

Working Paper 187

**Understanding and Monitoring Livelihoods
under Conditions of Chronic Conflict:
Lessons from Afghanistan**

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December 2002

Overseas Development Institute
111 Westminster Bridge Road
London
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UK

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This Working Paper forms part of a series that reviews the range of ways in which livelihoods approaches are currently used by operational agencies and researchers working in situations of chronic conflict and political instability (SCCPI). The aim of the series is to document current practice so that useful lessons can be learned and applied to ensure for more effective policies, needs assessment, and aid programming to support livelihoods during protracted conflict. Many of these lessons from each of the individual papers are summarised in a synthesis paper. The series also includes an annotated bibliography and a paper outlining the conceptual issues relating to the applications of livelihoods approaches to SCCPI.

The Livelihoods and Chronic Conflict Working Paper Series has been jointly funded by the Sustainable Livelihoods Support Office and the Conflict and Humanitarian Affairs Department of the UK Department for International Development.

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Acknowledgements

The long gestation period of this paper has led to its dynamic evolution as events in Afghanistan have unfolded. I am grateful to many for their comments, discussions and suggestions, most notably Chris Johnson, Helen Kirby, Kate Longley, Charles-Antoine Hofmann, Lisa Laumann, Trish Silkin, Andrew Wilder and Kerry-Jane Wilson.

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The Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) is an independent research institution that conducts and facilitates quality, action-oriented research and analysis to inform policy, improve practice and increase the impact of humanitarian and development programmes in Afghanistan. It was established by the assistance community working in Afghanistan and has a management board with representation from donors, UN agencies and NGOs.

Fundamental to AREU's purpose is the belief that its work should make a difference in the lives of Afghans. AREU is the only humanitarian and development research centre headquartered in Afghanistan. This unique vantage point allows the unit to both produce valuable research and ensure that its findings become integrated into the process of change taking place on the ground.

Current funding for the AREU has been provided by the European Commission (EC) and the governments of the Netherlands and Switzerland. Funding for this study was provided by the European Commission Humanitarian Aid Office (ECHO).

Acronyms

AAD	Afghan Aid Development
ACC/SCN	Administrative Committee on Coordination/Sub-Committee on Nutrition (UN)
AIMS	Afghanistan Information Management System
AREU	Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit
DACAAR	Danish Committee for Afghan Refugees
DFID	Department for International Development (UK)
EC	European Commission (Belgium)
ECHO	European Commission Humanitarian Aid Office
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (Italy)
FEZ	Food Economy Zonation (WFP)
FSS	Food Security Strategy
GGLS	Group Guaranteed Lending and Savings Scheme (Afghanistan)
IADP	Integrated agricultural development programme
IDPM	Institute for Development Policy and Management (UK)
ILO	International Labour Organization (Switzerland)
INTRAC	International Non-governmental Organisation Training and Research Centre (UK)
NA	Northern Alliance (Afghanistan)
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
NZZ	Neue Zürcher Zeitung (Afghanistan)
PRA	Participatory rural appraisal
SCCPI	Situations of chronic conflict and political instability
SC-US	Save the Children–United States of America
SF	Strategic Framework
SFA	Strategic Framework for Afghanistan
SMU	Strategic Monitoring Unit (now AREU)
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
VAM	Vulnerability Analysis and Mapping (WFP)
WFP	World Food Programme (FAO)

Vernacular terms

<i>Kuchis</i>	Nomads
<i>Loya Jirga</i>	A traditional Afghan council for building consensus
<i>Mujahideen</i>	Guerrilla fighters against the Communist regime in Afghanistan, 1978–92
<i>Sharia</i>	Islamic canonical law based on the teachings of the Koran, prescribing both religious and secular duties, and in some cases retributive penalties for law breaking
<i>Shia</i>	One of the two main branches of Islam (the other being <i>Sunni</i>)

Summary

This paper argues that there is little direct evidence for consistent livelihood understanding and analysis-informing humanitarian practice in Afghanistan in the past. The need for this is now greater than ever. The dynamics of the chronic conflict in Afghanistan has been poorly understood, not least in terms of its effects on livelihoods. Aid practice has been driven by simplified stories about the country reinforced through short-term humanitarian based programming that has emphasised delivery and paid little attention to learning. The result has been a monotonous landscape of interventions. Three case studies – on opium production, an economic blockade in Hazarajat, and carpet production in Northern Afghanistan – illustrate the complexity of livelihoods and the dynamics of power relations and the relevance of this understanding to programming. Key lessons drawn from these studies include: the recognition of embedded knowledge of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that have worked long-term in specific locations and the need to build learning explicitly into their programming; the poor understanding of the resilience of livelihoods; the need to recognise the legitimacy of ‘illicit’ activities; the dynamic nature of conflict and power relations and the poor conceptualisation of vulnerability within the livelihoods framework.

The emerging reconstruction agenda in Afghanistan post 11 September gives greater emphasis to livelihood concerns, at least at the policy level, but this is not well translated into programming. The Afghan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) established in 2000, envisages a role in developing a livelihood monitoring system that will have to balance national-level policy needs with developing field-based practices, working through interested partner NGOs. This field-based monitoring, probably to be based on a cohort monitoring system, will have to balance the requirement of flexibility and learning to inform field programming with the need to generate quantitative comparative data for policy-level work. An asset-based monitoring system could be used as an indicator of the extent to which households are able to ‘succeed’ in the particular contexts in which they are situated and potentially contribute towards a national-level poverty monitoring system.

1 Background

To describe this paper as a reflection of work in progress on a country in transition would be an overstatement, implying a clear destination and certainty of outcome. If anything this is a paper about uncertainty and challenges at multiple levels – political, institutional, analytical, logistical and of method. The thinking and original outline started life in a context that had an element of normality to it. There was the Taliban regime, which had largely established a monopoly of violence over 90% of Afghanistan although its writ did not necessarily run deep, or wide. There was an aid landscape peopled with known agencies, programmes and activities with understood strengths and weaknesses. There was an aid architecture and structure which, although contested, carried some semblance of coherence, coordination and accountability through a Strategic Framework and a Principled Common Programming mechanism.¹

11 September 2001, the American bombardment, the loss of power by the Taliban, the emergence of an environment of considerable insecurity, and the development of an expanded humanitarian response and an emerging reconstruction agenda for Afghanistan have transformed the country in many respects. Since the installation of an Interim Afghanistan Authority following the Bonn agreement in early December 2001, a national consultative meeting has been held.² This has led to the establishment of a transitional government that is anticipated to lead to democratic elections in late 2003.

Most political commentators would agree that political instability is greater now (in September 2002) than it was a year ago and the re-emergence of local warlords harks back to the early 1990s rather than signposting transitions to peace. The rapid expansion in number of aid agencies and levels of funding have led to growing confusion over coordination and problems over consistency of programming in humanitarian responses. Indeed the reality is that the semblance of agency cooperation that passed for coordination in the past under the Strategic Framework reflected accommodation and toleration under conditions of Afghanistan's low political priority in the global agenda. As a review of the Strategic Framework concluded prior to 11 September 2001 stated:

‘The central concern of the review team, therefore, has been why has coherence remained elusive. Rather than a technical problem of coordination, the main conclusion is that intrinsic and unresolved differences remain over the nature and role of politics, assistance and rights’ (Duffield et al., 2002: iii).

In other words the issues then were not of coordination but of interests. Those interests have now multiplied with an expanded repertoire of agencies including the international financial institutions, the United Nations' agencies, donors and NGOs all bidding for space and mandates. Against this a transitional government is attempting to establish itself. While there are strong aspirations for the normality of development business to proceed, things are very much ‘not normal’ and the security, political and socio-economic transitions on which Afghanistan is embarking have as much chance of unravelling as being consolidated.

