

Stakeholder perceptions of agriculture and nutrition policies and practice: A policy brief for Afghanistan

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Introduction

Like other countries in the South Asian region, malnutrition is a serious problem in Afghanistan: recent national statistics confirm high rates of stunting among vulnerable groups such as children under the age of five: nationally, 40 percent and in certain provinces, over 70 percent (National Nutrition Survey 2013, Ministry of Public Health). Additionally, micronutrient deficiencies are strongly implicated in malnutrition among women and adolescent girls (Flores-Martinez, Zanello, Shankar and Poole 2016), conditions that are likely to perpetuate the generational consequences.

While there are multiple causes of malnutrition, undernutrition and lack of dietary diversity point to micronutrient deficiencies rather than generalised food insecurity (Miller and Welch 2013). Therapeutic approaches to treating undernutrition are important, particularly in situations of conflict and disaster, but food-based approaches play a significant part in addressing chronic deficiencies, implying a major role for agriculture (Thompson and Amoroso 2011). In Afghanistan, there is potential to re-orient the whole agriculture sector toward the nutrition agenda (Levitt, Kostermans, Laviolette and Mbuya 2010).

A crucial policy question is: what are the pathways and incentives needed to ensure that agriculture can have an impact on nutrition?

The objectives of the research reported here were to identify the interrelationships among key organisations in agriculture and nutrition, evaluate the local evidence linking agriculture to nutrition and understand the perceptions of decision makers about policy making and implementation, as well as the capacities for improving nutrition through the agri-food system. The research was conducted within the DFID-funded research programme Leveraging Agriculture for Nutrition in South Asia (LANSA).

Methodology

Research design

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews covering perceptions of the following:

- The political and institutional context, governance systems, structures and processes
- Knowledge and evidence concerning nutrition and agriculture policies
- Stakeholder and policymaking capacity and resources

Interviews were conducted in Kabul and in the four provincial capitals of Badakshan (Faisabad), Bamyan (Bamyan City), Kandahar (Kandahar City) and Nangarhar (Jalalabad). These provinces were selected to achieve a degree of regional representation in terms of agriculture, remoteness and ethnicity. Also, access was facilitated by the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit.

Respondents initially were purposively selected from among public sector organisations, (I)NGOs and universities that were willing to participate, and then through a 'snowballing' technique. **Table 1** lists the respondents' organisational affiliations, with females indicated by an asterisk. A total of 46 interviews were conducted.

Table 1

| Organisation type | Central government | Provincial government | UN agency | NGO | University | Other |
|-------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|-----------|-----|------------|-------------|
| Badakhshan BDK | | 3 | 2 | 4 | | |
| Bamyan BMN | | 4 | | 5* | 1 | |
| Kabul | 4** | | 1 | 4 | | |
| Kandahar KDH | | 3 | | 4 | 1 | Cooperative |
| Nangarhar NGH | | 3 | | 4 | 1 | Consultancy |

* Female; ** Two Females

Conduct of interviews and data management

Six experienced national enumerators (five males, one female) were trained in the purposes of the research and tested the questionnaire among stakeholders in Kabul. Implementation ran from April to September 2015, beginning in Kabul. Interviews were conducted in Dari and Pashto, recorded, and translated and transcribed to English. All transcripts were scrutinised and key concepts identified and related to the questionnaire objectives and questions. Key topics were coded using QSR NVivo and analysed using queries, text searches and word frequencies. The node structure was refined and data were re-coded during the analysis as new themes developed. Emerging from this analysis are major themes concerning how agriculture can be further leveraged for nutrition within Afghanistan.

Key Findings

Lack of policy integration

Firstly, we found a lack of integrated policies. Where policies do, in theory, touch upon agriculture for nutrition, knowledge and practical value of these policies is limited at the implementation level.

Gaps in responses

Secondly, there were significant gaps in our expectations:

- Very little reference was made to the role of women, with almost no articulation of the ways in which women's participation in agriculture can help nutrition. The multisectoral linkages envisaged were not evident in understanding agriculture and nutrition policies, and there was no evidence of knowledge of MAIL's gender strategy. The exception was a respondent in Kabul, who expressed strong aspirations about collaboration with other organisations:
*'Gender is an issue between different organisations... We are the one Ministry to focus on women's situation in Afghanistan and we should add gender issues in all policies, plans and strategies.'*¹
- There was no evidence that national civil society organisations were engaged in advocacy on technical agriculture and nutrition issues. While many organisations are active in development issues - within particular spheres - a culture of awareness of sectoral and intersectoral development was very weak and knowledge of shared experience was limited.
- Thirdly, therefore, a related gap was knowledge management: there was no national knowledge management architecture to record, report and disseminate policies, practices and experiences. Most individual organisations, both public sector and (I)NGOs, have failed to develop an accessible web presence that might strengthen the knowledge culture.

