



# POVERTY IN AFGHAN POLICY

## Enhancing Solutions through Better Defining the Problem

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### About the Authors

Paula Kantor was director of AREU from 2008 to 2010. While director, she served as co-principle investigator leading AREU's study on livelihood change. Prior to this she was a lecturer in development studies at the University of East Anglia in the UK.

Adam Pain is a regular contributor to AREU and has worked on issues of rural livelihoods in the Himalayan region for the past 20 years. He is a senior research fellow at the department of international development at the University of East Anglia and a visiting professor at the Swedish University of Agricultural Science, Uppsala.

### Overview

This paper demonstrates how the critical link between social relationships and the security of rural livelihoods in Afghanistan is overlooked—both in national policy documents, and the programme-based solutions they engender. It is based on AREU research on rural livelihoods in Kandahar, Badakhshan, Sar-i-Pul and Faryab (hereafter referred to as “the study”) to illustrate the social complexity of Afghan village life—a complexity that is neither understood nor acknowledged by current national programmes. This has consequences, both for achieving programme objectives and, more importantly, for how those objectives are defined. Such programmes are often informed by simplistic conceptions of poverty reduction and rural development which are divorced from an understanding of how power and social inequalities help create and maintain poverty. As a consequence, these interventions can do little more than address outward symptoms of poverty, such as a lack of inputs or information, and may even cause harm if they are used to reinforce existing inequalities. The study's evidence and this paper's review of current policy documents point to the need to re-evaluate how poverty is defined and the types of solutions offered, in order to improve the effectiveness and equity of efforts to reduce poverty and livelihood insecurity. Ways forward include:

- Advocating for change in how poverty is defined and addressed
- Incorporating social analysis into project planning
- Incorporating social analysis into monitoring and evaluation processes
- Building capacity for social analysis
- Developing strategies to engage with village elites
- Recognising that programme implementation may feed into local patronage systems
- Supporting group formation processes and long-term transformative change
- Identifying ways to provide access to resources that challenge existing inequalities
- Understanding and developing existing informal support systems

# 1. Introduction

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The study identified various ways in which social relationships are important to livelihood security. The nature and quality of these relationships and a household's relative position within them all influence how far they enable accumulation or slow improvement, support efforts to cope with crises, or keep households in poverty. Village characteristics including concentration of landholdings and the availability of viable alternatives to farming and agricultural labour were associated with variations in livelihood outcomes across households. Household characteristics, such as availability of male labour, landholdings, and health or disability status, were also a factor.

The extent to which wealthy and socially powerful elites were oriented to support village interests depended on how far these overlapped with their own. In poorer and more marginal rural economies such as in Badakhshan and Sar-i-Pul this overlap was greater, with more evidence of traditional patronage structures and the obligation to help others they entail. The Kandahar villages were less equal—links to politically powerful actors coupled with a surplus economy led to elite self-interest. Connections upwards were used to advance elite households and not to gain advantages for villages; certain village elites actively maintained existing inequalities and exploited the less-powerful to further their own accumulation.

Among poorer households, hierarchical relationships with those positioned to deliver credit, sharecrop land, employment, aid or other needed services were central to livelihood security. These included dependence on landlords, with risks of arbitrary loss of sharecrop land; reliance on labour contractors or smugglers to access work outside the village in urban areas or Iran; and dependence on carpet traders for access to weaving work in Faryab. This dependence lent a degree of stability to uncertain lives, but at a cost of higher risk, lower returns, and fewer choices for the future.

For the most poor, charitable relationships were critical to livelihood security. Economic decline

in many study areas meant offerings were variable in quantity from year to year, a situation compounded by modernisation processes slowly shifting household interests away from collective needs. This made life for charity-dependent households highly precarious. Those with enough resources to access credit and reciprocate help were enmeshed in informal mutual support networks, which generally offered credit free of interest. In the Kandahar sites, proximity to the city helped two middle-income households slowly advance with the support of this credit; in Faryab and Sar-i-Pul it was the foundation that enabled households to cope with extended drought.

Respondent households recognise the importance of social relationships to livelihood security. This means they value their inclusion in the village community and work to maintain it. Coupled with the existence of social inequalities within the study villages, this means that holding those with power to account is challenging, as is changing existing power relations. If these efforts risk the existing security of poorer and less powerful households (even if it exists on unfavourable terms), they may be unwilling to participate. In these circumstances, social relationships can serve to create and maintain poverty, and are therefore part of the problem of poverty. As such, they must be addressed by any policy and programmes seeking to achieve sustained reductions in livelihood insecurity.

