



Declining Opium Poppy Cultivation: Reasons and Effects

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Introduction

Counter-narcotics policy in Afghanistan must endeavour to be responsive to evidence from the ground, rather than driven by ideology or assumption. The production and trade of opium is highly adaptive and responds to multiple economic, political and environmental stimuli. Meanwhile, counter-narcotics policy is typically developed far from the field, often through a political dialogue. Therefore, although it is not static, counter-narcotics policy often trails behind the evolving realities of rural Afghanistan.

This paper, drawing on a multi-year body of research on the opium economy, including research on 2009/10 cropping decisions, presents some key findings and recommendations based on these broad arguments:

- Those making and implementing counter-narcotics policy must continually and actively seek to be evidence-based, recognising that such policy must constantly be adapted as the context shifts.
- Measures of counter-narcotics “progress” must be understood in the local context. If not, they risk misinterpretation and false attribution to specific

In recent years, AREU has released several reports annually related to the opium economy; to access them visit www.areu.org.af or the AREU office. Many were written by David Mansfield, whose research also contributed significantly to this policy note.

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counter-narcotics measures, and their pursuit can lead to declines in opium poppy cultivation that are not sustainable.

- Counter-narcotics policy must also account for and respond to the potential negative consequences of reduced opium production, which can manifest in increased rural poverty, reduced government legitimacy and support for insurgency.

1. Counter-Narcotics Policy in Afghanistan

Counter-narcotics policy in Afghanistan encompasses a variety of measures, the mix and focus of which have evolved over time. Counter-narcotics is a crosscutting theme in the Afghanistan National Development Strategy, but there is still a need for closer integration of counter-narcotics policy into the broader rural development and governance paradigm, and for it not to be seen as the exclusive responsibility of the Ministry of Counter Narcotics and the drug-control community.¹ Some policy approaches key to ongoing developments in the sector are:

Strengthening and diversifying legal livelihoods: Rural development initiatives that strengthen opportunities and incentives to engage in legal agriculture, both for food security and income generation, are a vital component of counter-narcotics policy (although they do not necessarily only target those who may be involved in opium production, but generally seek to improve the economic base of rural communities). This approach has largely replaced a more narrow focus on “alternative livelihoods” approaches, which has largely sought to motivate and compensate farmers moving out of opium production on a short-term basis.

Eradication: The physical destruction of the crop in the ground, eradication can be undertaken after germination during the early stages of growth to serve as a demonstration effect and allow farmers to plant another winter crop (usually wheat) or later on

¹ David Mansfield and Adam Pain, *Counter-Narcotics in Afghanistan: The Failure of Success* (Kabul: AREU, 2008).

in the season once the plant has fully developed—at which stage there is often a stronger reaction to crop destruction because it results in greater economic losses. There is considerable debate about the efficacy of eradication, but evidence suggests that it is not a key factor determining current levels of cultivation.² US policy has moved away from eradication, which is now the preserve of Afghan authorities.

Disruption: A key priority of the National Drug Control Strategy is the disruption of the drugs trade by targeting traffickers and their backers and eliminating the basis for the trade. The Counter-Narcotics Police of Afghanistan is the lead law enforcement agency tasked to this. Since mid-2009, US military operations in Afghanistan have included the tactical targeting of traffickers identified as having links to the insurgency.

Success measures: During the last decade, the principle measures of counter-narcotics “success” were the number of hectares (ha) of opium poppy cultivated and the number eradicated. A measure of the number of “poppy-free provinces”³ was introduced in 2007 by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), which encouraged a degree of geographic distinction among indicators. However, simply aiming to increase the number of “poppy-free provinces” is not a complete target in its own right, because it fails to assess the causes, impact or sustainability of reductions in opium poppy cultivation.

2. Opium Poppy Production Trends

Opium poppy cultivation has generally declined over the past several years in all regions of Afghanistan, including the south, where it is most concentrated. Historically, cultivation levels have fluctuated broadly, influenced by a variety of factors including official policy and action, market prices for opium resin and other crops, and security and climatic conditions. To assess the durability of the current drop in production it is important to examine its causes, impacts and the potential for changes in the overall environment affecting the opium economy.

Strong governors

In both Balkh and Nangarhar, the provincial governors (Atta Mohammad Noor and Gul Agha Sherzai, respectively) are credited with leading and succeeding in a campaign against opium poppy cultivation. They used combinations of former mujahiddin networks,

² In Helmand, farmers were highly dismissive of government eradication threats, whereas market forces appear to have significantly influenced cultivation decisions, see Section 2.

³ Defined by UNODC as having 100 ha or less of total cultivation.

patronage, relationships with elders and strongmen, arrests, threats, eradication and the promise and reward of development assistance to reduce opium cultivation from high to very low levels.