Poorly designed policies

Thirdly, the policies themselves were said to be often donor-driven, ill-designed through top-down processes, with insufficient knowledge and awareness of local realities and heterogeneity of context. Provincial stakeholders expressed a lack of confidence in the knowledge of central policy makers, and reiterated an overdependence on foreign interventions.

1 Central Government, Kabul

Fragmented information flows

Fourthly, we found that communication both within and between sectors was good at the national and provincial levels, but there was evidence that communication between the hierarchical – national and subnational – levels of government was poor. Information flows were fragmented within parallel and often *ad hoc* communication routes. There was little or no evidence of knowledge management processes, either through communication from the communities, districts and provinces to the centre, or of precise policies from the centre to the provinces. Use of modern information management technology – internet – was negligible.

Coordination constraints

Fifthly, there was evidence of coordination activities among a myriad of policy formulating bodies, funding and implementation partners, but there are many inconsistencies to overcome.

Barriers at the national level

Major barriers to leveraging agriculture for nutrition are not confined to the specific sectors. Barriers are symptomatic of Afghanistan's broader development challenges. Extreme dependence on external human and financial resources shapes policy and practice according to international expectations, but fails to deliver efficient and effective processes and outcomes. In particular, we find that lack of capacity and resources within government ministries and departments, along with poor infrastructure remain major barriers to progress.

Finally, the deteriorating security situation and increasing humanitarian needs, particularly from returning refugees point to the need to integrate in a deliberate way the acute humanitarian interventions and long-term chronic development needs, of which malnutrition is just one element.

Recommendations

We propose the following prioritisation for cross-sectoral policies for agriculture and nutrition:

1. **Greater decentralisation - or 'deconcentration' - of policy making to provincial levels.** This needs significant development for national and subnational governance.² Devolution requires that the scale of operations strikes a balance between the availability of technical expertise and local capacity, and the ability for sectors and organisations to communicate effectively in PDCs and SWGs. Provincial-level governance would result in policies that are context-specific, and with fewer inappropriate projects and policies created centrally or copied from other countries: a 'context-sensitive' approach (Nijat, Gosztanyi, Feda and Koehler 2016).
2. **Improved information flows and knowledge management between central and provincial governments.** Internet websites for public sector organisations need to be developed and used as knowledge repositories, with appropriate links to donor and international organisations, including the UN. Increased use of provincial governance – both line ministries and the governors' offices – and district level SWGs are one mechanism to bridge the current poor lines of communication and information flow between national and provincial levels. Greater consultation in policy formation at the central level and improved training in government policies at the provincial level are consistent with strengthening the role and performance of traditional and modern civil society organisations at the lower levels of subnational governance (Nemat and Werner 2016).
3. **Investment in infrastructure for agriculture and nutrition** to create the conditions for successful domestic markets and enterprises. Food chain organisation should focus on creating processing and storage facilities and infrastructure such as energy and communications. Roads and energy linking food chain stakeholders will enhance access to food and enable expansion of a stable domestic agribusiness sector.
4. **Development of national trade policies for agribusiness**, in addition to infrastructure. This will beneficially impact many current problems including, but not limited to: undue reliance on foreign imports, allegations of inadequate food safety controls, lack of national micronutrient fortification of foods, insecure physical access to food and lack of business incentives for farmers and food chain entrepreneurs.
5. **Increased investment in departmental government capacity** within the agriculture and health sectors. Capacity at the provincial level is weak due, in part, to 'brain-drain' as individuals with capacity are recruited to work for (I)NGOs, UN agencies and central government for significantly higher salaries.

2 <http://moph.gov.af/Content/files/Position%20paper%20on%20decentralisation%20April%202015.pdf>

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Glossary of Terms

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| BDK | Badakhshan Province |
| BMN | Bamyan Province |
| DFID | United Kingdom Department for International Development |
| KBL | Kabul |
| KDH | Kandahar Province |
| LANSA | Leveraging Agriculture for Nutrition in South Asia |
| MAIL | Ministry of Agriculture Irrigation and Livestock |
| MoPH | Ministry of Public Health |
| (I)NGO | (International) Non-governmental Organisation |
| NGH | Nangarhar Province |
| PDC | Provincial Development Committee |
| SWG | Sector Working Group |

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The Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) is an independent research institute based in Kabul. AREU's mission is to inform and influence policy and practice by conducting high-quality, policy-relevant research and actively disseminating the results, and by promoting a culture of research and learning. To achieve its mission AREU engages with policy makers, civil society, researchers, and students to promote their use of AREU's research and its library, to strengthen their research capacity, and to create opportunities for analysis, reflection, and debate.

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