To what extent then do understandings of poverty in Afghan policy and programming reflect these social complexities? The second section traces out changes in conceptualisations of poverty and rural livelihood insecurity in a selection of Afghan policy documents, and identifies problematic trends in light of the study's evidence. It illustrates how the conception of poverty has narrowed from its nuanced presentation in the 2004 National Human Development Report (NHDR) to an individualistic and technical understanding that not only fails to address poverty's root causes, but also threatens to reinforce the very inequalities that keep people poor.

The third section explores how the way in which poverty is defined can determine the impact of potential solutions. In particular, it examines Agriculture and Rural Development (ARD) cluster programme documents developed as part of the reprioritisation of the Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS). Through this review, the paper identifies how the social complexities of village life and their implications for poverty could be better addressed. This will help ensure that they are as effective and equitable as possible in their future development and implementation.

The Afghanistan Livelihoods Trajectories study from which the data for this paper is drawn was funded by a grant from the ESRC RES-167-25-0285. The study conducted in-depth qualitative research on rural livelihood change in eleven villages spread across the Kandahar, Badakhshan, Sar-i-Pul and Faryab Provinces. Details on its methods and findings can be found in the forthcoming AREU companion paper: Paula Kantor and Adam Pain, “Securing Life and Livelihoods in Rural Afghanistan: The Role of Social Relationships.”

## 2. Understandings of Poverty in Afghan Policy

Afghanistan’s first NHDR, written in 2004, focuses on human security. The document defines human security as encompassing not just physical safety, but also social security and livelihood security. Achieving human security involves reducing poverty, and poverty is understood as a multidimensional problem including “inequalities in access to productive assets and social services; poor health, education and nutritional status; weak social protection systems; vulnerability to macro- and micro-level risks (both natural and human-triggered); human displacement; gender inequities and political marginalisation.”<sup>1</sup>

The report focuses on analysing the root causes of conflict and poverty, and devotes significant attention to the importance of reducing existing social inequalities. Written prior to the ANDS process, but aware of the need to draft a poverty reduction strategy paper (PRSP), the report makes prescient statements about what the PRSP and policy more generally need to do to address the many problems facing the country. Specifically, it recognises the relevance not only of gaps in access to resources, but also of inequalities in this access—the ways in which gender, ethnicity and geography contribute to how different people in Afghanistan experience poverty.<sup>2</sup> Drivers of poverty include inequalities between social or cultural groups, political marginalisation, dependence and social exclusion as well as lack

of access to resources. All of these factors relate back to people’s positions within social structures and relationships.<sup>3</sup>

The concept of human development informs the NHDR and its analysis. This is a people-centred approach to development where economic growth is important as a means to an end, rather than an end in itself.<sup>4</sup> Based on this, the 2004 NHDR provides a nuanced argument about the type of growth Afghanistan needs to counter existing inequalities, highlighting how institutions such as markets operate in favour of the powerful.<sup>5</sup> It does not deny the importance of growth but recognises that the neo-liberal view dominating development can create more problems than it resolves. It is critical of the weight given to the market in Afghanistan’s development approach, as stated below:

*Crucial importance is being accorded to the forces of a market economy in all of Afghanistan’s development strategies. Yet as experience shows in a number of developing or post-conflict countries around the world, a market approach to reconstruction and development policies may inevitably have a number of negative externalities, which policy makers in Afghanistan must be aware of—widening inequalities, large pockets of poverty, limited provision of social and public goods, and high levels of crime. For Afghanistan, a market approach to reconstruction may fail*

<sup>1</sup> Daud S. Saba and Omar Zakhilwal, *Afghanistan National Development Report 2004: Security With a Human Face* (Islamabad: United Nations Development Programme, 2004), 35.

<sup>2</sup> Saba and Zakhilwal, *Security With a Human Face*, 53.

<sup>3</sup> Saba and Zakhilwal, *Security With a Human Face*, 54-5.

<sup>4</sup> Saba and Zakhilwal, *Security With a Human Face*, 4.

<sup>5</sup> Saba and Zakhilwal, *Security With a Human Face*, 196.

*to incorporate the root causes of the conflict: unequal distribution and competition over resources, lack of inclusion, poor political accountability and legitimacy, among others.*<sup>6</sup>

The report calls for rapid and equitable growth to address absolute poverty as quickly as possible. Such growth should direct “resources disproportionately to the sectors in which the poor work (such as small scale agriculture), the areas in which they live (such as underdeveloped regions) or the factors of production that they possess (such as unskilled labour or land).”<sup>7</sup> Beyond this, it calls for a quality of growth which addresses the rural-urban divide and gender disparities, as well as resolving spatial and social inequalities. The NHDR thus provides a context-rich analysis that accounts for the complex social and institutional factors which create and maintain poverty in the country. It does not define poverty as a “technical problem” resolved simply through providing more resources; and it addresses the unequal advantages embedded within existing power relations in the country, where institutions like the state and market may not always work for the poor.

