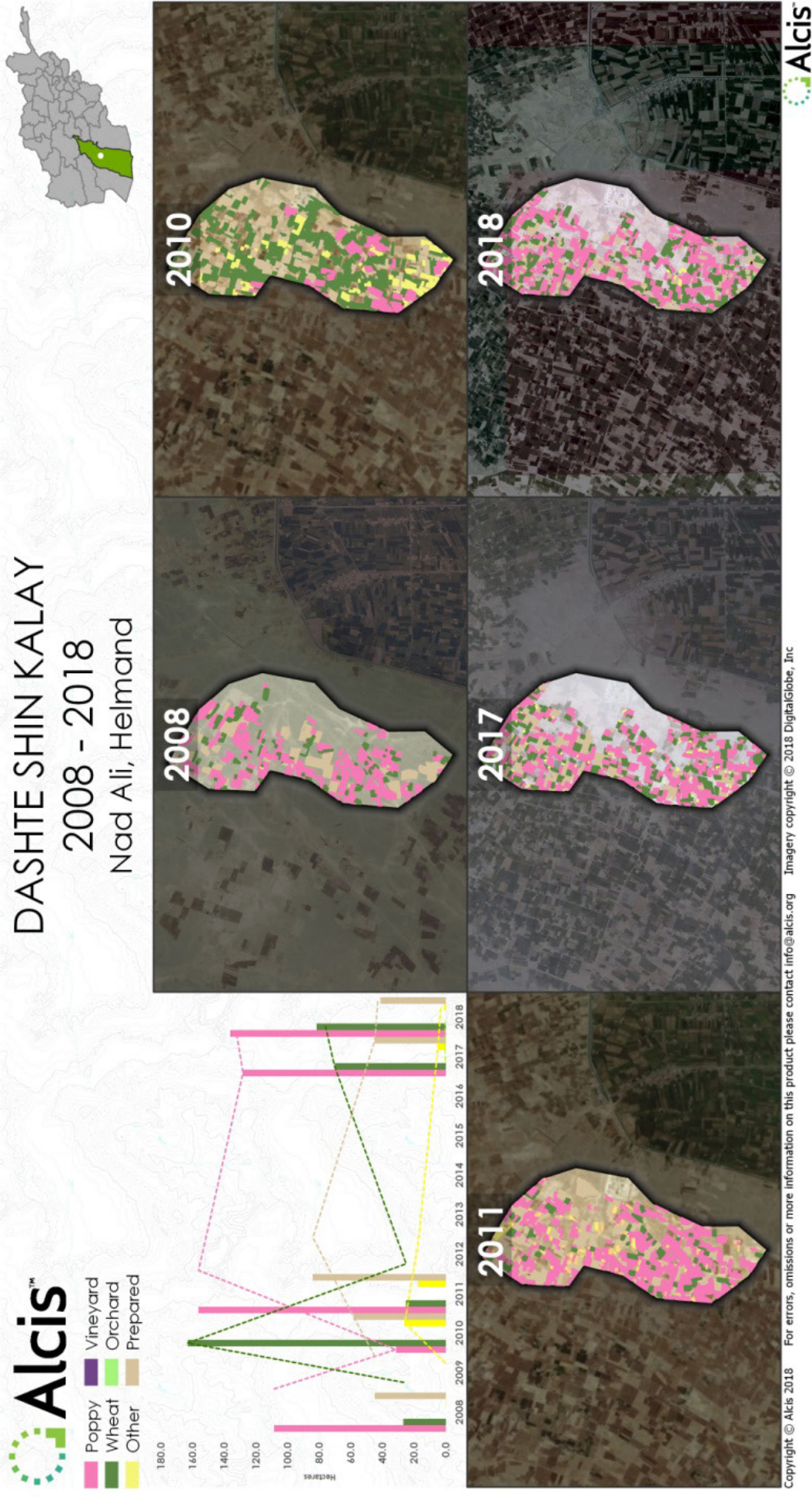


Figure 13: Crop mapping in Dashte Ab Pashak, North of the Nahre Boghra in Helmand, 2008-2018





Figure 14: Crop mapping in Dashte Shin Kalay, North of the Nahre Boghra in Helmand, 2008-2018



Many women also complained of the amount of work that was required of them in the former desert areas, particularly work on the land. The level of effort was seen as a notable increase compared to their previous lives in the canal command area. Most of this work was related to looking after livestock, collecting firewood, but also weeding opium poppy and preparing the food for the labourers employed during the poppy harvest. Some women did not work on the land when they lived in the canal command area of Helmand and found the move quite a shock: "[In the *dasht*] we work in the farm, in the *watan* we do not work."<sup>59</sup>

