



Agriculture can improve nutrition in Afghanistan

Five key recommendations for cross-sectoral policies

The Afghanistan Food Security and Nutrition Agenda (AFSANA) frames the agriculture, health, and other development sector policies and programmes for:

1. **Greater decentralisation or ‘deconcentration’ of policy making to provincial levels**
2. **Increased investment in departmental government capacity within the agriculture and health sectors**
3. **Improved information flow and knowledge management between central and provincial governments**
4. **Investment in infrastructure for agriculture and nutrition**
5. **Framing and improving national trade policies for agribusiness**

Like other countries in the South Asian region, malnutrition is a serious problem in Afghanistan. Statistics confirm high rates of stunting among vulnerable groups such as children under the age of five: nationally 40 per cent and in certain provinces over 70 per cent (UNICEF 2014). Additionally, micronutrient deficiencies are strongly implicated in malnutrition among women and adolescent girls (Flores-Martinez, Zanella, Shankar and Poole 2016), conditions which 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 must play a significant part



in addressing chronic deficiencies. This implies a major role for agriculture (Thompson and Amoroso 2011). In Afghanistan, there is potential to re-orient the whole agriculture sector towards the nutrition agenda (Levitt, Kostermans, Laviolette and Mbuya 2010).

↑ Investment in infrastructure is essential for agrifood markets.

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A crucial policy question therefore 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 are 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, and the capacities for improving nutrition through the agri-food system.

LANSa Research

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 Badakhshan (Faizabad), Bamyan (Bamyan City), Kandahar (Kandahar City) and Nangarhar (Jalalabad). These provinces were selected to achieve a certain degree of regional representation in terms of agriculture, remoteness and ethnicity. Access was facilitated by the Afghan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU), and these were also locations where physical insecurity could be managed at an acceptable level.

Respondents initially were purposively selected from among public sector organisations, (I)NGOs, and universities, and then through a 'snowballing' technique. A total of 46 interviews were conducted.

Six experienced national enumerators (five male, one female) were trained in Kabul by AREU. Implementation ran from April to September 2015. Interviews were conducted in Dari and Pashto, recorded, and translated and transcribed into English. All transcripts were scrutinised and key concepts identified and related to the questionnaire objectives and questions. Data were analysed using QSR NVivo. Emerging from this analysis are major themes concerning how agriculture can be further leveraged for nutrition within Afghanistan.

Further reading

Flores-Martinez, A., Zanello, G., Shankar, B. and Poole, N. (2016). Reducing anemia prevalence in Afghanistan: socioeconomic correlates and the particular role of agricultural assets. *PLoS One* 11(6): e0156878.

Levitt, E., Kostermans, K., Laviolette, L. and Mbuya, N. (2010). *Malnutrition in Afghanistan: Scale, Scope, Causes, and Potential Response*. Washington DC, World Bank.

Miller, D.D. and Welch, R.M. (2013). Food system strategies for preventing micronutrient malnutrition. *Food Policy* 42: 115-128.

Nemat, O.A. and Werner, K. (2016). *The Role of Civil Society in Promoting Good Governance in Afghanistan. Issues paper*. Kabul, Afghanistan, Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit and German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development.

Nijat, A., Gosztonyi, K., Feda, B. and Koehler, J. (2016). *Subnational Governance in Afghanistan. Issues paper*. Kabul, Afghanistan, Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit and German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development.

Thompson, B. and Amoroso, L., Eds. (2011). *Combating Micronutrient Deficiencies: Food-based Approaches*. Rome, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

UNICEF (2014). *National Nutrition Survey: Afghanistan (2013)*. Kabul, United Nations Children's Fund.

Research Findings

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

There were **significant gaps** in our expectations of policies and programmes:

- 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 Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock's gender strategy.

“ In Afghanistan, there is potential to re-orient the whole agriculture sector towards the nutrition agenda ”

- 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, a culture of awareness of sectoral and intersectoral development was very weak, and knowledge of shared experience was very limited.
- 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 to strengthen the knowledge culture.

Policies were said to be poorly designed, often donor-driven, 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 concerns about an overdependence on foreign interventions.

We found **information flows were fragmented**. 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 sub-national — levels of government was poor. Information flows were fragmented within parallel and often ad hoc communication routes. Use of modern information management technology was negligible.

There was evidence of **coordination constraints**: while there were some coordination activities among myriad policy formulating bodies, funding and implementation partners, there were also many inconsistencies to overcome.

We conclude that major barriers exist at the national level to leveraging agriculture for nutrition, which were not confined to the specific agriculture and health 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 found that lack of capacity and resources within government Ministries and Departments along with poor infrastructure and huge security concerns 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.

Policy Recommendations

1. The **Afghanistan Food Security and Nutrition Agenda** (AFSANA) was adopted in 2013 and is an appropriate policy framework for linking interventions in agriculture and health. It can facilitate a multisectoral approach, integrating development sector policies and programmes for tackling undernutrition. To be effective it requires leadership from central Ministries in Kabul, and close coordination within sub-national governance structures in Provinces and Districts.
2. **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 (International) Non-governmental Organisations, UN agencies and central government for significantly higher salaries.
3. **Greater decentralisation or 'deconcentration' of policy-making to provincial levels**. Devolution requires a balance between the availability of technical expertise and local capacity, and the ability for sectors and organisations to communicate effectively in Provincial Development Committees (PDC) and Sector Working Groups (SWG). Strengthening provincial-level governance will result in policies that are *context-specific*, and with fewer inappropriate projects and policies created centrally or copied from other countries (Nijat, Gosztonyi, Feda and Koehler 2016).

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← Irrigating spring cereals on the edge of Bamyan City.

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4. **Improved information flows and knowledge management between central and provincial governments.** Websites for public sector organisations are needed and should be used as knowledge repositories, with appropriate links to donor and international organisations. 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 between national and provincial levels. Greater consultation in policy formation at the central level and improved training in government policies at the provincial level will strengthen the role and performance of traditional and modern civil society organisations at the lower levels of sub-national governance (Nemat and Werner 2016).

5. **Investment in financial services and infrastructure for agriculture and nutrition** will create the conditions for successful domestic markets and enterprises. Food chain initiatives should focus on creating processing and storage facilities and communications infrastructure. Roads and energy linking food chain stakeholders and systems will enhance access to food markets and enable expansion of a stable domestic agribusiness sector.

6. **National governance and trade policies for agribusiness** are needed. These can reduce undue reliance on imports; address allegations of inadequate food safety controls; help to overcome the lack of national micronutrient fortification of foods; improve availability of, and secure physical access to, quality foods; and create business incentives for farmers and food chain entrepreneurs.

Credits

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