The 2004 NHDR provided a high-quality analysis grounded in Afghan social and economic realities to guide policy and programming. The question then becomes: Why did its promise not translate into future policy processes? The framing of the problems of poverty and insecurity evident in the interim and final ANDS and related policy documents since 2008 marks a significant reversal of the socially aware, context-embedded understanding of poverty, insecurity and development portrayed in the 2004 NHDR. The opportunity lost in not translating this analysis into sustained action at the time, or by failing to carry it over to the ANDS and later policy documents, is significant.

Two trends were identified in reviewing how a selection of recent Afghan policy documents and statements address poverty against the standard set by the 2004 NHDR.<sup>8</sup> The first is a general

attrition in the attention given to poverty reduction and livelihood security in policy documents over time; the second is a change in how poverty and insecurity are conceptualised.

Both the 2008 ANDS and in its interim version pay considerable attention to the goal of poverty reduction.<sup>9</sup> Within the ANDS, poverty reduction is clearly identified as the overarching aim to be achieved through implementing the strategy.<sup>10</sup> The document goes on to provide a detailed poverty analysis and, like the NHDR, commits to pro-poor growth where the poor experience significantly greater-than-average improvements in income and livelihoods.<sup>11</sup> These documents put poverty reduction and livelihood security at the centre of government and international community efforts to bring security, development and stability to Afghanistan. However, they lack the NHDR’s more nuanced appreciation of the social processes driving poverty, as will be shown below.

A further change is evident two years later, both in the documents released after the London and Kabul Conferences in 2010 and within the related “Kabul Process” programme documents. Poverty reduction appears to have slipped off the rhetorical agenda, even though these processes aim to support the further prioritisation and implementation of the ANDS. The deteriorating security situation and growing recognition of the role of state legitimacy in sustaining progress gave reconciliation, reintegration and anti-corruption measures precedence. Provision of economic opportunities through job creation and growth have overtaken poverty reduction and pro-poor growth as key aims, and analysis of how the social and political contexts of Afghanistan might restrict the availability of such opportunities is missing.<sup>12</sup>

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28 January 2010, <http://centralcontent.fco.gov.uk/central-content/afghanistan-hmg/resources/pdf/conference/Communique-final> (accessed 14 November 2010); and “Kabul Conference Communique,” 20 July 2010, <http://www.mfa.gov.af/FINAL%20Kabul%20Conference%20%20%20Communique.pdf> (accessed 14 November 2010).

<sup>9</sup> *Interim Afghanistan National Development Strategy* (Kabul: Government of Afghanistan, 2006); *Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS)* (Kabul: Government of Afghanistan, 2008).

<sup>10</sup> *ANDS*, 5.

<sup>11</sup> *ANDS*, 27.

<sup>12</sup> “Prioritization and Implementation Plan mid 2010-mid 2013” (Kabul: Ministry of Finance, Department of Policy, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> Saba and Zakhilwal, *Security With a Human Face*, 174.

<sup>7</sup> Saba and Zakhilwal, *Security With a Human Face*, 192.

<sup>8</sup> See *Afghanistan National Development Strategy* (Kabul: Afghanistan National Development Strategy Secretariat, 2008); “Afghanistan: The London Conference Communique,”

The disappearance of poverty reduction and livelihood security from the policy agenda mirrors a simplification in understandings of how to foster social and economic development in Afghanistan. Two interconnected features describe this simplification: an increasingly individualised account of poverty and underdevelopment, and a reliance on highly technical approaches to supporting economic development which do not consider the social contexts in which people live.<sup>13</sup> Both of these can be linked to the application of one-dimensional definitions of poverty—which tend to focus on gaps (i.e. in income, consumption, assets)—over a more complex appreciation of how people’s characteristics and the nature and quality of their relationships define what they can do and be.

As noted above, the attention the ANDS gives to poverty reduction is positive. However, the quality of analysis in the document is not sufficient to support the development of policy and programmes that address the complex causes of poverty in the country. More specifically, the ANDS never reaches the level of examining why people are poor. It limits itself to describing the condition of poverty based the capacities or assets that poor people lack, such as land, livestock, or skills.<sup>14</sup> It bases its analysis largely on data from the Afghan

Central Statistics Organization *National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment (NRVA)*. This provides a snapshot view of the characteristics of poverty which does not account for the dynamic role that exposure to risks and uncertainties plays. The analysis presents a static and depoliticised view of the poor, who are reduced to their individual characteristics and the gaps in their access to resources.<sup>15</sup> This understanding supports solutions to poverty which focus on providing individuals access to needed resources and opportunities as a means to improve their conditions.