Women from households that owned land in the former desert area referred to how tiring the work was but they recognised the economic advantages that farming in the desert could bring. As one woman noted: "When went to desert life was changed for the better, but my life is not good as I work too hard on the land."<sup>60</sup> Most women just talked of a "better life" and "improved food" while talking of the hardships they faced during their time in the desert<sup>61</sup> and the absence of any real alternative: "If we had a choice of life in any other location we would not go to the desert. Because there is no choice, we accept this life; it is better than when we had no land at all."<sup>62</sup> It is notable that there were only a few isolated cases of women from households that reported acquiring significant assets during their time in the desert lands. For example, one woman from Musa Qala referred to the fact that her family had acquired 27 *jeribs* of land, "our life has improved and now we have a sharecropper."<sup>63</sup>

For the landless there was little difference between farming in the canal command area and farming in the former desert areas. As a mother in a household previously from Koshal Kalay in Nad Ali, now sharecropping nine *jeribs* of land in the desert, exclaimed: "We are very poor. We hoped that we would find a good life in the desert but there was no change. We are always busy in the farm, wherever we are."<sup>64</sup>

Regardless of their landholdings and wealth, for these women the return to the canal command area of was like being at a "picnic", or on "holiday". They could once again travel to visit family and friends and even go shopping in Lashkar Gah; they could escape the intense desert heat of the summer months; and even though the vast majority of the women had no land and rented properties in the environs of Lashkar Gah while the men in their family looked for wage labour opportunities in the city, they were happy to be back in the canal command area.<sup>65</sup> As one woman, originally from Garamsir but had lived in the former desert areas for seven years, put it "now we are in the *watan*—everything is available here."<sup>66</sup> These women enjoyed their temporary release, conscious of the fact that they would return to the desert in the fall and that "because of our poverty we accept all the problems of the *dasht*."<sup>67</sup>

59 FI#1.

60 FI#12.

61 FI#26.

62 FI#49.

63 FI#24.

64 FI#23.

65 "When we returned, we are happy here. We have access to a clinic, the children have access to schools. Here we can find good food for the family" FI#4.

66 FI#6.

67 FI#23.



## 7. CONCLUSION

This research depicts a life in the former deserts of southwest Afghanistan that is tough. Although conditions are not as harsh as when people first settled the area after the fall of the Taliban in 2001, it remains a pitiless place of unyielding heat and relentless work, for both men and women. It is a place where life seems to be endured not enjoyed, more so for the women who live there, whose lives are afflicted by loneliness, depression and even suicide. Yet, as desperate as these conditions are, the population of these former desert areas continues to grow. A further 29,000 ha of agricultural land was claimed from these spartan desert areas in 2018 alone. One has to ask what does this continued expansion into these former desert areas tell us about the places where these new arrivals come from.

It is clear that many of the current residents of these desert spaces have little love for the Afghan government and its foreign backers. They often talk of a government that is corrupt, predatory and only “thinks of its own pocket.” There are continued references to the government’s weakness and inability, or unwillingness, to make a difference to the lives of farmers, particularly the rural poor. The violence that drove many from Nad Ali and Marjah to relocate north of the Boghra in 2007 and 2008 has also returned prompting even more families to move to these desert areas over the last two years.

Economic opportunities have become much more limited in the major cities and irrigated valleys of southwest Afghanistan. There are few of the jobs associated with the heady days of “the surge,” when jobs in construction in Lashkar Gah and security were more readily available. Development assistance has been fettered by insecurity and a dramatic reduction in the funds available, and land in the canal area of Helmand remains under increasing pressure, limited by a growing population and high prices. Furthermore, opium remains under siege. While the government’s reach is increasingly limited, farmers in the canal irrigated areas of central Helmand remain conscious that planting opium brings some risk. There may be some pressure to abandon the crop altogether, perhaps the threat of destruction during military operations, or the possibility of looting by government forces after the harvest. Either way, the crop—and thereby the economic welfare of many farmers—continues to be at risk in the more accessible parts of the southwest.

Under these circumstances, the rural population of the southwest have few choices, particularly the land-poor. At least in the former desert areas land is both available and affordable. Farmers also seem to believe that there is also less violence and corruption at the hands of government officials and while the Taliban authorities provide few services beyond security, there is some sense of order and predictability that cannot be found elsewhere. The lack of development assistance and employment in these former desert areas can be offset somewhat by opium poppy cultivation, which if yields and prices allow, provides a level of income that is commensurate with family living expenses and maybe even the funds for further investments in the land. The move to the former deserts areas is driven by security, patronage and economic necessity; its streets are most definitely not paved with gold.

While life in the former deserts areas is precarious during the “bad years,” the “good years” can allow farmers and their families to recover. The time for real concern is when the “good years” become less frequent in these former desert areas. This research has demonstrated the impact that successive years of low yields have had on farmers in Bakwa. Compounded by a fall in opium prices in 2018 there is a level of desperation amongst farmers in Bakwa that has not been seen during previous rounds of fieldwork. When considered in combination with the increasing rate at which the ground water level is dropping—a phenomenon exacerbated by the uptake of new technologies—it is only a matter of time before these former desert areas run dry. It therefore remains to be seen where these people will go, what they will do and what impact will they have when they are finally forced to move once again.

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ISBN 978-9936-641-15-6



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