The basic arguments of this paper draw on three case studies described in section 4 – opium production, an economic blockage in Hazarajat, and carpet production in Faryab (a province in northern Afghanistan). At one level the message of is relatively simple. There is little direct evidence for consistent livelihood understanding and analysis informing humanitarian practice in

¹ The Strategic Framework for Afghanistan (SFA), created in 1998, was designed to promote greater coherence between the assistance and political wings of the United Nations and its partner organisations in building peace and stability. The Principled Common Programme, established separately from the SFA was an attempt to build complementarities between programmes and help agencies work in a principled and accountable manner with the Taliban (Duffield et al., 2002).

² The *Loya Jirga* (a traditional Afghan council for building consensus) held in June 2002.

Afghanistan. Therefore, this review has little material on which to draw to contribute theoretically or in terms of analytical method to the debate on livelihoods under conditions of political instability, although a number of themes are identified that do raise challenges to the sustainable livelihoods framework. Instead, as this paper will argue, the issues in Afghanistan have been how humanitarian practices have been largely driven by other processes that while clearly informed by perceptions of need, have been more framed by external considerations.

But as will be seen, understanding and learning as a basis for programming and policy is more necessary now than ever. Central to this is the need to build understanding of vulnerability through informed analysis of micro and meso power relations and conditions, to investigate how these link to livelihood strategies and outcomes, and how programming strategies can be designed to address and monitor them.

This paper also addresses the development of the role of an independent organisation, seeking to explore how, under conditions of multiple and often centrifugal agency action and extremely limited government capacity, it can contribute through research to consistency of practice, understanding, and the development of capacity. The Strategic Monitoring Unit (SMU), the precursor to the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) was established in 2000 and emerged from the UN's Strategic Framework initiative of 1998 in relation to Afghanistan. The overall aim of the unit was to gain a better understanding of the broad impact of the totality of aid programming in Afghanistan through research and analysis, focussing particularly on the key concerns of the Strategic Framework, namely: improved livelihoods, access to basic social services, progress on human rights, and progress towards peace-building (AREU, 2002).

Post 11 September and the apparent lapse of the Strategic Framework, the AREU has refocused itself partly to build on its position as an independent, (and at present the only) body with a research focus in Afghanistan, to address the need for high-quality research, learning and analysis in Afghanistan; the building of research capacity; and through the promotion of discussion and debate, dissemination and advocacy strategies informing policy and practice. The challenges to AREU as a relatively independent body to fulfil this role within the current Afghanistan are considerable. To address livelihood monitoring and analysis from within one agency alone would be one matter; to argue for and promote a form of enquiry and practice across a range of agencies is a different one entirely. However if lessons are to be learned, linkages between humanitarian and development interventions established, and macro policy built on micro lessons, then some consistency of practices in learning and monitoring are essential.

A proposal to develop a livelihood monitoring system was made by the AREU during 2001 arising from detailed discussions with implementing agencies, observations on existing agency practice at the field level, the apparent limited understanding of context and programming impacts and the divergence of agency methods over space and time, all of which combined to severely limit understanding of aid impact. A funding proposal to support the development of a Livelihoods Monitoring System was submitted to the European Commission (EC) in September 2001 and was approved in mid-2002.

This paper in seeking to provide a review of current practice in relation to addressing and monitoring livelihood support in Afghanistan faces a multitude of challenges. Not least is the limited documentation and institutional memory of agencies, which makes it difficult to exhaustively trawl or review field practice. There are reasons for the thin documentary base but it almost certainly means that the general picture will be contradicted by specific examples. The use of literature and evidence is necessarily selective. The material is drawn both from the few case studies undertaken on livelihoods, from the available material on monitoring systems and from what has been learned from specific project interventions. If agency practice is somewhat opaque, even

more so is understanding of what people in Afghanistan actually do. As will be seen, one of the challenges faced in building understanding about livelihoods is some deeply entrenched opinions and constructions about what Afghanistan is and is not, what it was and what it should become.

Understanding is one matter. Building cross-agency monitoring systems represents a challenge of an entirely different order. There are the obvious cross-institutional difficulties (fitting one size of monitoring system to all) but in addition there are major concerns over method and approach, reflecting both livelihood frameworks, understanding of vulnerabilities and linkages between scales. To these need to be added a highly uncertain political and institutional environment giving rise to both enormous operational difficulties in the field and extreme pressures, partly donor driven, to focus on delivery rather than on necessarily generating understanding and learning.

This paper will elaborate a strategy by which it hopes that many of the above issues can be addressed, but will be unable to offer any proof or lessons learned that this will work. The rest of the paper is structured around five major sections. The first of these gives background to the Afghanistan context, followed by a section that discusses aid and agency practice both before 11 September and the emerging (and confused) picture since then. The next section pulls together a set of information on changing livelihoods in Afghanistan, grounded in both pre-1978 material (the year of the Communist coup) and on evidence gleaned from documentation, discussions and the field since then. Next is an exploration of broader lessons issues of method and analytical frameworks and the paper concludes with an outline of the approach that will be followed in building the monitoring system covering issues of both method and organisation.

2 The Afghanistan Context

There is unlikely to be any dispute that Afghanistan has been in a long-running situations of chronic conflict and political instability (SCCPI), and the dates offered to frame Afghanistan as an SCCPI usually start with 1978 and the Communist coup, the Soviet invasion in 1979 and withdrawal in 1988, the fall of the Soviet client regime of President Najibullah in 1992, the capture of Kabul by the Taliban in 1996 and defeat of the Taliban in November 2001. Whether the establishment in 2002 of a transitional government as a result of the recent *Loya Jirga* in Kabul heralds the beginning of a move out of SCCPI status remains to be seen.

Portraying dates as a map of significant events (and therefore a scheme for understanding Afghanistan) at one level does provide a limited definition of the boundaries of the Afghanistan 'context'. These dates and key elements associated with them are listed in Table 1. Framing the Afghanistan context in this manner however is rather like identifying key points of access through the outer walls of a maze.

Table 1 Key events in Afghanistan and associated activities

Date	Event	Activities
1880–1901	Emir Abdur Rahman	Enforced settlement of Pashtuns in the north Suppression of Hazaras British subsidies
1919	King Amanullah crowned	
1921	Independent Afghan state internationally recognised	Processes of modernisation initiated leading to rural resistance
1929	King Amanullah deposed	
1933	Zahir Shah becomes king	Development of agricultural export economy
1950s		Development of rentier economy: extensive American and Soviet aid
1972	Deposal of King Zahir Shah	Afghanistan becomes a republic
1978	Saur revolution	
1979	Soviet invasion	Cold war 'proxy war' Major refugee movements Destruction of rural economy
1988	Soviet withdrawal	
1992	Fall of Najibullah Power struggles between the Mujahideen	Emergence of localised warlords
1994	Emergence of the Taliban	Growth of humanitarianism
1996	Capture of Kabul by the Taliban	Regime of security Growth of the trade economy
1998	Capture of Mazar-e-Sharif by the Taliban Start of the drought	
2001	Fall of the Taliban	

A maze (in the classical sense) is a network of paths and hedges designed as a puzzle through which one has to find a way to the centre (or from the centre out). Dates and key events may help one gain access to the maze but they do not provide a route map through the maze to the heart of whatever the Afghanistan context is.