The focus on technical solutions to promote development and reduce poverty has survived within 2010 efforts to re-prioritise the ANDS.<sup>16</sup> This understanding of the problem of underdevelopment ignores the roles played by location, social relationships and social norms, which can restrict who is able to use available resources or take advantage of opportunities. An assessment now follows of how this has translated into specific programme approaches in the ARD sector. It demonstrates the need for better and more frequent social analysis in developing these and future policy and programmes, which in turn will improve their ability to engage appropriately with the social complexities defining village life.

### 3. ARD Programmes and Social Complexity

This section reviews the ARD cluster document prepared for the July 2010 Joint Coordination and Monitoring Board (JCMB) meeting in preparation for the Kabul Conference. These are acknowledged to be early documents in the programme development process and do not provide all the details needed for programme implementation. However, they do give sufficient information about problem definition and programme intentions, activities and constraints to comment on their potential to integrate an understanding of village

social realities into future programming. Box 1 provides a summary of the four National Priority Programs (NPP) and their subcomponents. Three subcomponents are reviewed in detail to draw out variations across ARD cluster programmes in how social analysis has been or could be addressed. These are: natural resource management and development; improved agriculture production and farm economics; and the rural access programme’s attention to cross-cutting issues. The aims and approaches of each are now briefly summarised.

<sup>13</sup> See Paula Kantor, “Improving Efforts to Achieve Equitable Growth and Reduce Poverty” (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2010).

<sup>14</sup> See Paula Kantor, Adam Pain et al, “Delivering on Poverty Reduction: Focusing ANDS Implementation on Pro-Poor Outcomes” (Kabul: Afghanistan, 2009).

<sup>15</sup> Kantor, Pain et al, “Delivering on Poverty Reduction.”

<sup>16</sup> See “London Conference Communique”; “Kabul Conference Communique”; “Prioritization and Implementation Plan.”

## Programme subcomponent summaries

### *Natural Resource Development and Management Subcomponent*

The natural resource management (NRM) subcomponent is concerned with reversing current destructive practices in the use of natural resources in order to ensure more sustainable and productive use.<sup>17</sup> This is a priority because of the significant role natural resources have in rural livelihoods, and the overall programme aim is to improve rural livelihoods based on sustainable resource use. It targets improvements in the following areas:

- Community-based resource management
- Rehabilitation, conservation and protection of watersheds
- Government ability to deliver the programme at sub-national level
- Accessible and appropriate science-based information and technology

These are to be achieved through collecting data on existing natural resources and monitoring changes; conducting a soil survey for the country; planning and managing rangeland, forest and protected regions to rehabilitate and restore selected areas; increasing ministry technical capacity through recruiting NRM specialists; and improving communication and education on NRM and conflict resolution for community-based organisations. This review will focus on the community component to highlight where and how greater attention to the social side of NRM may assist in achieving programme aims.

### *Improved Agriculture Production and Farm Economics Subcomponent*

The second NPP's agricultural production and farm economics (APFE) subcomponent is aimed at fostering economic growth, reducing poverty and providing licit livelihood options.<sup>18</sup> The programme aims to increase agricultural resilience to adverse weather and other natural risks in order to reduce the threat production fluctuations pose to agricultural livelihoods. It also aims to establish and strengthen farmer organisations as a means

<sup>17</sup> "The Agriculture and Rural Development Cluster National Priority Programs" (Kabul: Government of Afghanistan, 2010), 11-15.

<sup>18</sup> "Agriculture and Rural Development Cluster," 30.

#### **Box 1: ARD Cluster National Priority Programs**

##### **NPP1: National Water and Natural Resources Development**

*Component A: National Water Resources and Irrigation*

*Component B: Natural Resource Development and Management*

*Component C: Afghanistan Land Authority*

*Component D: National Energy for Rural Development in Afghanistan*

##### **NPP2: National Comprehensive Agriculture Production and Market Development**

*Component A: Improved Agriculture Production and Farm Economics*

*Component B: Rural Credit through the Agricultural Development Fund*

*Component C: Afghanistan Rural Enterprise Development*

*Component D: Comprehensive Agriculture and Rural Development Facility*

##### **NPP3: National Rural Access**

*Component A: Improvement of Secondary Roads*

*Component B: Improvement of Tertiary Roads*

*Component C: Institutional Building*

##### **NPP4: National Strengthening of Local Institutions**

of improving national food security. The activities identified to achieve these aims include:

