

Briefing Note on Fieldwork in Kandahar Province, December 2015 - January 2016: Opium Poppy and Rural Livelihoods

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About the author

Paul Fishstein (MS, Agricultural and Resource Economics) is a former director of AREU whose Afghanistan experience goes back to 1977. He is currently an independent consultant.

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1. Introduction

This briefing note provides initial observations from fieldwork conducted between 14 December 2015 and 8 January 2016 in ten field sites within Arghandab, Panjwai, and Zharai Districts of Kandahar Province. There were 150 interviews conducted in ten field sites, which were selected in order to provide a range of locations with varying agricultural assets, security, and proximity to urban markets. Where possible, pairs of sites were chosen on either side of the Arghandab River. Fieldwork took place after the 2015/16 main (winter) planting season, allowing comparison between the 2014/15 and 2015/16 cropping seasons. Information was collected on the 2015 summer season, but because fieldwork was completed several months before summer planting for 2016, no comparisons can be made between last summer and this year.¹

These initial observations reinforce the significant differences in outcomes based on geography, location, and water/land resources, as well as the important role played by local political conditions and history. While there were differences across households depending on their land and other assets, in general those in the more secure areas with better access to markets in Kandahar city had adopted a more diversified agriculture and were thus less dependent on opium poppy for cash income and wheat for subsistence.

In 2014/15, according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), farmers in Kandahar Province cultivated 21,020 hectare of opium poppy, the third largest area after Helmand and Farah, notwithstanding an estimated 38 percent decrease in cultivated area from 2013/14. (According to UNODC, production in Kandahar decreased by two-thirds, from 995 to 338 metric tonnes, due to declining yields throughout the southern and western regions, as a result of soil depletion and other agronomic factors.²) In recent years Arghandab District has had limited opium poppy cultivation, while Panjwai and Zharai have been much more significant cultivators; in 2014/15, Zharai made up nearly one-quarter of opium poppy cultivation in the province.

¹ Appreciation goes to the Organisation for Sustainable Development and Research (OSDR) for their fieldwork and their contribution to analysis.

² "Afghanistan Opium Survey 2015: Cultivation and Production" (Kabul: UNODC/MCN, 2015). In part due to methodological differences, there has often been a wide divergence between UNODC and United States (US) estimates of cultivation both in absolute amounts and even in trends. This is most acute at provincial levels and especially in Kandahar. (For example, in 2013, the US estimate for cultivated area in Kandahar was less than UNODC's by nearly one-third.) Yield data should be treated with caution due to changes in methodology and the simple fact that measuring yields in this environment is very difficult.

The most significant opium poppy-growing area in Kandahar is Maiwand, which, according to UNODC, has accounted for between 37 and 58 percent of area in the province over the last six years. Maiwand, Panjwai, and Zharai are three of the seven districts targeted by the three-year (2013-16) USAID-funded

Kandahar Food Zone Program (KFZ), which aims to help farmers shift out of opium poppy cultivation into licit crop production. KFZ has reported construction or rehabilitation of six canals each in Zharai and Panjwai, including three in or near the fieldwork sites.³

3 “Kandahar Food Zone Program (KFZ) Overview.” Updated September 30, 2015. <https://www.usaid.gov/news-information/fact-sheets/kandahar-food-zone-program-kfz>

2. Water and Land Resources

A. Water

The three districts are situated to the west of Kandahar city and lie within the Lower Arghandab watershed, which starts at Dahla Dam to the northeast. As is the case virtually everywhere in Afghanistan, households reported an overall shortage of irrigation water, with increasing reliance on deep wells (70-100 metres) over shallow wells or canals that were used in the past. Throughout this part of Afghanistan, such deep wells have replaced *karez* (underground aqueducts), with attendant social and hydrological effects. Most farmers who have the financial means to drill a well will do so, often using returns from opium poppy to finance it. There is widespread concern about a falling water table, especially with the continued expansion into *dasht* (desert) areas that was seen in some of the fieldwork sites and elsewhere in southwest Afghanistan. Earlier estimates are that in the entire Lower Arghandab Basin, due to water shortage, about 83 percent of agricultural land is cultivated only intermittently.⁴ In Talukon in Panjwai District, respondents complained that in 2012 and 2013 an aid agency had drilled 30-40 wells to a depth of 20-30 metres, but now that the water table has fallen further, the wells do not provide water. (There were additional complaints that the wells had gone to households with *wasita* [personal connections] and that the “NGO” had not done the job correctly but rather had “just taken the money and left”-- a standard complaint about aid projects.)

