

Afghanistan's 'surplus' rural population

Key messages

- The scale and significance of landlessness in rural Afghanistan has been ignored.
- The evidence suggests a bleak future for agrarian based livelihoods, with a growing 'surplus' rural population without the means to live through productive activity or decent work.
- The focus of policy and programmes must be on the immediate needs of a deeply impoverished rural population.

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Background

Since 2002, Afghanistan's government and the international community have put agriculture at the centre of efforts to rebuild Afghanistan's economy, based on a shared vision of agriculture as the engine of growth that would promote economic development, provide employment and reduce poverty. The assumption that agriculture was the main source of livelihoods for a majority of its population has persisted through Afghanistan's 2009 National Agricultural Development Framework to 2014's Agriculture Sector Review (ASR). Yet agricultural growth has not taken place and rural poverty rates have not declined.¹ What has this meant for Afghanistan's rural households? To what extent are the basic assumptions of policy correct and if they are not, what might this mean for their future? And if agriculture is not the main source of income, what does it mean to live in rural Afghanistan if economically many households cannot make a living there?

The Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) based in Kabul, Afghanistan, has been researching economic and political life at village, district and province level as part of its contribution to the Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium. SLRC is an eight-country, six-year research programme investigating how people in places affected by conflict make a living and access basic services. AREU's second round of

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¹ World Bank (2015). Afghanistan: Poverty Status Update: An analysis based on National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment (NRVA) 2007/08 and 2011/12. Washington, World Bank

study in 2009 had found that households were running out of options in the rural economy. This briefing considers what has happened since.

Methods

This paper draws on three rounds of study in 2002-3, 2008-9 and 2015-6², tracking a small panel of rural households in contrasting parts of Afghanistan. The 2016 study draws evidence from eight villages and 64 households in Herat, Kandahar and Sar-i-Pul provinces. This longitudinal research offers unusually deep insights into rural people's lives and challenges many assumptions that have driven policy making in Afghanistan for 15 years.

Main findings

The scale and significance of landlessness has been underestimated

There are known inequalities in land ownership in Afghanistan,³ but national data on land ownership patterns does not exist. The significance of landlessness, therefore, is rarely considered in policy. Research in a companion SLRC study⁴ in Nangarhar and Badakhshan found rates of landlessness at 64.5 per cent of 21,323 surveyed households and 40 per cent of 10,039 households respectively. Findings from our 2016 study in well irrigated villages reinforce this: for example, in Kandahar, a single landowner was reported to own 50 per cent of one village's irrigated land, while 85 per cent of the 500 households were landless. In a Herat village one landowner held one-third of all irrigated land and in a second, the landowner owned 77 per cent of irrigated land: significant proportions of households in both villages were landless. All these large landowners have agricultural surplus that they sell. In rain-fed villages in Sar-i-Pul, 75 to 85 per cent of households were landless.

If this evidence is representative – given that 15 years of research on Afghanistan's rural economy suggest so – Afghanistan's landless population is likely to be a majority of rural households. Sharecropping is the most common way that rural households gain access to land, underpinned by often deeply unequal patron-client relations and interlocking contractual arrangements – such as access to credit and protection – that if lost can imperil livelihoods (see below).

The direction of rural livelihood trajectories vary, but for many the long term future is grim

Consistent with national level statistics⁵ our research points to a survival economy with household assets dwindling. The signs of 'running out of options' in the rural economy were visible in 2009⁶ and are now, if anything, worse, with many case study households dependent on remittance income from Balkh, Iran or Pakistan. It is, however, not all one long trajectory of decline. Since 2001 military and development expenditures created a reconstruction economy from which a few drew enormous gains and others derived some trickle down benefits. However these opportunities have mostly ceased with the withdrawal of foreign militaries. The opium economy – now perhaps returning – brought new levels of cash income and food security to many rural areas, but it was a short term prosperity that alternative livelihood programming has not been able to recreate. Increasing investment in village public goods through the National Solidarity Programme, as well as in education and health, have contributed to a wider availability of public goods in many villages. Livelihood trajectories also vary dramatically between locations: for example, between the rainfed villages of the Sar-i-Pul hills, Badakhshan's mountain villages, irrigated villages in Herat, and peri-urban villages in Kandahar. Even within a district there are distinctions between village economies; for example in Herat, as structured by the availability of irrigation water, history, land ownership patterns and the practices of the village elites. Household trajectories are thus subject to contextual structural factors.

Social relationships, not market relations, characterise the nature of economic behaviour

Through all study sites it is clear that the rural economy in Afghanistan has not grown and what is striking is the extent to which land and labour relations remain fundamentally not subject to market relations or commoditised. Access to land is accounted for much more by patron-client relations than market forces explaining why on the whole capitalist processes of land accumulation and dispossession have not taken place. The relative security offered by social relationships under conditions of conflict may in part explain their persistence. Wages, often paid in kind rather than cash, are determined more by custom and segmented by gender, locality and age. These factors alone are grounds to be deeply doubtful about the assumptions made in the ASR⁷ about the potential for agricultural growth to create jobs.