Table 1 expands the timeline backwards from 1978 to draw attention to the fact that it may not be such a useful key date after all, and that in many ways it simply represents a particular point in a long-term trajectory of change. For example, Rubin's (1995a and b) thesis on the transformation of

Afghanistan from buffer to failed state hinges on the rentier (a state with a significant dependence on indirect sources of income, e.g., aid rather than direct taxation) nature of the Afghanistan state from the 1930s onwards, building on previous British subsidies. Limited direct taxation became increasingly supplanted by indirect taxation, external aid (notably from Soviet Russia) and revenue from natural gas, thus limiting the accountability of the state to its rural constituency. The revolution of 1978 was simply a reflection of internal contradictions coming to a head (Fielden and Goodhand, 2000).

Nevertheless, explanations of the Afghanistan context continue to focus on key simplifying motifs and absolutes which, while evocative and certainly with elements of truth, are not helpful in understanding the very complex interplay of history, place, time, political, economic, social, religious and ethnic elements that underlie vulnerabilities, livelihood strategies and outcomes. A number of these generalities are explored in order to illustrate this point.

A common representation of Afghanistan is that it has been devastated by more than 20 years of war. Thus the Draft Food Security Strategy for Afghanistan could claim³ that:

‘Food Security in Afghanistan has deteriorated markedly during the last two decades. The current drought has added a further burden to a series of adverse long-term trends. These include protracted conflict, the erosion of the agricultural production base, loss of irrigation and other infrastructure and declining non-agricultural income generation opportunities’ (Sloane, 2001: 1).

No-one could question that during the Soviet era there was widespread destruction of rural infrastructure (see Rubin, 1995a), major refugee movements, a retreat from surplus production in agriculture and a diversification in the rural non-farm trade. However, as the Draft Food Security Strategy states:

‘[from 1992]... substantial international assistance has been given to Afghanistan to enable the return of refugees and the re-establishment of agricultural production. Of necessity much of this has been short-term, aimed at the rapid rehabilitation of basic productive resources damaged and destroyed during years of fighting. The results were encouraging. Within five years from 1992, the country produced an estimated 70% of its own food needs’ (Sloane, 2001: 1).

The evidence does not support a picture of 20 years of unmitigated conflict. Not only has the conflict and destruction been episodic but it has also been localised. For example, in Faryab province in northern Afghanistan while the Soviet army caused widespread destruction during the fighting between the Taliban and the Northern Alliance between 1996 and 1998, most of the destruction took place in Almar district in western Faryab – other parts remained completely untouched and when the Taliban swept through the north to finally capture Mazar-e-Sharif destruction was very limited (Pain, 2001). However the indirect effects of war, e.g., currency instability, the disruption of trade as with the closing of the Uzbekistan border under the Taliban, are likely to have had more widespread economic effects.

The destructive effects of war are time and place specific. But it is also very clear that the nature of conflict has undergone substantial change affecting rural livelihoods in complex ways. During the period 1978–92 the conflict in Afghanistan was essentially a cold-war ‘proxy war’ (Fielden and

³ The Food Security Strategy statement should be contrasted with that of UNDP (1993) which states that ‘The agricultural production systems of Afghanistan can only be described as robust and resilient. For 14 years, from 1978 to 1992 rural production systems in Afghanistan continued to support the remaining rural population under conditions of extreme difficulty. Although malnutrition and hunger were reported, this did not degenerate into the same catastrophic situations, which developed in countries where the production systems are basically far less robust, and far more marginal, and in many cases, have simply exceeded their human carrying capacities. This is not the case in Afghanistan, for although the infrastructure developed by agricultural production systems in many areas have been degraded or destroyed, the basic elements of land and water remain’.

Goodhand, 2000) with the Soviet and American states being the major funders of the combatants. The emergence of the Mujahideen and the culture of local commanders were to lead to a major change of power relations at the local level, supported by control of arms and money.

After the collapse of the Soviet State and the scaling down of American interest in Afghanistan in 1992, the competing forces needed to obtain alternative sources of funding to support their power base. Building on previous trends, the contribution from regional interests (notably Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Iran, India and the ex-Soviet states on Afghanistan's northern border – each supporting their own interests), smuggling, opium production and extraction of natural resources all came to play a role in the resource-acquisition strategies of the competing parties. This phase of the conflict with a multiplicity of local power centres and petty conflicts reflected the complete breakdown of a central state authority. The rise to power of the Taliban and the regime of security that it could impose meant that by 1996 these economic processes could be brought to scale.

What these various transactions provided in terms of revenue, and to whom, remains a source of some debate. Rubin (2000), for example, has argued that by the late 1990s the black economy of Afghanistan had come to include opium production and that cross-border trading systems into Pakistan, represented a major source of funding to the Taliban. The apparent rapid collapse of the Taliban after the American bombing could be read as indicating the external funding to the Taliban⁴ that was curtailed once the Americans opened hostilities after 11 September 2001, may have played a much greater role than previously thought. This is consistent with an understanding of why the Taliban felt able to impose a ban on opium production.

The key point though is that the nature of the conflict underwent a significant change from 1992, and the underlying interests of actors and their engagement in regional economic systems became an increasingly important feature. As Duffield has argued (2001) a more accurate conceptualisation of Afghanistan under the Taliban is that of an emerging political complex operating at a regional level rather than just a complex national political emergency.

As with the need to understand the changing nature of the conflict, an understanding of the nature of the Taliban is also relevant. For many the Taliban were seen to be a failed state, by others as a rogue state. As Duffield et al. noted:

‘The underlying motif that shapes the SFA [Strategic Framework for Afghanistan] as a conceptual tool is that Afghanistan under the Taliban constitutes a “failed state”. That is, it can be known through the collapsed public services, fragmented social infrastructure and non-existent political legitimacy that this concept suggests. Thus the framework gives a brief description of an impoverished war-torn society characterised by fragmentation, depleted social capital, collapsed basic services, disappearance of traditional coping mechanisms, avid gender discrimination, absence of effective government, and so on’ (Duffield et al., 2002: 11).

This idea of a failed state and the formative role that it has played in driving aid practice⁵ is returned to later. The important point here is that Duffield et al., amongst others, were unconvinced that the motif of failed state accurately represented the Taliban and their ability to maintain security and military capabilities and effectively implement, as noted above, an unprecedented ban on opium production within one season. Traditional coping mechanisms as will be seen as far from dead and community social capital shows every sign of life.

⁴ It is widely believed that the Inter-Services Intelligence Agency of Pakistan were a key supporter – see Rubin (1995b: 139).

⁵ This is an analysis essentially permitting NGOs a relatively free hand and legitimacy to operate semi-independently.

Macro and simplifying explanations of Afghanistan therefore do not do justice to the complexity at ground level. There were even limits to the power of the Taliban and they did not attempt to impose control on the tribal Pushtuns of eastern Afghanistan who continued to play music and follow tribal, rather than *Sharia* Law (Pain, 2001). Local communities were able to run formal and informal schools for girls with tacit understanding from local authorities. There was effective resistance in some areas to recruitment into the Taliban army. In many respects therefore the reach of the Taliban state, even though it had some distinctive characteristics, was not very different from that of past Afghan state structures.

The notion of ‘depleted social capital’ referred to above also deserves mention. The World Bank (2001) in its briefing paper prior to the reconstruction meeting in Islamabad in November 2001, described Afghanistan as ‘eroded of social capital’, following on from Rubin ‘the years of war had destroyed much of Afghanistan’s social capital as communities and institutions were dispersed or destroyed’ (2000: 1794). Yet any field experience in rural Afghanistan would tell you that the strength of association and solidarity at household and village level and beyond is a striking feature of rural Afghanistan and merits investigation as such networks or relationships and patterns of support have undoubtedly changed. As Pain and Goodhand (2002) have put it:

‘Leaving aside the considerable contestation that exists about the notion, value and use of the concept of social capital, there is empirical evidence to the contrary. Rural communities are far from enfeebled and traditional non-market exchange mechanisms, village solidarity and Islamic norms of alms-giving still play a strong role at community level’ (Pain and Goodhand, 2002: 18).