Out of 150 surveyed households, 112 reported a change in the availability of irrigation water in recent years. Slightly more than half of households in Arghandab District reported no change, and in Mianjui, the majority of households (11 of 15) reported no change. It should be noted that “no change” did not necessarily imply that there was sufficient water, only that there had been no decrease or increase.

B. Land

There has been expansion of cultivation and residence into the *dasht* in Asheqeh and Kolk-e Mersenzai in Zharai, and in Nagehan and Shuyen-e Sufla in Arghandab; in the latter area, 30 percent of the population was said to have moved to the new areas in the *dasht*. Some of this expansion is the result of previous land grabs by commanders or by the general population in reaction to land grabs by others. A number of surveyed households in various districts reported purchasing or otherwise obtaining land in the *dasht*.

Land is farmed either by its owner or through a sharecropping or leasing arrangement. Sharecropping takes a variety of forms, depending mainly on the effort required or on who provides inputs, but also related to history, relationships, the talent of the sharecropper, bargaining power, and other factors. In the canal-fed areas, the farmer's share is typically one-third, while in the desert areas it may be one-fifth. Lower shares (e.g., one-sixth) are typical when the land is devoted to orchards because less effort is required from the farmer. Lease amounts vary depending on the location and quality of the land. One *jerib* (0.494 acre or roughly one-fifth hectare) will cost Pakistani Rupees (PKR) 20-60,000 (US dollars (USD)\$190-565) for low-quality land without water (i.e., *dasht*), and up to PKR 100,000 (USD\$940) or even PKR 200,000 (USD\$1,880) if the land has good water and solar power. Land closer to Kandahar city is less frequently sharecropped or leased, as the owners can more easily take care of their land even if they are living in the city. Land farther away is more frequently farmed by others, including in such far-flung places as Nalghan, where 40 percent of the land was said to be either sharecropped or leased. About two-thirds of surveyed households farmed only their own land, and about one-third either leased or sharecropped, while ten households farmed a mix of theirs and someone else's land. In total, a little less than two-thirds of land is owner-farmed, while a bit more than a third is farmed by a sharecropper or the person who leases the land. Of course, there are variations across the areas.

⁴ Watershed Atlas of Afghanistan, first edition - working document for planners. Raphy Favre, Watershed Consultant, Golam Monowar Kamal, AIMS Focal Point. (Kabul, January 2004) 140.

3. Security and Governance

In most of the ten fieldwork sites, respondents reported that security was relatively good, despite the proximity of areas of Panjwai to smuggling routes to the south in Registan, Shorawak, and Garmser, which tend to attract or create insecurity. Respondents' generally positive views of security may be because they are making comparisons with other less secure areas of Kandahar and nearby Helmand, as well as with conditions in the area in previous years. In most of the fieldwork areas, including Arghandab, the people were said to be *hamkar* (cooperative) with the government, largely because the Taliban were seen as outsiders and having been "cruel" when they previously controlled the area. Respondents rarely mentioned the provincial governor, whose name was unknown to many.

The population was much more focused on the Afghan Local Police (ALP), as they usually hold the power in the area and have the most effect on people's daily lives. More significant than the provincial governor was Provincial Police Chief Abdul Raziq, who was mentioned mostly approvingly as keeping the province relatively secure: "People are hopeful as long as Commander Raziq is in place; we're not worried. We're happy with his work. He is a good person."⁵ There were some concerns, however, about a worsening security situation in next-door Helmand Province, given reports that the Taliban continued to be supported from across the border with weapons and supplies and with assistance from elements of Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba fighting inside Afghanistan.