- Establishing effective mechanisms for farmers to access quality inputs, such as developing institutional frameworks and providing logistical support to farmers' associations formed to improve farmers' purchasing and marketing abilities
- Strengthening existing research stations to improve the delivery and transfer of knowledge to farmers; improved extension services
- Improving the current and future capacity of the strategic grain reserve to respond to food crises and market fluctuations.<sup>19</sup>

Across these objectives and activities, this programme component will focus on investing in

<sup>19</sup> See "Agriculture and Rural Development Cluster."

the development of value chains to increase the links between farmers, research and extension services, and domestic and international input and output markets. The main constraints to delivering the programme are identified as regulatory and organisational. Problems in the supply of inputs, information, infrastructure and natural resources such as irrigation water are also identified as challenges. There is no mention of challenges related to engaging with communities and farmers, or the complex social environments of villages. The same is true of the NRM program.

### ***National Rural Access Programme***

The national rural access programme (NRAP) has been in existence for the past eight years, and thus has a considerable implementation history. Its aim is to improve rural access to basic services through the construction and maintenance of secondary and tertiary roads. It applies a labour intensive approach, generating fixed numbers of work days for locals and using community-based contracts. What sets this ARD cluster component apart is an explicit and detailed inclusion of the cross-cutting issues of gender and social inclusion.<sup>20</sup> The NRAP team has carried out a gender analysis of rural access which illustrates the effect socio-cultural norms have on gender mobility and hence the ability to use roads and access services. This has led to a second study to identify the factors improving and constraining “women’s inclusion in and benefits from rural access planning and implementation.”<sup>21</sup> Its findings will be used to incorporate gender concerns into future programme planning and implementation. The NRAP also has a social inclusion unit which focuses on issues of pro-poor labour selection in community contracts. It is charged with monitoring these contracts to identify and address implementation constraints, and to ensure they achieve intended social and poverty outcomes. It also works to coordinate its social inclusion activities with other community-based rural development programmes.<sup>22</sup> This could be a model for other programmes to follow. However, this depends on a greater willingness (and ability) to integrate the outcomes of the unit’s work than is currently displayed in the NPP programme summary.

<sup>20</sup> “Agriculture and Rural Development Cluster,” 55-56.

<sup>21</sup> “Agriculture and Rural Development Cluster,” 55.

<sup>22</sup> “Agriculture and Rural Development Cluster,” 56.

### **Integrating social awareness**

Analysis of the programme intentions of the three ARD NPP subcomponents identified four areas where attention to social realities on the ground could improve programme outcomes in terms of planning, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation. These involve:

- Identifying and addressing existing social differences
- Addressing power-based inequalities
- Developing a greater awareness of the value of group structures
- Developing and improving NRAP’s gender and social inclusion units

In both the above three summaries and the overall ANDS prioritisation and implementation plan for the ARD sector, the absence of people is an overarching characteristic.<sup>23</sup> This is not to say that groups such as farmers, communities, beneficiaries and women are neglected entirely. However, the diversity that these words encompass in terms of demographics, resources, region, or experience of poverty is not acknowledged. For example, the term “farmer” is used without considering possible variations in farmers’ socio-economic circumstances, and how this might in turn influence how they engage with the APFE programme. Used uncritically, this term encompasses anybody from the powerful Kandahar landlord from one study village and his sharecroppers, to subsistence farmers in remote Badakhshan or drought-hit Sar-i-Pul. All of these “farmers” have different needs, as well as different levels of ability to access both programme and village resources. There is also no mention of how sharecroppers and landless agricultural labourers will benefit from these interventions. Since these are among the poorest groups in rural Afghanistan, this is particularly problematic.<sup>24</sup>

The Kabul Process is about prioritisation, planning, programme development, and implementation, all of which ultimately relate to the diverse

<sup>23</sup> “Prioritization and Implementation Plan”; “Agriculture and Rural Development Cluster.”

<sup>24</sup> The 2007/08 NRVA reports that the highest poverty headcount rate is among those with access to land only through sharecropping, renting or mortgaging (42% of these households); This figure is 32% for those without any access to land at all and 33% for those owning and cultivating land. These figures include both rural and urban households.

interests and needs of ordinary Afghans. However, social analysis—an explicit assessment of who is being planned for, how their needs, interests and abilities to access resources differ, and how these differences might be accounted for—is largely absent from the documents reviewed. Admittedly, it may be too early in the process to implement and integrate detailed social analyses. However, the documents give little sense that analyses of factors likely to affect the distribution of benefits—such as the role of elites—are seen as relevant to achieving desired outcomes. This sets a starting position for more detailed programme development work that is divorced from an understanding of the realities of Afghan rural life summarised in Section 1. This gap in social understanding is likely to produce programmes that either over-state their objectives and potential achievements, or miss out on necessary programme objectives because they apply simplistic definitions of existing problems.