Of course there are markets in rural Afghanistan, with agricultural commodities and technical changes such as new wheat varieties, expansion of vegetable cultivation

2 Grace, J and A. Pain. (2004). Rethinking Rural Livelihoods in Afghanistan. Synthesis Paper Series. Kabul, Afghanistan Research & Evaluation Unit; Kantor, P. & Pain, A. (2011). Running out of options. Tracing Rural Afghan Livelihoods. AREU: Synthesis Paper Series, Kabul; Huot, D., Pain, A., & Ghafouri, I. (2016). Afghanistan livelihood trajectories: Evidence from three villages in Herat Province. SLRC, London; Pain, A., Huot, D and Ghafouri, I. (2016) Livelihood trajectories in Afghanistan: Silent violence in Kandahar Province. SLRC, London; Huot, D. & Pain, A. (Forthcoming 2017) Livelihood trajectories in Afghanistan: livelihoods on the margins: evidence from Sar-i-Pul province. SLRC, London

3 World Bank, (2005). Afghanistan: Poverty, Vulnerability and Social Protection: An Initial Assessment. South Asia Region. Washington, The World Bank.

4 Pain, A and Sturge, G (2015) Mapping village variability in Afghanistan: The use of cluster analysis to construct village typologies. Working Paper 32. AREU and SLRC, ODI

5 World Bank, (2015) Afghanistan: Poverty Status Update: An analysis based on National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment (NRVA) 2007/08 and 2011/12. Washington, World Bank.

6 Kantor, P. & Pain, A. (2011). Running out of options. Tracing Rural Afghan Livelihoods. AREU: Synthesis Paper Series, Kabul

7 World Bank, (2014) Islamic State of Afghanistan Agriculture Sector Review (ASR): Revitalizing Agriculture for Economic Growth, Job Creation and Food Security. Washington, The World Bank

in Nangarhar, and new fruit varieties in Wardak.⁸ Rural Afghanistan has a monetised economy with both subsistence and market elements. But while the growing of crops specifically for the market⁹, such as onions in Nangarhar, saffron in Herat and opium poppy, may have given social institutions a more economic role, it is still social institutions that regulate economic action.

There is inequality and 'silent violence' in rural life

These social institutions closely relate to the patterns of inequality in land ownership and access to sharecropping. Villages play a central role in the social and economic life of households and the security of their livelihoods. Land ownership patterns underpin power relations both within the village and externally,¹⁰ and determine whether such relations are reciprocal or hierarchical, resulting in varying levels of exploitation and obligation. Many households are not autonomous – rather, they are embedded in hierarchical relations, resulting in a pervasive undertone of 'silent violence'.¹¹

The most systematic form of its expression is in the restrictions that women face through deprivation of access to communication, education and economic activity (most notably in Kandahar), although some are able to achieve a degree of independence. Another expression is how dependent households live with constant insecurity around the arbitrary nature of the patron-client relationship. When the sharecroppers of one village in Herat were no longer needed they were simply ejected, despite the long history of their work for the landlord. Lack of obedience to village leaders carries external risks too: arbitrary action by district authorities and various security forces is a constant threat, and the connections held by the landed elites to the district, provincial, or national level are often needed in times of trouble, such as to negotiate the release of a detained household member from prison or resolve a conflict. Thus, opportunities for resistance to these elites are limited.

These deeply unequal structures remain because the resources to live an agricultural life are held by very few while sought by many due to lack of other options. Whilst some people leave to seek work, many remain despite the risks and inequalities as villages and joint households offer access to a distributional economy – entitlements and claims on household resources and networks, rather than a productive economy.

8 Fitzherbet, A (2007). Rural resilience and diversity across Afghanistan. In: Pain, A and Sutton, J (eds). *Reconstructing Agriculture in Afghanistan*. FAO and Practical Action pp: 29-48

9 Minoia, G; Mumatz, W and Pain, A (2015) The social life of the onion: the informal regulation of the onion market in Nangarhar Afghanistan. Working Paper 26, SLRC, AREU and ODI; Minoia, G and Pain, A (2016) Saffron: the social relations of production. SLRC, AREU and ODI

10 Pain, A. (2016) Using village context analysis in Afghanistan: methods and wider implications. Working Paper 46. SLRC, AREU and ODI

11 Boyce, J and Hartmann, B (1983) *A Quiet violence: View from a Bangladesh Village*. London; Zed Press; Pain, A., Huot, D and Ghafoori, I. (2016) Livelihood trajectories in Afghanistan: Silent violence in Kandahar Province. SLRC, AREU and ODI; Watts, M (2013) *Silent Violence: Food, Famine, and Peasantry in Northern Nigeria*. University of Georgia Press.