Some of the improved security was attributed to the presence of the ALP, who are deployed in seven of the ten fieldwork areas. As in most places where the ALP are deployed, residents had mixed and cautious views. The ALP and Afghan National Police (ANP) were said almost universally to be taking money from farmers at harvest time against the threat of opium poppy eradication. (Typical prices were PKR 5-10,000 [USD\$53-106] per *jerib* for opium, and PKR 5,000 [USD\$53] for *chars* [hashish].) But the ALP were also seen to have brought a certain level of security and were considered a lesser evil than the Taliban who had been present previously. Taliban were said to have taken *ushr* (a harvest tax), food, and other benefits from the people, so the amounts taken by the ALP and ANP were seen to be reasonable and usually predictable by comparison. For example, in Mianjui, the Taliban were reported to have killed 500 people in 2007 and to have attacked police posts during the pomegranate harvest season, which prevented the

harvest and damaged the trees. In Sperwan it was said that a number of Taliban died fighting there, so residents avoided traveling to Pakistan, where they might encounter hostile Taliban sympathisers. "People here hate the Taliban, as they gave us a lot of torment, collecting *ushr*, *zakat* (donations), and food. The Taliban extracted a lot of resources. There were also drone strikes when the Taliban were here. After the Taliban left and the bombardment stopped, all was well." Some respondents say that if they had to go to Pakistan, they would claim to be from Helmand because Sperwan has bad associations among Taliban supporters.

In some cases, the ALP commanders were those who had originally driven out the Taliban, and were given credit for that. Some ALP commanders represented the re-assertion of power by traditional families, and antipathy towards the Taliban may have roots in tribal conflicts in the past. It also appears that some people prefer the compromise settlements worked out by the elders (except near the *woleswali* (district headquarters), where the state system is followed) rather than the harsh judgements offered by the Taliban.

Some ALP were also said to take PKR 200-400 (USD\$1.90-3.80) per *jerib* for common crops. Some people "couldn't remember" whether the ALP were taking money, but most people were intimidated enough to agree to pay the price. ALP were said to have divided up the area, so that at least farmers were not susceptible to multiple demands for bribes. In some places where the ALP/ANP did not take money, people "give them something to keep them happy."⁶

In general, satisfaction depended on the characteristics of the ALP commanders and men. In Talukon, people were not happy with the government, especially the behaviour of the ALP: "ALP take money and don't respect the elders. You can't fight with the ALP, as tomorrow they will come plant a mine at the back of your house, or tell the *woleswal* (District Administrator) that you've hidden something and you'll end up at Pul-e Charkhi."

In Nagahan, which is close to Kandahar city, it was said that the ALP/ANP did not take money because they feared the response of the provincial authorities if someone called in to the 119 anti-corruption hotline.

⁵ Interview with elders, Shuyen-e Sufla, Arghandab, 26 December 2015.

⁶ Interview with farmer, Mianjui, Arghandab, 31 December 2015.

4. Agriculture

In Kandahar, there are two cropping seasons: the main winter season, and a smaller summer season, the extent of which is limited by availability of water. Agriculture in the area is dominated by wheat and orchards, albeit with some significant differences between the fieldwork sites. For instance, in Mianjui, 92 percent of the land in surveyed households was taken up by orchards, with the remaining amount devoted to field crops. On the other hand, in most of the surveyed areas of Panjwai and Zharai, at least one-third of land was given to wheat, with significant shares of land going to opium poppy. Aside from wheat and opium poppy, the most important field crops in the area are vegetables: tomato, okra, eggplant, and onion. In some areas of Zharai, cumin was grown. Areas closer to the markets of Kandahar city are more attractive for cultivation of vegetables.

The dominant orchard crops are grapes and, in Arghandab, pomegranates. Although fighting has taken place in various eras going back to the time of Soviet occupation, most of the destruction of the orchards occurred during fighting between the US military and the Taliban several years ago. But these orchards are progressively being rebuilt. This area of Kandahar, especially Panjwai, is the source for several types of raisin: black, green, red, and the highly regarded *ab josh* (a type of large raisin). In some areas, other orchard crops are apricot, peach, and plum.

During the minor summer season, by far the most common crop is maize (prohibited by local security officials in at least one area because it can provide hiding places for insurgents), followed by *reihan* (basil) and mongbean. In Demrasi, *reihan* was said to have become popular in the last three years after being introduced by the government or NGOs. (Saffron was also said to have been introduced around 2005/06, but failed because it was tried in the wrong places and was given only to those with *wasita*.) The variety of *reihan* that is grown in this area is exported to India for use in hot-weather drinks and medicine.

