

## The Helmand Food Zone: The Illusion of Success

### Introduction

The first year of the Helmand Food Zone (HFZ) implementation led to a 37 percent decrease in opium poppy cultivation in Helmand province, from an estimated 103,590 hectares in 2008 to 69,833 hectares in 2009. As such, it was celebrated as a success and led to calls from the donors and the Afghan government for further Food Zones to be established in other provinces of Afghanistan.

However, the negative consequences of the HFZ did not take long to appear. Switching from opium poppy to wheat, which is a less labor-intensive crop, led to those who had sharecropped or leased land in the main canal irrigated area of the HFZ, not only losing their income, but food security, shelter, water and a means of credit. In the absence of a viable alternative, large numbers of these land-poor farmers moved to the desert where they cultivated even greater amounts of opium poppy. Moreover, with the departure of international military forces in 2014, the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces lost control over large tracts of the more accessible canal irrigated areas of central Helmand, with the result that the amount of poppy cultivation surpassed its previous highest level.

This paper addresses the HFZ and its consequences. It also highlights the different actors involved and the challenges of delivery, evaluating the narrative of success that dominated the discourse on Helmand at the time and what actually happened on the ground, both inside and outside of the programme boundaries. The study concludes that the HFZ, instead of controlling opium poppy cultivation, helped extend it. Indeed, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime estimated that in 2017 opium poppy cultivation rose to 144,000 hectares, an almost 50% increase from the year the programme began.

### Methodology

This research included in-depth fieldwork and high-resolution satellite imagery collected before, during and after the implementation of the HFZ. The research was conducted in different districts, with 4,122 households being interviewed, supplemented by interviews with service providers including those digging wells, working the desert, and selling solar panels.

The methodology for this paper consisted of four steps. First was the site selection which was designed to cover different population groups with different access to resources and experiences of poppy cultivation and of the interventions implemented under the HFZ. The second part included fieldwork and interviewing people during the opium planting and/or harvesting season. The third part consisted of high-resolution, remote sensing imagery. Finally, the fourth section involved conducting interviews with policymakers and practitioners involved in policy and operational decisions in Helmand.

### What is the HFZ?

The origins of the HFZ were political. Driven by the need to make significant progress on counternarcotics the UK Government - the lead in both the Provincial Reconstruction Team and in the G8 on Counternarcotics in Afghanistan - as well as the recently appointed Governor, Gulab Mangal, were keen to make a dramatic dent in the level of cultivation in Helmand, and reduce USG pressure to mount a campaign of aerial spraying in the province. The plan itself originated with international advisers with no experience of counternarcotics, rural livelihoods or Helmand, and was technically weak. Nevertheless, it gained currency with the Governor, the PRT and others keen to gain Afghan buy-in for counternarcotics and make significant and immediate progress against poppy cultivation in the main irrigated areas of central Helmand.

## Key findings

The HFZ had three initiatives: the first was an information campaign aimed at deterring the planting of poppy; the second was to provide farmers with agricultural inputs so that farmers would have an alternative, with an overwhelming focus on wheat, and fertilisers; and the third was an eradication campaign that began each spring.

In the three-year period, around US\$ 40 million in wheat seed and fertilisers were distributed to 10 districts in Helmand. Inputs were distributed to the farmers in return for a commitment to abandon poppy.

In the environs of Lashkar Gah the population responded to the HFZ, and other programmes of development assistance, by moving out of poppy and cultivating a wide range of other crops, supplementing their income with non agricultural jobs, such as trading, construction and other wage labour opportunities associated with the surge in international troops and investment.

However, beyond the environs of Lashkar Gah, opportunities were less frequent, and the incomes were lower. Farmers in these areas did not have the same exposure to the kind of physical and social infrastructure that those nearer the city could take advantage of to improve their quality of life.

In those areas beyond the environs of Lashkar Gah a focus on wheat, which had widely different input requirements, particularly much lower labour intensity, caused tenant farmers or sharecroppers to lose their jobs and land. Without land, an income, food security, water, credit and shelter, they had little choice but to move to the former desert areas and cultivate opium poppy and were encouraged to grow even greater amounts by more unfavorable land tenure arrangements, with the faint prospect that they, too, might be able to buy some desert land if only they had “a good year.” The land-poor were typically paid one-third of the final opium crop in the canal-irrigated areas of Nad e Ali, Marjah and Lashkar Gah, whereas they received only one-fifth of the crop in the former desert areas. As a result, once in the former desert areas, sharecropping households were compelled to cultivate more land with poppy just to maintain the same standard of living as they had in the HFZ.

Without targeted assistance and with less land available for sharecropping or lease within the canal-irrigated areas of the HFZ, the land-poor moved to the area north of the B oghra canal in search of land (see following figure).

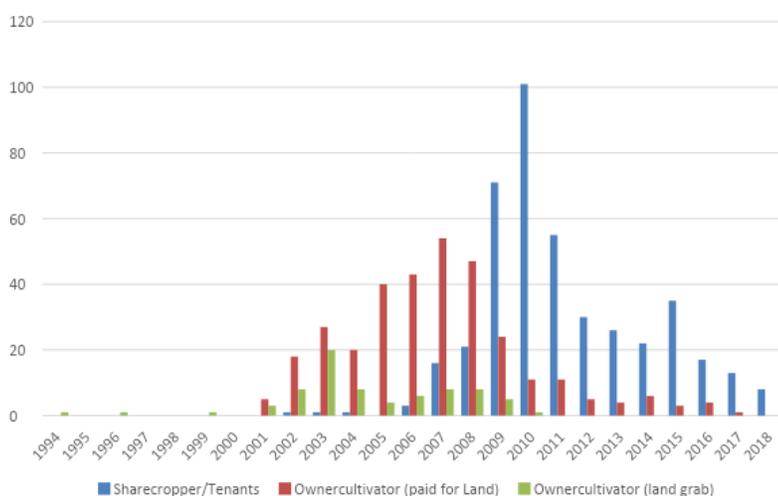


Figure 1 : Year of settlement in area north of the Boghra, by land tenure, 1994-2018

Those who owned land in this area were responsive to this inflow of cheap and relatively skilled labor. At this point, much of the land north of the Boghra canal had been already captured and distributed through gifting or by sale at a rather nominal price, yet significant amounts remained idle. The HFZ helped create a bountiful supply of labour in need of land and a viable income, which prompted greater amounts of poppy to be grown.