The second area where improvement is needed is the programmes' failure to appreciate that inequalities in wealth and power exist in villages and could affect programme implementation and outcomes. The programme summaries highlight this in several respects. The NRM programme's reliance on community-based resource management systems is not balanced by a socially aware understanding of the challenges involved in applying this approach. The constraints identified in the document do not include difficulties in engaging with communities, dealing with existing social hierarchies, or the possibility that those in power may co-opt programme resources or agendas. Evidence from the study suggests that these are real threats: Community Development Council (CDC) resources were co-opted in at least three villages studied, showing how aid can be diverted via complex local patronage relationships to purposes beyond those of the programme. The power of the main landlord in one Kandahar village also shows how fear-inducing power imbalances can pose a challenge to community engagement. This is not to say such challenges will arise in all villages, but the potential exists and needs to be planned for.

An uncritical engagement with power and social inequality is also illustrated in the APFE's focus on delivering access to inputs. This is rooted in an understanding of agriculture that views lack

of inputs as the main constraint to production—if the gap in access is filled and fluctuations in production mitigated, then the problem is solved. While limited input availability is certainly a factor, the study evidence shows that farmers' differing positions in village social and economic relationships influence their access to inputs and ability to use them. Once programme resources such as seeds and fertiliser enter the web of village social networks and power relations, there is no guarantee that they will be accessible to all or put to their intended use.

Similarly, the NRM programme identifies delivery of information to communities as a means to achieve “sustainable, well-managed projects that improve the environment and economy.”<sup>25</sup> This overlooks the fact that power, gender norms and other sources of inequality also have the potential to influence how natural resources are controlled—and hence programme success.<sup>26</sup>

This programme also mentions using participatory approaches to water resource management planning to afford communities a greater degree of responsibility. The main constraint identified in using this approach is communities' lack of skills needed to participate in decision-making. This illustrates two problematic assumptions. First, that skills are all that is needed to bring about full participation by community residents; and second, that community-managed processes are so new that rural Afghans do not have relevant skills and knowledge to participate. The existence of informal water management systems in many parts of the country, and the fact that such systems are sometimes inequitable, counters both assumptions. In this case, expanding participation may not require skills as much as efforts to counter the local power dynamics that keep those most dependent on natural resources—women, the poor—silent or excluded.

This brings us to the third issue—the value of group structures in their own right. Where groups are identified as part of the programme approach in the NPP subcomponents reviewed, they tend to be viewed as instruments for achieving programme goals. They are not valued for what

<sup>25</sup> “Agriculture and Rural Development Cluster,” 12.

<sup>26</sup> See Bill Cooke and Uma Kothari, *Participation: The New Tyranny?* (London: Zed, 2001).



the groups themselves could deliver to members. Farmer associations in the APFE programme are thus simply there to support input delivery and market access, while community groups in the NRM programme are a means to ensure effective resource management. In both cases the possibility that such groups could be used to implement social change or address inequalities is absent. There is also no acknowledgement that those with land and other resources may co-opt these groups and use them to reinforce existing inequalities. Again, this is due to a lack of recognition of the social causes of poverty.

Both time and funds will be needed in order to develop group structures that reduce inequality as well as achieve programme goals. A long-term perspective is needed to give such groups space to develop organically and at a pace suited to local power dynamics. This will ensure that they are not co-opted, allowing solidarity to develop and local needs to emerge. It will also avoid placing those involved at undue risk in contexts like the landlord-dominated villages in Kandahar. A social mobilisation approach will also require time spent gaining an understanding of the local context, and research to draw lessons from the existing successes of such approaches both in Afghanistan and elsewhere.

The final point relates to the broader focus on gender and social inclusion in the NRAP. This should serve as a model across ARD programmes. Ideally, social inclusion efforts should be coordinated by a cluster-level unit to monitor activities, identify action research needs, hold implementing units accountable for achieving inclusion outcomes, build social analysis capacity, and expand awareness of the relevance of social analysis to achieving broader cluster outcomes. That said, there is also room for improvement in how these analyses are used to inform NRAP design, implementation and monitoring. For instance, the summary of efforts to address cross-cutting issues of gender and social inclusion is confined to one area of the document. The implications and outcomes of these efforts are not integrated into descriptions of NRAP's objectives, outcomes or constraints. Where improving gender mainstreaming and ensuring compliance with social safeguards are listed under proposed ministry activities, they currently lack an analysis of power relations. Missing too are proposals for

engaging with communities in ways that might improve access to programme benefits among those facing social constraints. This implies that social inclusion is understood as a problem which access alone can overcome.