Another variety, *reihan-e siya* (black *reihan*), is used for food and spices but is not grown here. The plant is transplanted from a nursery, and is grown after the wheat harvest. It requires little water but large amounts of labour. The stems and leaves are discarded or burned for fuel, and the seeds are used. Each *jerib* yields 35-60 Kandahari *maun* (one *maun* = 4.5kg), which sells for PKR 500-700 (USD\$4.70-6.60). *Chars* is also grown during the summer season, especially in Zharai. Several households reported growing a bit

of opium poppy in Panjwai during the summer (which would be highly unusual due to the weather conditions during those months). In some areas of Arghandab and Zharai, vegetables were grown. In Mianjui, orchards were the only summer crops.

There is ongoing expansion of orchards and of new crops such as *reihan*, which is grown during the limited summer cropping season. As discussed below, there was wide variation in the extent of opium poppy cultivation among the surveyed households, with Zharai having the highest percentage and Arghandab having none at all. Arghandab households had the highest proportion of orchards (which produce cash crops), and devoted the lowest percentage of land to wheat, which is primarily produced for household consumption. The surveyed households in Mianjui and Nagahan in particular grew very little wheat this year (8 and 14 percent of cultivated land, respectively), reflecting an extremely high reliance on cash crops. In fact, in Mianjui only one household grew any wheat at all. This contrasted sharply with areas such as Demerasi and Talukan in Panjwai, where surveyed households devoted 38 and 35 percent respectively to wheat, and where 12 of 15 in Demerasi and all 15 households in Talukan grew wheat. A bit less than half of surveyed households (70 out of 150) reported meeting wheat requirements through their own production in 2014/15, with slightly fewer (66) projected to meet them this year; only nine households reported a saleable surplus last year.

Between 2014/15 and 2015/16 winter cropping seasons, there were no significant observable changes in cropping patterns in the surveyed households, including the proportion of land that was devoted to major crops. There appear, however, to have been changes in the total land farmed by the households in the fieldwork sites (increases in some areas of Arghandab and decreases in some areas of Zharai), despite an apparent decrease in the amount of leased land farmed. In general, households maintained the same mix of crops between last year and this year, although in Talukan in Panjwai and in Nalgham and Kolk-e Mersenzai in Zharai, the number of households growing opium poppy increased. From last year to this year, most households maintained or decreased the amount of land they planted in wheat; the fact that none of the 60 surveyed households in Arghandab increased the amount of wheat again suggested a greater reliance on cash crops and markets.

Farmers make extensive use of agricultural chemicals, with little understanding of effects or hazards, or even the actual contents. Herbicides were used by nearly all (124) households, mostly obtained from Kandahar city but some from the well-stocked agricultural input stores in Panjwai bazaar (see Figure 1). In addition, more than three-quarters of households used a variety of other chemicals known only by their colour and bottle shape. Farmers reported a mix of active chemical, trade, and brand names, including Taj Opic, Mectone, Cypermethrin, Taj Dorsbin, Pendimethalin, Taj Grow G, Farorat, Chlorpyrifos1, Ferrostrene, and Lambda-Cyhalothrin, as well as soil conditioners such as Humic Power. One Iranian chemical was said to be marketed as effective in counteracting the spraying said to be carried out by the Americans (see below).

The quality of the chemicals is generally viewed as questionable, because they are second-hand goods, expired, or adulterated. This situation is generally attributed to extension workers from the Department

of Agriculture, Irrigation, and Livestock (DAIL) who fail to do their job of controlling quality, in part because they have links with shopkeepers who sell such inferior goods. It is also possible, however, that farmers put excessive faith in the chemicals' promised effects, which almost guarantees eventual disappointment.

While most households (136 of 150) reported having a generator and at least one solar panel for lights (119), only six households reported having a solar panel to run a tubewell. Solar-driven water pumps are not present to the extent that they are in the desert areas of Helmand. At a one-time price of USD\$5,900, fully installed by a dealer in Kandahar city, however, they could transform the economics of desert cultivation in this part of Kandahar. There were reports that the better-off people in Shuyen-e Sufia were using solar power for wells in the *dasht*.



Figure 1: Agricultural chemicals and seeds in shop in Panjwai.