The success of these governors suggests that political will and power in key positions can be very important to reducing opium production and seems to favour the policy approach of rewarding provincial governors who achieve significant reductions in cultivation. However, such rewards can also create resentment amongst populations who feel the brunt of livelihoods loss but do not benefit from any compensation. This can actually reduce the legitimacy of the government in the eyes of the people. Coupled with the fact that such reductions may not be sustainable if and when a particular governor’s political fortunes shift, this means that gains made through such an approach are fragile.

Wheat, markets and food security

Helmand, where up to half of Afghanistan’s opium is produced, is a good example of how market forces and expectations affect cultivation levels. From 2008 to 2009, overall opium poppy cultivation dropped while large tracts of wheat were planted in areas opened up for cultivation by high rainfall. Poppy cultivation dropped in areas where the provincial government exerts some control and where it does not.

Recent high food prices were a key factor in farmers’ decisions to grow less opium poppy. When wheat reached 35 Afs per kilogram in 2008, with the price of dry opium simultaneously very low, many opium farmers had difficulty purchasing enough grain for their families’ consumption. Farmers responded by growing more wheat, but for consumption rather than to take advantage of high prices at market (few farmers can produce a marketable wheat surplus).⁴ Farmers made similar choices for the 2009/10 season, despite wheat falling to as low as 15.5 Afs per kg, because many expected that insecurity in Pakistan (the traditional source of wheat imports) will drive the price back up and anticipated that opium prices would remain low for the foreseeable future. However, the durability of this shift to wheat is far from certain because it is not a profitable crop; a stable wheat price and a rise in the price of opium might encourage increased opium poppy cultivation (and there are, in fact, already signs that the price of opium is beginning to rise in the eastern and southern regions).

⁴ 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).

Market-driven reductions in opium poppy cultivation are potentially more lasting in some other provinces. For example, in the central province of Ghor, it was only while opium prices were high during the middle of the last decade that opium poppy cultivation became attractive. When prices dropped along with yields (for climatic reasons), most farmers abandoned it in favour of other crops.⁵

Insecurity and market access

Although insecurity in Pakistan is believed to have contributed to rises in wheat prices and has thus encouraged its cultivation in southern Afghanistan for household consumption, local insecurity tends to discourage the production of licit crops for market, leaving opium as the only viable cash crop. When roads are dangerous to travel, farmers often find it difficult to access sales points and traders have difficulty visiting villages. Opium then becomes a more attractive option for farmers: they can more easily access credit to grow it, they can sell it from the farm-gate and it can be easily stored without spoiling. For farmers in such conditions, growing opium poppy is a choice often taken in the absence of other possibilities.

3. Counter-Narcotics, Counter-Insurgency and Government Legitimacy

The ISAF counter-insurgency strategy declares that “victory is achieved when the populace consents to the government’s legitimacy and stops actively and passively supporting the insurgency.”⁶ Counter-narcotics does not feature prominently in counter-insurgency strategy documents, but counter-narcotics policy is highly relevant to counter-insurgency objectives in Afghanistan. In the long term, a strong, legitimate government and a secure environment will be conducive to lasting reductions in opium poppy cultivation and trafficking. In the short term, however, tensions can exist between efforts to reduce opium cultivation and efforts to build government legitimacy and win the support of the population. This is a particular risk as opium-growing areas in the south are brought under military or government control, but also in more secure provinces.

Corruption and targeting: Counter-insurgency strategy in Afghanistan aims to suppress both the “narco-insurgent-criminal nexus” and the “confluence

of narco-Afghan government corruption.”⁷ The likelihood is that more weight will be given to the targeting of insurgent-linked traffickers (given that over 50 have been put on the international military “capture or kill” list⁸), which is at odds with a growing impression in the south that government officials are more involved in the drug’s trade than the Taliban.⁹ Active targeting of insurgency-linked trafficking could have the unintended effect of “taking out the competition” and strengthening government-linked players, or at least creating the perception of doing so. This could be counter-productive at a time when increasing the perceived legitimacy of the Afghan government is a key counter-insurgency goal. Narcotics-related counter-insurgency efforts must be balanced and include a focus on government-linked actors.

Eradication: Eradication efforts could also potentially undermine government legitimacy in the eyes of Afghans, particularly if the prime targets are those who do not have the necessary connections or money to protect their crop from eradication, and there is evidence of this occurring.¹⁰ Popular support for the government could be further undermined in situations where crop destruction is the primary encounter between rural communities and the government.

Poppy Free Provinces: Government legitimacy also risks being undermined by aggressive eradication or other counter-narcotics actions taken to achieve “poppy-free” status in provinces with already low levels of opium poppy cultivation. Some provinces will only be declared “poppy free” this year by the UNODC if “timely elimination activities are implemented” against residual poppy crops; this is the case for Badakhshan, Baghlan, Faryab, Kabul, Kunar, Laghman, Nangarhar and Sari-Pul.¹¹ But the areas of these provinces where opium poppy cultivation persists are often the most insecure or agriculturally marginal. The adding of a few provinces to the “poppy free” list could come at the cost of

⁷ Commander of the NATO International Security Assistance Force/US Forces Afghanistan, *ISAF Campaign Plan*, November 2009, Slide 12. Abbreviations in original have been expanded.