The population in the area north of the Boghra was already increasing prior to the HFZ. However, the programme set in place a number of factors that not only led to an increasing rate of settlement of the former desert areas but larger parts of the area being brought under cultivation and into more intensive opium production. By 2018, there were as many as 600,000 people living on almost 60,000 hectares of agricultural land, whereas in 2002, less than 10,000 people occupied 882 hectares. Already the most prolific opium poppy growing province - with up to 50% of Afghanistan’s annual hectareage - the HFZ played a critical role in Helmand expanding its capacity to produce opium poppy.

Allegations of corruption dominated local perceptions of the HFZ, with a common belief that agricultural input provision (and eradication conducted under the name of the HFZ) favored the governor, the rural elite and their patronage network. A vibrant black market in wheat seed and fertiliser developed in Lashkar Gah, where inputs destined for farmers were sold by village elders and provincial officials. While some senior Afghan officials were arrested and imprisoned for their actions, these cases were viewed locally as the tip of the iceberg. Governor Mangal's reliance on donor patronage from funds to transport and logistics—and his pursuit of an opium ban regardless of the impact on rural lives and livelihoods—increased the perception among farmers that he did not act in the interests of the local population, while further allegations of corruption claimed that the quality seed purchased by the PRT and intended for the farmers was replaced. These practices and their deteriorating economic situation further widened the sense of distance between farmers in districts like Marjah, Nad e Ali and Nahre Seraj and the government.

## Recommendations

HFZ represented a step back in time, it was a classic crop substitution program from the 1970s that attempted to replace a cash crop (poppy) with a food crop (wheat). It failed to draw on decades of experience and lessons learned in the field of rural development in illicit drug crop growing areas, and on work undertaken in Afghanistan before and after the fall of the Taliban regime.

### Recommendations - Programme

- **Look beyond simple and outdated models of crop substitution.** The HFZ idea focused on replacing poppy with wheat. But research in this area shows that the population is interested in applying practices other than poppy only if they realise broader development goals. These goals cannot be summarised in generating income, but also includes health, security, education and other infrastructural services.
- **Recognise that interventions that raise the opportunity cost of labour would have the greatest development impact on opium production.** When other employment opportunities are available then poppy becomes less attractive, as it is more attractive when the labour is cheap or free.
- **Focus development investments in those rural areas where they will both deliver real outcomes and be practicable.** There is a need to consider appropriate mechanisms for delivery of assistance under these suboptimal conditions, development outcomes that can be expected and responses to enduring opium poppy cultivation in these areas, at least in the medium term. Also, policymakers will need to learn to work within this challenging political terrain if the government is not to find itself hemmed into the cities, towns and lower valleys.
- **Effective monitoring and evaluation are critical for programming in conflict-affected environments.** More systematic independent impact monitoring is required that gives greater weight to the experiences of, and effects on primary stakeholders, drawing on research on the ground and high-resolution satellite imagery in order that programmes can be realigned where possible, or even canceled where they are failing and leading to costs that far outweigh the benefits.
- **Use performance measurements to prioritise the assessment of crop and income diversification.** Experience demonstrates that enduring reductions in cultivation are a function of livelihood diversification, of movement into high-value horticultural crops (which allow reductions in staples like wheat and maize) and of the availability of non-farm income.

### Recommendations - National

- **Assess all national, multilateral and bilateral development programmes for their impact on the production, trade and use of opium and of its derivatives.** These counternarcotics assessments should be a mandatory feature of the approval process for financial and technical assistance that lies with the Ministry of Finance. The format for these assessments should draw on the guidelines that were developed by the World Bank for counternarcotics mainstreaming in 2007 but have been largely ignored.
- **Conduct a comprehensive counternarcotics review of the National Priority Programmes.** This review will ensure that those responsible for these programmes understand the impact they might have on the illicit drug problem, and take steps to maximise positive impacts when conducting such activities. In particular, there is a need to build synergies between different sectoral interventions through area-based planning in order to maximise both development and counternarcotics outcomes.

- **Strengthen the technical and strategic capacity of the line ministries so that they are better placed to integrate the causes of poppy cultivation into the design and implementation of their development programmes.** In the past, the Ministry of Counternarcotics had the responsibility to support line ministries in developing a better understanding of how their programmes would impact opium poppy cultivation but failed to deliver. Responsibility to ensure that development programmes at least do not encourage poppy cultivation - such as was the case with the HFZ - should now lie with the line ministries. They will require technical support to do this.
- **From an analytical perspective, abandon the crop comparisons that have dominated the descriptions of opium production in the literature of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.** Wheat vs poppy analysis is very problematic. We need to look at systems, how resources are used to produce a livelihood. There is a need to identify who benefits most and least from production and how different interventions will deter cultivation, while others may actually encourage it.

The information and views set out in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official opinion of AREU and EU.

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