5. Markets and the Larger Economy

Except for opium and *chars*, which are sold to traders at the village level, households have the option to sell their outputs in a mix of village, garden, and Kandahar city. Marketing occurs mainly in two ways. For pomegranate, most farmers sell their entire orchard as a whole (e.g., five *jerib* of pomegranate for PKR 1.5m [USD\$214,150]). When the price has been agreed to before the harvest, it is typically lower; at the time of harvest, the price varies according to the current market. For most vegetables and grapes, farmers sell after the harvest either in the village or in Kandahar city according to the current price. When demand in Kandahar city is high, traders are more likely to come to the village to purchase outputs. If farmers need money urgently, they will take their goods to the city.

None of the households reported any constraints on marketing, other than some complaints about poor prices. Surprisingly, given farmers' tendency to complain, only 39 of 150 households said that they had not received good prices for their outputs, and some of those complaints were related to crop disease and other factors which reduced the prices. For vegetables harvested during summer, the hot weather prevents farmers from holding their outputs to wait for a good price, with the result that prices are extremely low. No respondents reported any difficulty in transporting goods. In Nalgham, people reported that they were benefitting from a road that the international military had built in Sang-e Hisar during fighting several years ago, although at the time they had objected to the damage the road had caused to the land.

Roughly one-third of surveyed households reported a member working full-time off the farm. The largest categories of employment were the security services and shopkeeping (21 households each). Of the households with a family member in one of the security forces, ten specified being in the ALP. Other categories included wage labour (11), driving either a vehicle or a Zarang⁷ (8), teaching (3), other government positions (5), and working as mechanics (3). Most labour opportunities were in Lashkar Gah or Kandahar city, with the sites closer to Kandahar city offering more opportunities. Despite the relative proximity to Pakistan, only two households reported having workers there. Some men from the area were said to work in the brick kilns in Pakistan, but, as noted above, many respondents said that they avoided working across the border because they were hassled when they travelled there. Iran was not a destination for work-seekers from these rural areas of Kandahar, in large part due to language difficulties.

⁷ A type of motorbike that can be fitted with a variety of trailers to transport people and goods.

Some young men mentioned going to Helmand and other areas for the opium poppy harvest. Youth considered it a *mela* (festival): a chance to earn money and have fun at the same time. Recruitment was said to take place by mobile phone, with employers calling last year's workers to see if they were available. The daily wage in Demrasi was reported as AFS 250 (USD\$3.70) or PKR 400 (USD\$3.80).

The pomegranate harvest was also seen as a good source of labour opportunity in areas where there were orchards. In Shuyen-e Sufla, respondents reported daily wages of PKR 500-600 (USD\$4.70-5.70) and even up to PKR 1,500 (USD\$14.10) for "professional workers" - those who know how to handle pomegranates and have an acquired eye for how many of which size can fit in the cardboard crates that are used to transport them. Only 14 households reported taking loans in 2014/15, with the same number reporting accumulated debt from previous years.

Forty-six households reported a significant change in their livelihoods this year, of which 22 were positive and 26 were negative. The most common reason for a positive change in their livelihoods was having a family member drawing a salary in the security forces; the next most common reason was a good harvest. The most common reason for a negative change in their livelihoods was poor yields (especially pomegranates which were damaged by last year's rain), followed by damage that they thought was caused by US "spraying" of opium poppy (described below).

It was reported that only in Morghan both boys and girls were attending school or madrassa, and that the Taliban had not criticised or interfered with girls' education. All respondents reported a drastic reduction in development assistance, reflecting the post-surge situation and the international military drawdown. In the last year, only seven of 150 households reported any sort of development assistance in the area. The assistance that did exist consisted of construction of bridges, culverts, retaining walls, and storehouses for grapes. No households reported receiving any seed and fertiliser in the last year. Aside from the construction of one raisin house which had been built in Shuyen-e Sufla in 2014, all said no work had been done. All reported that prior to the last two years there had been a lot of development assistance (e.g., canal cleaning, building of retaining walls and *pul-e chak* (culverts) but that this had evaporated in the last two years.⁸

⁸ As noted above, the USAID-funded Kandahar Food Zone Program (KFZ) is a three-year, multi-faceted alternative development program operating in seven districts of Kandahar, including Panjwai and Zharai. KFZ has reported construction or rehabilitation of six canals each in Zharai and Panjwai (including three in or near the fieldwork sites).