Equally strong family and lineage ties challenge the essentialist argument of ethnic identity as being the defining element of Afghanistan’s warring parties. While ethnicity may have been used by many commanders as a tool to generate support, and there are historical roots to this, it has not been the sole cause of the conflict, and neither does it withstand scrutiny as a robust form of categorisation of social groups (Schetter, 2001). It cannot be denied that certain groups have used ethnicity affiliations to those in power for their own ends and to gain control of resources. Pain (2001) cites the example of Pushtun settlements in the south of Faryab gaining control of water resources and denying access to downstream water users. Pushtun villages in the north, forcibly settled there during the late 19th century by Abdur Rahman are now suffering persecution since the fall of the Taliban. But micro-level politics based on ethnic identity is not always an explanatory factor that has general applicability.

Simplifying and general statements at best are not helpful in understanding the dynamics of Afghanistan as an SCCPI, either at the general or the specific level. The long-running conflict in Afghanistan has changed its nature over time and the linkages between macro, meso and micro (i.e., national, district, and village economies), between conflict, political changes and economic systems are extremely important to understand, not least in terms of their effects on livelihoods. What is striking about Afghanistan is the fact that despite everything the conflict has not led to the breakdown of society. But it has resulted in major changes and transformations built on evolving social relations and changing coping mechanisms (Pain and Goodhand, 2002). The changing nature of the conflict and the shift in conflicts’ context had very specific effects on livelihoods. It is not so much whether conflict has had an effect or not, but what types of conflicts have had what types of effects.⁶ Aid practice has rather poorly addressed these issues.

⁶ I am grateful to Trish Silkin for this point.

3 Aid and Agency Practice

An understanding of aid practice in Afghanistan is approached through first looking at the changing nature of aid agency engagement since 1978 and how it has evolved in parallel to the changing political circumstances within Afghanistan. The periodisation of Afghanistan's conflict is in many respects coincident with phases of humanitarian practice.

With the refugee movement out of Afghanistan from 1978 as a result of the communist coup, the Soviet invasion and emerging forces of resistance, the major component of aid support was humanitarian relief and rehabilitation assistance, of which health was a major component. This was provided largely through a mushrooming of NGOs based in Peshawar. Some of these played an important role in semi-covert cross border operations in support of the *Mujahideen* resistance (Atmar and Goodhand, 2001). With the departure of the Soviets in 1988 and the fall 4 years later of President Najibullah, the UN and other international relief agencies were able to expand their role in providing humanitarian relief, both for returning refugees and for those civilians caught up in localised conflicts. With the gradual collapse of central state services from 1994–6, the eclipse of Kabul as a centre of power and the emergence of regional pockets of security as the Taliban came to power, the aid community increasingly engaged in rural rehabilitation and the provision of health and education services.

However, since the early 1990s, a number of processes had been emerging that were to lead to a new agenda for aid management and delivery in Afghanistan. In part these were based on the poor performance and lack of accountability of many NGOs involved in delivery of humanitarian assistance, deriving in part from practices developed before the departure of the Soviets. There were also wider concerns about inadequacy of humanitarian practice in dealing with prolonged political conflicts and building a peace dividend that linked in with agendas for reform of the UN itself (Duffield et al., 2002).

The outcome was the emergence in 1998 of the Strategic Framework for Afghanistan. Its basic aim was to improve the coherence between aid and the political agenda of donors as a means not only of supporting a transition to peace in Afghanistan but also of addressing human rights issues that had become the major fracture line between the Taliban and donors. This is not the place to review the workings of the Strategic Framework and its associated instruments. These included the Principled Common Programming that was designed to ensure greater complementarity and coherence in the provision of assistance, and the establishment of the Strategic Monitoring Unit (now the AREU) as an independent body to review the impact of the new aid architecture. The view of the review team (Duffield et al., 2002) of the SFA, commissioned by the then SMU, was that it was seen by many to have largely failed. As observed earlier, this was not mainly for reasons of failing to coordinate but because the SFA did not address the fundamental and underlying issue of differing interests.

These matters are relevant to the post-Taliban context and will be returned to in section 6. It is doubtful that the SFA led to any substantial change in working principles or practice by NGOs engaged in the field. They continued to work largely under humanitarian funding regimes because donors were unwilling to engage in longer-term development processes, as they did not recognise a legitimate central authority in Afghanistan with which they could do business.

Duffield et al. (2002) observed that despite the emergence of the SFA and proposed reform of the architecture of aid, in practice bilateral funding by donors of agencies for project implementation remained the most common instrument for getting business done. What Duffield et al. called 'the triumph of the project' entrenched short-term projects driven by humanitarian budgets into the aid landscape of Afghanistan.

If one combines the dominant motifs of understanding of Afghanistan discussed in section 2 with the largely humanitarian sources of funding geared towards short-term projects, then the peculiarities of the Afghanistan aid landscape,⁷ organised largely in terms of physical delivery of inputs and formulaic approaches to sectors, becomes more understandable. The corollary of this is that investment in building understanding and learning, identifying opportunities, engaging in participatory processes – let alone addressing needs – have been far less visible in aid practice.

This somewhat severe generalisation is justified by outlining the nature of project interventions in agriculture and food security. Underlying these is a set of assumptions concerning the role of agriculture in rural livelihoods and the relation between food production and food security. This has various elements and the starting position of Rubin (2000) fairly represents the view of what Afghanistan was seen to be:

‘in the 1970s, Afghan society was split between a rural, largely subsistence economy and an urban economy dependent on a state that drew in turn most of its income from links to the international state system and market. As late as 1972, the cash economy constituted less than half of the total’ (Rubin, 2000: 1791).

The notion of a dualistic economy and largely subsistence non-monetised rural economy sits somewhat uncomfortably with the contribution that taxes on agricultural exports made to government revenue. The key element though is the equation of rural with subsistence and it has been a short step from this to equating rural with agricultural, and subsistence with production. Thus Sloane (2001) states:

‘To target possible food security assistance interventions, the population can be divided into three broad categories representing their general level of food security .. the Groups are (i) those who are capable of being self-sufficient, (ii) those who are potentially or marginally self-sufficient, (iii) those who have limited or no opportunities to provide for the needs of themselves and their families at an acceptable level’ (Sloane, 2001: 13).

The treatment of food security as equivalent to food self-sufficiency and rural as agricultural is what has informed general practice in terms of interventions in rural Afghanistan. While the search has not been exhaustive, there is little documentation to support a picture of systematic investigation into the nature of the rural economy and rural livelihoods prior to the design of project interventions. There are examples of detailed and informative studies that address particular components of the rural economy but these are almost entirely done within a sectoral perspective, or proceed on the assumption that rural is agricultural, and start with a pre-conceived notion of delivery. A case in point is the Afghanaid⁸ study of 1998, (Afghanaid, 1998) which was revealing about its underlying assumptions and approach, reflecting the fitting of districts to existing programmes:

‘The objective of the survey was (i) to validate the recommendations made by the reconnaissance survey, (ii) to provide community and household level data and (iii) to assess the extent to which the selected districts are ideal for the Afghan Aid Development (AAD) programme of engineering and community development ... many of the programme components tested in Badakshan can be implemented in East Nuristan with little or no modification’ (Afghanaid, 1998: 1–2).