A similarly technical understanding is apparent in how the document equates availability of rural roads with the ability to use them. In particular, the programme's gender analysis fails to identify the challenges inherent in making availability of roads meaningful to women. A more nuanced understanding of the social context therefore needs to be integrated into the programme's analysis to illustrate the challenges of delivering the wider benefits of rural roads in the Afghan context. An awareness of these challenges should also temper claims concerning NRAP's projected impact on a range of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). This is especially important as long as the programme itself lacks components focused specifically on mitigating the limits social norms place on access.

Finally, the NRAP's proposed outcomes do not hold the programme staff accountable for social inclusion. Results are framed in terms of "beneficiaries" experiencing less travel time, more trips and lower commodity prices. Once again, the term "beneficiaries" masks the diversity beneath, overlooking the different capacities of rural Afghans—young and old, male and female, healthy and infirm—to benefit from roads. The outcomes also include nothing related to pro-poor orientation of labour days or contracts. The absence of defined social outcomes may signal a devaluation of the implementation unit's work on gender and social inclusion, as well as a lack of ability to use information collected for the purpose intended. More political will, capacity and incentive structures motivating staff will thus be needed if social outcomes are to be achieved.

NRAP's explicit highlighting of social inclusion is a considerable step forward in relation to other ARD cluster programmes. However, more needs to be done both to integrate these concerns within programme implementation and outcomes, and to hold implementers accountable for achieving them. This will take a leadership willing to invest in social development and acknowledge its equal relevance to achieving the goals of growth and poverty reduction. As it stands, the ARD cluster

documents show no such willingness. This is evident in how the capacity gaps identified across cluster programme documents tend to

focus on financial and project management; no mention is made of capacity needs associated with social analysis or community engagement.

## 4. Ways Forward

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Evidence gained from in-depth qualitative research in eleven villages across four provinces has identified the importance of social relationships, power and inequality to rural poverty and livelihood insecurity. However, Afghan policy and programme documents have shown declining attention to the problem of poverty combined with an increasingly individualistic and technical understanding of what poverty is and how to reduce it. These programmes do not reflect the social complexities and power dynamics of Afghan rural life, and thus risk investing considerable human and financial resources in pursuit of objectives that are either undeliverable or fall far short of what is needed.

The actors involved in the Kabul Process need to develop policy and programme approaches that are informed by the study's analysis and that provided in the 2004 NHDR. This requires an acknowledgement on the part of policymakers, planners and donors that policy and programme effectiveness will improve if more time and money are invested in developing a better understanding of the social context. Programmes do not function in a void; they affect and are affected by the complex social worlds in which they operate. This reality must be factored in before implementation in order to improve programme equity and effectiveness. As it currently stands, the ARD cluster has not acknowledged this need. The remainder of this section suggests ways forward for improving how the social causes of poverty and insecurity are addressed.

### ***Advocate for change in how poverty is defined and addressed***

Based on evidence from this and other studies as well as programme implementation experience, efforts must be made to persuade policymakers and programme planners to return to a more socially-rooted understanding of poverty as articulated in the 2004 NHDR. This requires a greater acknowledgement of the role social inequalities play in constraining growth and poverty reduction.

### ***Incorporate social analysis into project planning***

Social analysis must be better integrated into the programme development process. This will improve the ability of programmes to engage with and, if necessary, challenge social realities. This can be accomplished by continually asking: who the programme or policy is for; what their needs are and how they differ; how they live and make a living; the role that relationships and inequalities play in this; and how programmes can be designed and implemented in ways that challenge existing inequalities and avoid strengthening them. These questions will help to avoid the kind of abstractions identified in the ARD cluster documents by keeping real people at the centre of programme development and implementation efforts.

### ***Incorporate social analysis into monitoring and evaluation processes***

Monitoring and evaluation processes should take programmes' social outcomes into account, as well as how social contexts may support or limit the achievement of other programme objectives. This information can feed back into programme design, and will expand understandings of how programmes interact with their social contexts. Donors, implementation units and other actors involved in programme management, implementation and monitoring need to develop better incentives for staff both to use social analysis and achieve the social outcomes it identifies. This will ensure that such analysis does not end up isolated and unused, as seems to be the case in the NRAP.