6. Opium and Counter-Narcotics

The fieldwork sites varied in the extent to which opium poppy was cultivated. As noted above, there was almost no opium poppy (one household) grown in Arghandab, while it was more present in the research sites in the other two districts. In Panjwai, in Demrasi, informal estimates were that half the population grew at least some opium poppy. None was grown near the road or the *woleswali*, but it was somewhat more prevalent to the east and south of the *woleswali*. There was far more cultivation in Talukan and Sperwan. Within Zharai, in Asheqeh, there was limited opium poppy cultivation, as fruit and other cash crops provided good incomes, especially in land closer to the river. On the other hand, in Kolk-e Mersenzai, cultivation was more widespread, especially north of the road and farther into the *dasht*, where there was less security and more poppy. In those areas, some of the population had been alienated when they were excluded from an earlier land distribution; further, without the patronage offered by ALP, they were more sympathetic to the Taliban, who in turn discouraged eradication by the ALP. Finally, in Nalgham, opium poppy cultivation was widespread, despite the presence of the ALP, ANP, and Afghan National Army (ANA). Among the surveyed households in the three fieldwork sites in Zharai, two-thirds of households grew opium poppy, making up 20 percent of the land area. None of the 57 households that grew opium poppy mono-cropped.

As noted above, from last year to this year there was not a major increase in the amount of opium poppy grown. However, the number of households growing opium poppy did increase in some villages (Talukan, Nalgham, Kolk-e Mersenzai). In Nalgham, the growing areas were those in which there was limited government control and were far from the *woleswali*. In Kolk-e Mersenzai, the opium poppy areas were north of the main village; the farther one went into the *dasht*, the less security and the more opium poppy there was. Between 60 and 70 percent of the land in the *dasht* near Kolk-e Mersenzai was said to be growing opium poppy, as wheat yielded inadequate returns, given the high initial costs of drilling a tubewell and the recurrent costs of diesel fuel to run the generator that drives the tubewell.

While opium poppy is grown primarily in the winter cropping seasons, seven and five households respectively reported growing opium poppy in Sperwan and Talukan in the summer of 2015, for a total of 18 *jeribs* in Sperwan and ten in Talukan. Given the warm conditions and reduction in irrigation water during the summer, this is very unusual.

In some areas, respondents said that growing opium poppy came down to an economic decision: “The decision to grow or not is based on profitability, not the word of the government; if Ashraf Ghani comes, they will still grow.” In some areas, households are not growing poppy because fruit and other crops give a better income without the stress of bribes to security personnel, worries about spraying, and land depletion. In Demrasi, opium poppy cultivation had decreased because of salty land, “US spraying,” depletion of soil, and high costs relative to returns. Reasons for reducing or stopping cultivation included high production costs, fear of the effects of “spraying,” attractiveness of orchard crops, and need for crop rotation. The proximity of the government also played a role, as seen in Nagahan, close to Kandahar city.

Production costs (water, labour, chemicals) can make alternatives such as melon and vegetables more attractive. In Mianjui, a respondent explained, “We don’t grow opium poppy because we have gardens which produce. Even if the government gives us money to grow, we won’t. The costs don’t make sense.”⁹ In 2014/15, opium yield in Panjwai and Zharai districts was reported to be 1-2.5 *maun* per *jerib*.

In all sites, there was a widespread and unshakable belief in “foreigner spraying” that did not superficially affect the flower but somehow rendered the capsules empty of resin¹⁰ and harmed other crops as well. Spraying was said to be done twice a year using aircraft, and respondents described the accumulation of the white chemical-like snow at the base of walls.

During interviews, all respondents stated that there had been no information or eradication campaign so far in the 2015/16 planting season, although it was still early, as most eradication in this part of the country takes place during March and April. Last year, the authorities in some areas had summoned the elders before planting to deliver the message that spraying would take place, but this seems not to have happened this year. (According to UNODC, 396 hectare of opium poppy had been eradicated in the province in 2014/15, an increase of nearly five times over 2013/14.) On 18 January, however, after the conclusion of fieldwork, surveyors reported that the *woleswal* had announced on Radio Television Afghanistan Kandahar that he had held a meeting with farmers in Demrasi and Sperwan

9 Interview with farmer, Mianjui, Arghandab, 30 December 2015.

10 This firmly held belief has been reported elsewhere, most notably in Helmand Province. See David Mansfield, “‘From Bad They Made It Worse’: The concentration of opium poppy in areas of conflict in the provinces of Helmand and Nangarhar” (Kabul: AREU, May 2014).