⁷ This is probably peculiar to all humanitarian interventions in SCCPI (Kate Longley, personal communication) but it is peculiar all the same.

⁸ Afghanaid and DACAAR (Danish Committee for Assistance to Afghan Refugees) are two examples of country-specific international NGOs to be found in Afghanistan. Afghanaid was established from the UK and has been largely funded from the UK.

DACAAR has established what are called baseline studies (DACAAR, 1997) for villages included in its integrated agricultural development programmes (IADPs). These studies give basic description and interesting information of the agricultural economy of the villages in which they work. Each survey is organised by sectors, strays little beyond the agricultural sphere and has little analysis of socio-economic differences. The studies certainly do not provide a basis for monitoring change, let alone project impact.

The impression then is of a monotonous landscape of interventions centred on the reconstruction of irrigation infrastructure, fruit tree nurseries and seedling distribution, wheat variety trials and seed production and at best some on-farm trials. Reporting focuses entirely on the length of irrigation structure rehabilitated the number of fruit trees distributed and the increased area under improved seed and increased grain production. When pressed about impact, the common assertion is that more production will have benefited the farmers.

There are of course exceptions and the DACAAR IADPs represent a move towards a broader perspective, allowed in part by a funding regime that has permitted a longer-term perspective. But even DACAAR's IADPs, are in practice, heavily geared towards technical delivery and there appears to be little understanding of the underlying village social structure⁹ and economy.

The draft Regional Food Economy Zonation (Clarke and Seaman, 1998) undertaken by the World Food Programme is the only document that appears to systematically address that fact that rural households can obtain food through markets and exchange mechanisms as well as through production. What is surprising is that it does not appear to have informed the Draft Food Security Strategy, let alone a wider audience. The series of studies that the World Food Programme (WFP) Vulnerability Analysis and Mapping (VAM) unit undertook subsequent to the Food Economy Zonation, included four in urban areas (Herat, Faizabad, Mazar-e-Sharif and Kabul) and two in rural areas (Badghis Rainfed area and the Northern Rainfed Belt). They do not appear to have had a wider impact in terms of encouraging other agencies to think in terms of different socio-economic groups, diverse sources of income in rural households and the role of the non-farm economy. It is not clear whether these studies were widely discussed, but even by early 2001, the original Food Economy Zonation remained as a draft internal document and had not been further developed by WFP. This may have been partly a problem of funding. In addition the pressures of responding to the emerging drought from 2000 appear to have limited the resources of WFP to further develop this approach.

⁹ To its credit DACAAR supported an anthropologist to investigate some of the reasons why newly installed wells were not used, and in the process uncovered a fascinating story on the nature and dynamics of gendered and socially owned space (Klijn, 2002).

4 Changing Livelihoods in Afghanistan

This paper has argued that explanations and understanding about Afghanistan have been simplistic at best, and wrong at worst. The combination of simplified stories about the country combined with short-term funding sourced through humanitarian programming (at least until September 2001) has led to aid interventions driven by delivery and short-term objectives. The extent to which this has changed since the end of 2001 remains unclear. Understanding of what people do and why and learning have both been limited. What evidence is there that aid interventions have essentially got it wrong (or not entirely right)? This section first briefly outlines the limited historical material available on livelihoods before going on to draw on three case studies – on opium production, livelihoods in Hazarajat – and livelihoods in Faryab to use as illustrative material so show that livelihoods are complex, diverse and that understanding the complex dynamics of power relations under the conditions of long-term instability in Afghanistan are essential to understanding what people do. They also support the argument made in section 3 that interventions have not been well informed by understanding.

The dominant understanding of rural Afghanistan pre-1978, i.e., that largely subsistence farming in which 80% of Afghanistan's population was involved, has already been commented on. The general consensus is that before 1978 Afghanistan was largely self-sufficient at a national level. But if some of the historical evidence is teased out, it becomes clear that certain areas – for example, Badakshan, Hazarajat etc. – were grain-deficit areas and migratory labour practices were common in order for households to achieve sufficient command of food supplies. Other areas – particularly irrigated parts of the northern Turkmenistan plains – were grain-surplus areas, exporting grain and attracting migrant labour. These underlying patterns, hardly surprising in a physical landscape shaped by mountains, valleys and plains and where access to water is a major determinant of production, provided the basis for the food economy regions drawn up by Clarke and Seaman (1998), which indicate just how diverse regional economies were.

The data presented by Dupree (1980) on village-level occupations is certainly consistent with an interpretation that rural economies were far from being totally farm-based. The data derives from a rural employment survey in the 1960s and while the categorisation denies the opportunities for individuals (men) to have multiple occupations, for Kandahar where 60% of the males recorded their occupation, nearly 8% of these were religious teachers and nearly 25% were listed under an 'other' category (not farmer, shepherd, blacksmith, carpenter or barber). Oral evidence also points to a long history of seasonal and longer-term migration to Iran and Pakistan (to work in the coal mines of Quetta, for example).

For the nomads (or *kuchis*) of Afghanistan who have been a visible part of the social and physical landscape, and who were estimated in the late 1970s to provide about 12–14% of the total population, there has been a long-term trajectory of change reflecting a dynamic economy driven by both political and economic trends. On the political side in the 19th century Abdur Rahman not only forcibly settled nomads from eastern Afghanistan in pockets along the northern Afghanistan border, but his gaining of control of the central highlands and Hazarajat also led to the *kuchis* who strongly supported him gaining control over pastures that had previously belonged to the Hazaras. Equally the partition of Pakistan and India in 1947 stopped the trading systems that the nomads had operated into India. The closing of the Pakistan border to nomadic movement in 1962 was to further restrict nomad access to their traditional winter pasture and forced a major reorientation of their seasonal movements into Afghanistan, greater competition for pasture resources and economic pressures to move out of nomadic existence. The economic trajectory of change for many nomads has been from caravaneers in the late 19th century working primarily for Hindu traders, into traders in their own right during the 1930s, to owners of transport systems, merchants and land owners in their own right from the 1960s onwards (Pedersen, 1994).

We now examine in more detail livelihood systems that have evolved or deepened since 1978, focussing on two commodities (opium and carpets) and two geographical areas. None of the studies specifically employ a particular livelihood framework but draw opportunistically on livelihood concepts to frame their enquiries. Two of the case studies (the cultivation of opium and the Faryab study) are essentially ex-post understandings, using a livelihood lens to look at the effect of interventions on household strategies. The other study uses a livelihood analysis to explore context in Hazarajat in relation to the design of future interventions. They all raise key issues about livelihood strategies under conditions of political instability and about method in relation to generation of understanding and monitoring of livelihoods, although none specifically address less monitoring and evaluation practices.

4.1 Opium poppy cultivation

The story of opium production, and attempts to control it, is in many ways illustrative of both aid practice and precisely why an informed livelihood perspective is needed.

The normative position on poppy cultivation and its control is well represented by Sloane (2001). It argued that the expansion of poppy cultivation reflected a failure of governance (p. 9) and drew attention to the expansion of production in 1999 both in terms of area cultivated and provinces and districts in which poppies were grown. It acknowledged the strategic role of opium cultivation in providing access to land, credit and other assets. In the light of the ban on opium cultivation it then advocated:

‘there is a need to develop/support alternate agricultural and other income-generating activities in the post-opium cultivation scenario’ (Sloane, 2001: 11).