### ***Build capacity for social analysis***

To make any of this happen, capacity for social analysis needs to be developed or strengthened. This should include both conceptual and technical skills, since the latter will not be beneficial without an understanding of why such analysis is relevant. These skills can be built in various ways with different levels of financial and time commitments. When possible, Afghan staff in NGOs and government agencies should be sent

on tailored short courses or degree-level study in social development. Learning from other agencies that are more experienced in social analysis is another way to gain experience, as is bringing in short term-technical assistance capacity. These latter two approaches support the mentoring of staff through efforts to apply such concepts and skills on the job.

### ***Develop strategies to engage with village elites***

The study evidence clearly showed that the role of village elites cannot be ignored in efforts to improve rural livelihood security. Planners and implementers must assess how elites engage with village communities and what role they may play in relation to the programme. In some cases programmes will be able to build on elites' existing philanthropic roles. In others, however, their potential to expropriate programme control and benefits needs to be neutralised. This may extend to an entirely new strategy in areas like the Kandahar villages studied, where elites hold a virtual monopoly on power. In such instances, longer engagement processes and coalition-building may be needed to build alternative power centres and support structures before rural development interventions challenging existing inequalities can start.

### ***Recognise that programme implementation may feed into local patronage systems***

Programme planners need to recognise that their programmes will operate within complex social environments characterised by patronage. This means that programme benefits may be used within these systems for unintended ends, such as strengthening social networks. Communities should not be idealised as equitable democratic sites which are somehow less susceptible to corruption or patronage because they are closer to the people. Efforts should be made to develop monitoring systems sensitive to such potential abuses so that they can be better accounted for in future planning.

### ***Support group formation processes and long-term transformative change***

In Afghanistan, the pressure for quick results often leads to short term projects, where success is measured in terms of immediate,

quantifiable outputs instead of long-term structural outcomes. This means that limited attention is given to actions which have more potential to address the systemic causes of poverty identified in this paper. If poverty is to be eliminated and not just mitigated, this needs to change. Specifically, more effort needs to be put into fostering processes of group formation, especially those which forge ties among the less-powerful and link them to others. The strength in numbers this creates can support the kind of collective action against existing powerholders that would be unthinkable on an individual basis. Some ARD cluster programmes did focus on groups, but this was largely as a means to deliver inputs or information and overlooked what the groups themselves could achieve.

If driven by outside intervention, such groups may risk being viewed as imposed and lacking legitimacy. Aid actors must therefore allow space for group formation processes to develop internally and to identify the most appropriate means and resources to counter existing inequalities. This is difficult, time-consuming and may not fit the "critical-ness" driving Afghan policy processes. However, the payoff in supporting locally-driven processes of social change is likely to be considerable.

### ***Identify ways to provide access to resources that challenge existing inequalities***

Fostering agricultural growth and reducing rural poverty is about more than providing access to inputs or services. These approaches may bring immediate practical benefits, but there is no guarantee that the benefits will be distributed equally. In some cases, these approaches may even support existing inequalities instead of challenging them, leaving the poor locked into dependent relationships in order to secure access. Efforts to improve poor peoples' access to resources or employment need to acknowledge this possibility and seek ways to break such connections to secure more independent access. Providing better and more accessible information about the availability of state or NGO assistance and the criteria for qualifying is one possibility. Another possibility at the policy level is intensifying efforts to provide legal means of labour migration to neighbouring countries.

### ***Understand and develop existing informal support systems***

The study showed the importance of existing local support systems in the form of credit and charity. It also showed the variability of support from these sources and therefore their precariousness. Programmes seeking to promote growth, poverty reduction and livelihood security therefore need to take such systems into account. For example, microfinance institutions need to acknowledge and understand how their products will interact with existing sources of informal credit and the relationships that underpin them; The Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, Martyrs and Disabled and its partners could consider how to institutionalise forms of village charity to make them systematic, transparent and reliable, orienting them to development goals as well as social welfare.

It bears repeating that the first step in implementing any of these recommendations is making sure that addressing social inequalities is central to the poverty reduction strategies of policymakers, donors and programme planners. There needs to be a commitment to changing the way programmes are designed, implemented and monitored in order to reflect local social, economic and geographic conditions and inequalities. This will have resource implications. Events in post-2001 Afghanistan have illustrated the seeming unwillingness of many national and international policymakers to engage with social complexity, acknowledge inequalities, and orient policy to the needs and realities of Afghans. This unwillingness, compounded by the benefits some powerful actors obtain from systems which create and maintain inequality, present considerable barriers to improving Afghan lives.

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