Figure 2: Photo of opium poppy eradication. Source: Tolo News, “Poppy Fields Cleared in Crackdown Campaign in Kandahar’s Panjwayee,” 18 January 2016.

at which they had agreed to destroy their own opium poppy with tractors in exchange for promises of development projects. On the same day, Tolo News reported that there had been a “massive campaign” of eradication in Panjwai, along with pledges from officials to facilitate better access to markets for licit production. Observers questioned whether or not the accompanying photo (Figure 2) represented opium poppy under eradication or even an opium poppy field at all, as there did not appear to be any plant material in the ploughed area.

In Kolk-e Mersenzai, there were complaints that last year’s campaign had only gone after the small farmers. In Sperwan, farmers had become accustomed to the campaign, and did not plant near the road. They also happily gave money to the ALP without *janjal* (hassle).

Chars is grown after the wheat crop has been harvested. Unlike in places such as Balkh, where *chars* is usually intercropped with cotton for a combination of pest management and camouflage, in these areas of Kandahar *chars* is grown alone and not intercropped, reportedly because there is no fear that the authorities will take action (see Figure 3).

The opium trade is carried out by local traders who buy and transport it. They use established networks that involve links with ALP, ANP, and other authorities. The *wasita* involved is all local; as one respondent said, “If I know a minister, this is not as useful as someone smaller who knows the local ALP.” (At the time of fieldwork, last year’s raw opium was being purchased for USD\$700-900 per *maun*, depending on the water content.)



Figure 3: *Chars* plants drying and still standing in field, Kandahar Province, December 2015.

7. Conclusion

Initial observations from fieldwork conducted in ten sites in three districts of Kandahar after the winter planting season of 2015/16 confirm observations made elsewhere in Afghanistan: that farming households in more secure areas with better access to markets - in this case Kandahar city - can shift out of opium poppy and diversify into licit crops. The better-off areas (e.g., in Arghandab and in Asheqeh in Zharai) appeared to be those where orchards, especially pomegranate and grape, were being rebuilt after being destroyed in earlier fighting. In such areas, there was essentially no opium poppy and little wheat. The decision not to grow opium poppy was reported as being largely a matter of economics rather than the result of government pressure. The cultivation of *reihan* (basil) as a summer crop has increased significantly in the last three years. In other, less well-off areas (e.g., all three field sites in Panjwai, and in Kolk-e Mersenzai in Zharai), households were more dependent on cultivation of opium poppy and wheat. In all of these areas, opium poppy cultivation was more pervasive in the desert areas.

Initial observations also reinforce the significant role played by geography, location, and water/land resources, as well as by local political conditions and history. In most of the fieldwork sites, respondents reported that security was better than in previous years, and people were generally cooperative with or at least tolerant of the government, if only because the Taliban were seen as outsiders who had imposed cruel and harsh conditions during their control of the area. As elsewhere in Afghanistan, views of the ALP were mixed. While most ALP took money from farmers in exchange for looking the other way on opium poppy cultivation, this was largely tolerated because the amounts were not extreme and collection was somewhat predictable - in contrast to past extraction by the Taliban.

No respondents reported any difficulty in transporting goods to market, and a surprisingly small percentage of respondents complained about low prices for the agricultural outputs. Roughly one-third of surveyed households reported a member working full-time off the farm, with the largest category of employment the security services. All respondents reported a drastic reduction in development assistance in the area in the last three years, reflecting the post-surge situation and the international military drawdown.

This fieldwork has identified two major areas of concern. As in neighbouring Helmand, water tables have fallen, requiring drilling of ever-deeper wells. And despite the difficult conditions, people continue to move into the *dasht* where there is less state influence and where opium poppy is the only crop that allows them to recoup agricultural expenses (primarily diesel). The wider use of solar-powered water pumps could reinforce these two related trends: migration to the desert areas and expansion of opium poppy cultivation.

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