However the history of interventions to provide alternative income strategies so as to reduce opium cultivation in Afghanistan is largely one of failure, mainly because the root causes and reasons for the cultivation of the opium poppy were not well understood (Mansfield, 2001a).

Since 1989 attempts have been made to control opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan. The Afghanistan Drug Control and Rural Rehabilitation Programme (1989–96) implemented through the UN Drug Control Program supported a variety of different interventions in agriculture, livestock, health, education, income-generation, water and sanitation and infrastructural works in some 200 sub-projects across the major opium poppy-growing provinces. The key component underlying the Program was a ‘poppy clause’ that required local communities to sign an agreement to abstain from poppy cultivation in exchange for project interventions (Mansfield, 2001a). Reviews of the Program concluded that it had little effect on reducing poppy growing, and that communities had become adept in using threats of cultivation as a bargaining ploy with the Program. Programmes instigated by other agencies basically adopted the same model of emphasising alternative development interventions to substitute for income derived from opium poppy production. They largely failed (Mansfield, 2001a) to reduce the poppy-growing area, and where there were benefits it was mainly the wealthier members of the communities who had gained most.

A detailed reading of the evidence with respect to opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan tells a rather more nuanced story than that of Sloane (2001). The expansion in cultivation dates primarily from the 1990s (Mansfield, 2001b) primarily because of the emergence of a regime of security that has allowed the opium trade to flourish, linked to both the war and the black economies. As Mansfield observed, Afghanistan has been unusual with regard to drug-crop cultivation in that in other countries opium poppies are cultivated in areas to which the state has limited access. In Afghanistan opium poppies have been cultivated in some of the most accessible areas. Although

poppy cultivation had spread to over 40% of the districts in Afghanistan, nearly 75% of this area was in just two provinces, Helmand and Nangarhar, and within districts in which land holdings were small and access to irrigation water and markets were problematic. Even at the peak of their cultivation during the 1998/9 season, opium poppies occupied only 2.6% of the total cultivated land.

The evidence that Mansfield presents shows that opium production provided the means by which poor sharecroppers and the landless could get access to land, since it offered the only source of credit and inputs that could be obtained, giving access to land to meet their subsistence needs and allowing them to deploy at less than cost the only asset they had – labour. In effect this meant that the cultivators carried all the risks of cultivation, operating on highly disadvantageous terms given that moneylenders control trade and credit. For the rich landowners returns of some US\$1,957.5 ha⁻¹ from a poppy crop are achievable compared with an estimated US\$212.75 ha⁻¹ for the sharecropper (Mansfield, 2001b). A large part of the difference in returns can be accounted for by high interest rates and distress sales of opium at harvest by the sharecropper. For the sharecropper opium cultivation was thus an ex-post coping strategy designed to gain access to land, credit and food under conditions of agricultural underemployment and low opportunity labour cost. For the rich landowner opium cultivation was a diversification strategy designed to increase income with low risk.

With such an understanding it is clear why drug control strategies designed to promote alternate sources of income to replace the income derived from opium poppy cultivation failed. Firstly, the immediate cultivators derived relatively little income from opium production and secondly, related to this, the main reasons for cultivation had little to do with directly generating cash income but everything to do with gaining access to land for food production, credit opportunities, and opportunities for farm labour.

4.2 Livelihoods in Hazarajat

The Hazarajat case material draws extensively from a report on a field study (Semple, 1998) undertaken to investigate livelihood strategies in the central highlands of Afghanistan (Hazarajat). The author had previously worked with Oxfam in the region, although the extent to which Oxfam was involved in the study is not absolutely clear. The purpose of the investigation was to identify opportunities for appropriate assistance to support livelihoods, although it is unclear whether this led to a programme of implementation. The study, structured around a livelihoods framework, combined the collection of primary data through participatory rural appraisals in six villages, focus group interviews of key informants (including traders) and a review of secondary information. The study was undertaken at a time (1998) when Hizb Wahadat (a Hazara based political party aligned with the Northern Alliance) was in control and Hazarajat was under economic blockade by the Taliban. Three weeks after the study was completed, the Taliban gained control and the economic blockade that has lasted for nearly two years, was lifted.

Hazarajat, people by the Hazaras, who are largely although not exclusively *Shia* muslims, is a geographically remote and mountainous part of Afghanistan with a long history of conflict. It is also an area that has historically been grain deficient and dependent on livestock trading systems and seasonal labour movements in order to procure sufficient grain supplies. It is an area vulnerable to both climatic shocks (heavy snowfalls, floods) and economic blockade. It was the location of a major uprising against Abdur Rahman during the late 19th century and the resulting insecurity led to a major famine. Key lands particularly pastures were seized by the Emir and awarded to the *kuchis* who supported his military campaign. Since that time conflict between the *kuchis* and the Hazaras over access to these resources had continued although from 1978 with the Hazaras in control of the area, access to the *kuchis* had essentially been denied.

From 1978 when the communists came to power resistance by the Hazaras forced the local administration and army to retreat from the hills and a local regional government was established by a group of local religious figures. In 1983 there was harsh fighting between different factions of Hazaras, some of whom were backed by Iran, and only in 1989 was a unified alliance of Hazaras formed under the umbrella of Hizb Wahadat. This group held control over much of Hazarajat until the summer of 1998 when the region fell to the Taliban.

The study looked at the major impacts of the 1997/8 economic blockade and the effects of this on terms of trade. The winter of 1997/8 was a long severe winter that led to major spring flooding, affecting both the crop stand and increasing the incidence of diseases (particularly rust) on the wheat crop. The combined effect of the blockade and reduced grain production (both because of the spring flood and reduced inflow of agricultural inputs) was expected to lead to major food insecurity.

Because of the blockade, the cost of importing goods, particularly of grain certainly increased significantly in relation to the value of export goods and the relative changes in price were seen to be the major reason for food shortages rather than the decline in local production. The terms of trade for bullocks and other animals against wheat fell by some 60–85% from 1990 prices.

Household strategies to address the blockage and its effects on prices were to reduce livestock holdings thereby reducing dairying and wool-based handicraft production, reduce investment, reduce consumption of non-food items so that expenditure on grain became the major component of the expenditure budget, and to increase labour migration in order to gain access to additional sources of income.

Some households had of course prospered from the economic blockade and, building on a long history of regional trade and smuggling routes under conditions of insecurity, smuggling systems were extremely effective at getting key commodities across the blockage albeit at a price. However, it was primarily outside traders and donkey owners with appropriate connections to the Taliban who were able to cross the lines.

Despite the difficult economic conditions and unfavourable climatic conditions the predicted famine did not emerge, although the study in its investigation of coping strategies makes it clear that a whole range of complex strategies were deployed. While enabling survival, these coping strategies contributed to an overall impoverishment. They included drawing on social support mechanisms, accessing distress foods, asset disposal (largely of livestock), increasing indebtedness through informal credit and migration.

The strength of its study is this historical perspective combined with an analysis of the direct and collateral effects of war on households. Its focus on understanding coping mechanisms and using this understanding as a basis for programming is significant. Thus:

‘That the economic crises cum famine [sic] in 1997/98 did not include massively increased mortality rates or starvation is largely attributable to people’s successful use of “coping mechanisms”. In the face of the crisis, when their normal livelihood strategies proved inadequate, people resorted to alternative sources of income and food. Despite civil war conditions, a blockade and economic crises, absence of any effective government and an extremely limited international assistance operation, the population has survived. In 1997, it seemed perfectly reasonable to predict that an economic blockade, involving a virtual cessation of food supplies to an area that is already desperately poor, was bound to cause a high mortality famine. Instead, the effects have been absorbed as increasing “immiserisation”. As the area is likely to be exposed to similar crises in future, whether political-military or “natural”, one of the key issues in livelihood support strategies is how to strengthen (and avoid under-mining) these coping mechanisms’ (Semple, 1998: 74–75).