Afghanistan has a 'surplus' rural population

So why do rural Afghans, government and donors still, despite the evidence, hold faith in an agrarian economy? The old script is deeply embedded: most rural Afghans describe themselves as farmers even if their income comes from non-farm sources. Donors and policy makers have also stuck with the narrative of transitions from rural to urban and reapplying used models of evolutionary structural change to new contexts and countries. Programs that may follow are unlikely to wrench any time soon Afghanistan's rural economy from its social foundations into a fully commoditised economy or one that will offer decent jobs or generate the surplus that is expected. This leaves a very large residual rural population, who are neither 'first movers' nor living in areas of high agricultural potential, lacking food security and social protection.

The degree of outright landlessness tells us something about the scale of land scarcity, which cannot be addressed by land reform. Whilst Afghanistan has not run out of land, it has hit the buffers in terms of the availability of irrigated land and, even in the long term, little is likely to change. The many landless are thus a 'surplus population' with few future agricultural opportunities except, at best, partial subsistence. Rain-fed land only produces in good rainfall years; the supply of irrigated land is constrained by the limits of water supply. The standard policy response is investment in new irrigation structures and efficiencies, but a decade of lacklustre implementation does not suggest that any future irrigation initiatives could keep pace with rural demographic expansion. It also assumes reliable rainfall, but climate change is likely to lead to reduced winter rainfalls - on which Afghanistan's irrigation systems depend.

Afghanistan may be suffering not from late development - but from being 'too late'

Afghanistan has come late to the processes of structural transformation that have characterised the development of other countries.¹² Much of the intervention model applied to Afghanistan has explicitly assumed that the transitions of the past are possible now, but Afghanistan faces singular disadvantages. For a start its demographic transition has already taken place - as opposed to Europe where the demographic transition followed the agrarian one. Opportunities for international migration are rapidly shutting down. Afghanistan's urban economy is failing to take off and is severely handicapped in its economic competitiveness and faces challenges from its neighbours which a free trade policy only exacerbates.¹³ This all points to a growth in the size of Afghanistan's 'surplus' population, whose rural market economy cannot provide sufficient means to live through productive activity or decent work. The evidence on livelihood trajectories offers a very pessimistic assessment for the future of agrarian based livelihoods in rural Afghanistan. It

12 Losch, B., Freguin-Gresh, S and White, E.T. (2012) *Structural Transformation and Rural Change Revisited: Challenges for Late Developing Countries in a Globalizing World*. Africa Development Forum series, Washington DC: The World Bank

13 Chang, H.C (2002) *Kicking away the Ladder: Development Strategy in Historical Perspective*. London, Anthem Press

may therefore be more of an issue not of 'late development' but of being 'too late'.

Conclusions and recommendations

Afghanistan has a large and growing 'surplus' rural population. Our research shows strongly the existence of a distributional economy, and a moral economy linked to patron-client relations, that hold rural Afghanistan together. Some tough questioning of the assumptions that a sufficiently large productive economy can be generated in rural Afghanistan is needed.

The focus of policy and programmes must be on the immediate needs of a deeply impoverished rural population, many of whom are food insecure and without decent work or the means to secure it. This requires attention to supporting the distributional economy, as much as the productive one where efforts have so far been exclusively located.

Elsewhere¹⁴ we have recommended direct forms of social assistance such as cash payments to households, and greater attention to achieving food security and prioritising the promotion of staple crops. A more measured approach to market development and the realisation of its limits is needed. However this is likely to require substantial public investment, to which current policy approaches are hostile.

Finally, employment schemes that generate work on a reliable and sufficient basis for public good investment may be the easiest mechanism to bring into operation. There are lessons to be learnt from India's National Rural Employment Guarantee Act which guarantees the right to work for 100 days on a public works project at the official minimum wage.¹⁵ Such rights need to be linked with continuing support for, and access to, quality education and health services, and need to take account of the ability of local power holders to control and capture external resources.

This Briefing Paper is based on SLRC research examining livelihood trajectories since 2002. Readers are encouraged to quote or reproduce material from SLRC Briefing Papers for their own publications. As copyright holder, SLRC requests due acknowledgement and a copy of the publication.

This brief draws from the Synthesis report "Life in the times of 'late development': Livelihood trajectories in Afghanistan 2002-2016", and the case studies "Livelihood Trajectories in Afghanistan: silent violence in Kandahar province", "Livelihood Trajectories in Afghanistan: evidence from three villages in Herat province", and "Livelihood trajectories in Afghanistan: Life on the margins in Sar-i-Pul province."

This briefing was written by Adam Pain and Danielle Huot.

14 Transforming Afghanistan? Seeking coherence between technical solutions and political processes: lessons from the field. Briefing paper 20. SLRC, AREU and ODI

15 Li, T.M (2009) To make lives of let die? Rural Dispossession and the Protection of Surplus Populations. *Antipode*, 41 No S1, pp66-93.