⁸ Imre Karacs, “Opium Barons at Top of Kill or Capture List as US Targets the Taleban,” *Times Online*, 11 August 2009.

⁹ 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” (June 2008).

¹⁰ David Mansfield, “Drivers 2009/10 Growing Season: Initial Brief” (London, 2010).

¹¹ “Afghanistan Opium Survey 2010: Winter Rapid Assessment” (Kabul: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime/Ministry of Counter-Narcotics, 2010).

⁵ David Mansfield, “‘Poppy Free’ Provinces,” Ghor chapter.

⁶ ISAF, “Tactical Pocket Reference: Understanding Counter-insurgency” (October 2009).

alienating communities from the Afghan government—communities in which the absence of viable alternatives means that the decreases in cultivation levels would be both painful and hard to sustain.

Reductions based on coercion: Tensions in Nangarhar demonstrate that reductions based on coercion, as opposed to the successful shift to legal livelihoods, can further entrench poverty and inequity and reduce popular support for government. Diversification of on-farm, off-farm and non-farm incomes in Nangarhar have largely been beneficial in districts closest to the capital, Jalalabad. However, some more marginal areas where there is not a viable alternative winter cash crop, such as the districts of Achin, Khogiani and upper Shinwar in the Spinghar piedmont, have struggled to maintain their livelihood standards. Combined with recent high food prices (2008 in particular), the opium ban has caused significant hardship and this has dented government legitimacy in these areas.¹²

4. Conclusion and Policy Implications

Although opium poppy cultivation is down in Afghanistan for the third straight year, there is no guarantee that this trend will continue. Cultivation choices depend on a variety of factors, some of which are difficult for policymakers to influence, including complications resulting from the unstable security environment. Attention must be paid to the reasons behind declines in opium poppy cultivation—only those that are based on sustainable legal livelihoods are likely to be lasting. To facilitate and maintain such transitions out of opium poppy production, efforts must continue in the delivery of rural development initiatives as well as toward creating an overall environment conducive to licit agriculture. This includes improvements in governance and security. Understanding counter-narcotics as part of these processes will reduce the potential for counter-narcotics actions to harm rural livelihoods and government legitimacy, and will focus resources where they are most likely to be effective.

Moving forward, research findings on current opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan suggest six general recommendations for counter-narcotics policy:

- 1) **Conceptualise counter-narcotics more broadly:** To facilitate sustainable reductions in opium poppy cultivation, counter-narcotics must be understood as part of a broader framework of rural development, good governance and security.

- 2) **Area-based measures are not enough:** Area-based measures, be they overall opium poppy hectareage or the number of “poppy free” provinces, are insufficient measures of counter-narcotics “success.” Efforts to reduce opium poppy production without considering the broader context and consequences risk being unsustainable, causing hardship for rural families and creating resentment of the government.
- 3) **Don’t needlessly harm the weak or poor:** Eradication targeted at farmers producing small amounts of opium poppy with few alternatives, or at villages or farmers without the necessary resources or connections to prevent it, may result in unsustainable reductions in cultivation and significant hardship. Likewise, rewards and development assistance should be delivered to those most in need.
- 4) **Consider who and what are behind cultivation decisions:** Attention must be placed on the causes and impacts of decreases in opium cultivation. Trends out of opium cultivation based on coercion or market prices are often unstable and short term, and don’t necessarily reflect improved living standards or best use of land.
- 5) **Prioritise rural development with substantial long-term commitment:** Overall improvements in rural development in Afghanistan are vital for the achievement of sustained reductions in opium poppy cultivation. Particularly in the south, rural assistance remains primarily short term and narrowly targeted, with limited potential to contribute to lasting change. Only when farmers are secure in legal livelihoods are declines in cultivation likely to be lasting.
- 6) **Consider the wider impacts of counter-narcotics actions on counter-insurgency and government legitimacy:** Opium poppy eradication or suppression can undermine efforts to “win hearts and minds” and increase government legitimacy. Likewise, other counter-narcotics actions can damage government legitimacy, contradicting counter-insurgency goals (as has occurred in Nangarhar). While both counter-insurgency and counter-narcotics could be said to share the same vision of a secure, licit rural sector, efforts should be made to manage any tensions that exist between them in the short term. Ultimately, improvements in the security situation would facilitate other agricultural markets and cultivation options, thus allowing for reductions in opium poppy cultivation.

¹² David Mansfield, “‘Poppy Free’ Provinces: A Measure or a Target” (Kabul: AREU, 2009), Nangarhar chapter.