4.3 Livelihoods in Faryab

The third study was undertaken by this author (Pain, 2001) and the substance of the analysis and conclusions are described in more detail in a forthcoming paper. Here focus is on the underlying reasons for doing the study, the key lessons that can be drawn from it and the possible utilisation of its results.

Save the Children (US) (SC–US) has been working in Afghanistan since the early 1990s primarily in support of children and women in the areas of health, education, economic opportunities (microfinance, business-development services) and more recently in humanitarian responses (food security, children in crises). Since 1995 SC–US started a programme in northern Afghanistan implementing a Group Guaranteed Lending and Savings (GGLS) scheme that was eventually concentrated in Faryab province.

As a result of the drought in northern Afghanistan SC–US was increasingly being edged into greater engagement with food distribution in partnership with WFP and local NGOs. However the SC–US Pakistan and Afghanistan regional office felt that it had limited local experience in emergency/drought response and was keen that it should build emergency responses into a longer-term programming effort, notwithstanding the difficulties of obtaining longer-term funding. As a result of an untied grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, it felt able to fund a background study in order to provide insight into livelihood strategies in Faryab as a basis for identifying appropriate strategies and interventions for SC–US to support in improving the livelihoods of vulnerable families. The study was carried out during July 2001, concentrating on two districts in the province and on three village studies, selected on the basis of wealth contrasts, in each district.

Study methods focussed on a review of the secondary and project literature (and commendably the GGLS scheme was extremely well-documented), interviews with key informants mostly including retired teachers and traders, and particularly with carpet traders, together with group interviews at village level. These were supplemented with household-level interviews undertaken by surveyor teams (man and woman). All discussions used structured checklists around key livelihood issues and interviews were compiled in a daily diary.

An investigation of the historical economy of Faryab drew attention to both the location-specific nature of the war experience and how wider aspects of power and control had affected livelihoods in general. This included the phases of the war, the destructive effects of Soviet bombardment as well as the effect of blockades and insecurity on currency instability and inflation. Given the location of minority Pashtun settlements within the province, the movement in and out of these groups during various phases of the conflict was indicative of the differential vulnerability that particular ethnic groups experienced. Evidence was found on how previous agreements over water distribution between up- and downstream water users on the main Faryab river had been breached by local warlords during the period of General Dostum's rule, and more severely curtailed by new Pashtun settlements under the Taliban authorities. A time when the downstream users had the rights of use the new settlers dammed the Faryab river and used with lift irrigation pumps to melons for the market. Despite representations by people from Andkhoy (downstream) to the Taliban authorities for water-sharing agreements to be respected, no action was taken.

While history and location were found to be important variables accounting for household-specific strategies, the study showed that households historically had multiple sources of income. Asset holdings and livelihood strategies differed between richer and poorer households. Poorer households tended to have lower incomes but with a more diverse range of income sources. For some villages in northern Faryab a significant proportion of their income was derived from non-farm sources. In the past, poorer households also appeared to have drawn more on non-market exchanges (e.g., rights of gleaning) as a source of food.

An analysis of household coping (non-erosive of assets) and survival (erosive of assets) strategies showed that the full range of household assets (physical, financial, natural, human and social) had been drawn upon, although not necessarily exhausted. It is likely that remittance income had come to be a major source of household income. In at least one village mechanisms of solidarity¹⁰ in the face of adversity were clearly evident. Household strategies in terms of sequencing asset disposal, accessing other sources of income and shifting between coping and survival strategies over the three years of drought had differed significantly between richer and poorer households.

Set against this context was the implementation of the GGLS scheme. This project has been seen to be relatively successful in terms of disbursement and recovery of funds from its target group of disadvantaged women. In the words of a programme review (SC-US, 2000):

‘Overall the program has been able to maintain a high level of success for several reasons. In general, the program has demonstrated a high degree of flexibility in its model, enabling it to innovate in response to contextual changes. The model is also appropriate in the cultural context, transparent, and community based. With much effort invested in building community links and awareness, the program’s success is also due to a certain extent to the buy-in from relevant religious and social figures. The program has been aided by a detailed knowledge of the local economy, the micro-economics of its productive activities, traditional economic systems and traditional credit mechanisms. The loans have mainly supported traditional enterprises for which marketing and demand mechanisms already exist. Another strength of the program is that although it operates in an emergency context, it has adopted a non-relief nature. From the outset the program has put a strong emphasis on cost-recovery and long-term operational and institutional sustainability. Field level operational costs have been minimised through an efficient management structure, with an optimum loanee: personnel ratio. The program also has a mandatory savings component, with restricted access, allowing loanees to accumulate reserves for emergencies’ (SC-US, 2000: 3).

The GGLS scheme has been admirable for its ability to stay on the ground under extremely difficult conditions, maintaining flexibility and constantly re-inventing organisational methods, lending approaches and contacts with varying local authorities. It maintained its ability to use women in the field through utilisation of surveyor couples and careful negotiation with local authorities. Its emphasis on effectively distributing and recovering loans contributed towards a bias towards carpet production, the major skill and income source of women and for whom increased carpet production was the natural, if not only, choice. However a careful analysis of prices, costs of raw materials, carpet weaving volume and the movement of many households into carpet weaving as a coping strategy under drought, showed that the terms of trade for carpet production were moving quite quickly against producers. This was reinforced by the increasing control of the market exerted from Peshawar, Pakistan, a consequence of long-term structural changes in Afghanistan’s economy as a result of the war.

The GGLS scheme’s business model focused on the distribution and recovery of loans and did not address issues of prices and markets, or how these were set and controlled. A wider understanding of changing markets or power relations under conditions of chronic political instability compounded by drought might have lead to a somewhat different strategy that addresses both issues of markets and prices as well as the within-household consequences of women working harder under conditions of deteriorating terms of trade, in support of household economic activities.

It was also evident that there was little understanding of the role of carpet production in the household economies of different socio-economic groups and how this varied by location. The absence of household and livelihood analysis both at the outset of the project and also in the impact evaluation limited understanding of the extent to which the GGLS scheme had or had not contributed to household accumulation, risk spreading, coping and survival strategies.

¹⁰ A village meeting reported how they had not allowed a key individual to leave because he was so important in keeping the village together (Adam Pain, unpublished field notes, 2001).

5 Reflections on Frameworks for Livelihood Analysis

What lessons can be drawn from the livelihoods studies discussed in the previous section? There are several which can be grouped in terms of the interests, capacities and challenges to operational agencies, lessons learned in terms of livelihoods under conditions of chronic instability, and challenges posed to existing livelihood frameworks by their application in SCCPI.

5.1 The lessons for operational agencies

The first point that stands out from these studies is that none of them actually demanded a major outlay in terms of time or money. The review of the lessons to be learned from the opium eradication programme drew on operational experience and documentation (including evaluation) derived from the processes of implementation. The study in Hazarajat drew on the understanding and experience of one individual over a number of years but the fieldwork itself was carried out, with partner agencies, in a matter of weeks. The Faryab study was undertaken by someone who had no experience of either the agency or the region but was able to draw on good institutional memory, effective documentation and interested colleagues. Within the space of a month it was possible to put together an outline of a conceptual analysis as a basis for developing a programming response.

What stands out from the above is that each of the studies drew on embedded knowledge, an extremely rich resource possessed by many of the operational agencies in the field. What is impressive about most of the NGOs working in the field in Afghanistan is that they have built up (and appear not to give sufficient recognition to this fact) through long term engagements in specific localities both good understanding of the context (often through osmotic processes of absorption) and excellent relations with the community. For the Faryab study, as an outsider, this was an extraordinary piece of institutional capital on which to draw.

The critical gap appears to be the mental and physical space to draw on these resources and learn the lessons. The SC-US project had all the data on prices, on currency fluctuations, political history, and the dynamics of conflict but had not put it together to ask what it meant. Two issues arise from this.

The first is recognition that particularly under conditions of instability long-term engagement generates understanding that can be used. The extreme danger that Afghanistan faces now is that the multitude of agencies beginning to work in the country have no history of prior engagement, little understanding of context and are mainly driven by institutional mandates and funding imperatives. There are key strategic issues here about the way in which new agencies should be allowed to work in such contexts and what processes of institutional learning they should be required to go through before engagement at field level.

The second issue that needs to be dealt with is why agencies who have been working in the field have not taken the key step from building analysis with the material that they have accumulated both accidentally and systematically into understanding and programme development. Part of the answer is that the collection of the analytical building blocks has been accidental – dependent on interested, capable and motivated individuals and long engagement with project implementation. Learning has not been a systematic and required component of practice. This has been reinforced both by funding modalities that have given little space for such activities and by institutional cultures of delivery that have arisen partly in response to this, and that is more than the need to do it. The key challenge therefore is to develop a culture of enquiry, which requires attention to both building capacity and internal structures within implementing agencies and funding regimes together with the modalities to support it.

It must be said that one of the limitations of the livelihood case-study material is that one cannot point clearly at this stage to the effects of that understanding being reflected in changed practice. The likely practical implication, if the livelihood understanding is carried through, is that a more complex and more contingent programme of interventions would arise. In the case of opium it would appear that the wider political agenda concerned with its eradication in the context of Afghanistan (and its unfair mental association with the Taliban) is likely to preclude the learning of lessons. The issue of licit/illicit activities is returned to below as it represents a challenge to the normative livelihoods framework. For Hazarajat the programming outcomes are unknown, but UN agencies have not generally been engaged long-term in specific field locations. Again it is possible, but again unknown, that Oxfam with long-term experience of working in Hazarajat may have absorbed the lessons. For SC–US the events of 11 September 2001 overtook an immediate response to the study, but at the time of writing a follow-up to build livelihood understanding into programming is likely to go ahead.

5.2 Lessons from the understanding of livelihoods

There are of course many specific lessons to be learned about livelihoods in the particular context within which they were studied. Many of these support the more general picture presented earlier about rural not being necessarily agricultural, of increasingly diversified livelihoods as ex-post coping strategies are deepened because of the riskiness of the economic environment, of issues of insecurity and complex power relations being confounded with environmental shocks, and about differentiated strategies between different socio-economic groups, based on differential ownership of assets. These are all challenges to formulaic programming conventions.

There are however a number of more general and intriguing issues that raise questions with respect to normative models (of livelihoods) and to the understanding of livelihoods under conditions of instability. They cannot all be addressed here in detail (and nor, it must be admitted, are these issues fully thought through or understood). The discussion looks briefly at four of these – firstly the puzzle as to why matters are not worse in Afghanistan and linked to this issues of local solidarities and what these explain about resilience; secondly the challenge of illicit activities; thirdly the highly dynamic nature of conflict and power relations; and fourthly developing understanding of vulnerabilities.

5.2.1 *Why are matters not worse in Afghanistan?*

As Semple in his study of Hazarajat stated ‘The robustness of the people of the area in surviving shortages continues to puzzle’. As a newcomer to Afghanistan at the beginning of 2001, and fresh from work in Ethiopia, and given all that had been said about the war and drought, the levels of destitution and impoverishment that had been seen by the writer in both Ethiopia and earlier in places in northern India were simply not to be observed in Afghanistan. The terms of reference for a recent study on vulnerability in Afghanistan basically raised the same question (Lautze et al., 2002).¹¹

‘Given the reports on the drought and food security situation from international organisations and from NGOs working in Afghanistan, it seemed evident that a famine was imminent. So far there has not been the level of malnutrition that would be expected from the reports last year’ (Lautze et al., 2002: 37).

¹¹ The page number is quoted for the draft (February 2002) report; the terms of reference are not included in the final version of the report, for which the reference is cited.

What do these observations tell us? The first answer that comes to mind is that outside observers have simply got it wrong. A crisis mentality has gripped the development community as a result of the drought and particularly since 11 September 2001 and gross and inaccurate assumptions have been made about connections between drought, conflict and food insecurity. Indeed this may be part of the answer. A careful reading of the WFP food security assessment for 2001 makes it clear that the effects of drought have been patchy with some districts on aggregate being in grain surplus while others, particularly in the north-west, being notably grain-deficient.

However, the conclusions of Lautze et al. (2002) are much more pessimistic and argue that there are deep and multiple vulnerabilities that need to be addressed. The Lautze study is challenging and has been widely debated both with respect to method, evidence and conclusions. The conclusions do not exclude the possibility that given what has happened things could have been worse.

Even in those areas where production had completely collapsed and despite the deployment of some fairly severe coping and survival strategies households were hanging on (Pain, 2001). Markets had not failed and demand had not collapsed. Part of the answer would appear to come from the fact that social mechanisms of solidarity and resilience are such that within-community distributional mechanisms allow households to hold together much longer than would appear possible given their asset base. There are clearly aspects to resilience – it is deeper and more effective than one might imagine – that we do not understand. It is possible, but this is entirely speculative although consistent with Semple's observations, that conflict has served to maintain and even deepen social ties. Obviously this is not true not for all or everywhere, but if the parallel between pre-colonial India and the capacity of rural communities then to withstand drought are drawn (see Davis, 2001) one might conclude that it is the very failure of the state and the maintenance of local ties that has allowed households to survive so well.

There are clearly major challenges to understanding and connections between vulnerability and social structures to be investigated, not least if humanitarian interventions are to be supportive of existing coping strategies.

5.2.2 The challenge of 'illicit' activities

Why is growing opium to give its cultivators access to land, and therefore the means to access credit and food for survival an illicit activity? When smuggling of goods across economic blockages as in Hazarajat or across the Pakistan border is the only means by which an individual can gain profit or returns, at what point does that become an illegal rather than a justifiable strategy for dealing with risk? In the liberal economy that has characterised Afghanistan under the Taliban the poor have had to find diverse ways in order to cope. It is not clear how well these strategies are understood and what the implications of reconstruction and attempts by an emerging state to gain control will be on the deployment of these strategies. Moreover, under conditions of instability where poor people find opportunities that work, what is the tactical justification that would seek to ignore or deny them? The livelihood framework has not been used to systematically understand these dimensions of livelihood strategies. Particular problems may exist in the collection of data on these practices.

5.2.3 The dynamic nature of conflict and power relations

The Hazarajat and Faryab studies on livelihoods drew out just how complex the issues of conflict and power in SCCPIs are, and how difficult it is to generalise. In Hazarajat, for example, once the Taliban took the area and the economic blockage was lifted leading to a rapid fall in grain prices, a new threat emerged. This was because as the Taliban returned so did the *kuchis* to reclaim access to what they perceived as their land, and to claim rent that had not been paid during the period of their absence!

Besides grappling with the decision as to when an event ceases to become a ‘shock’ and mutates into a ‘trend’ before evolving into a ‘norm’, there seems to be little systematic way in which effects at the macro and meso levels can be traced down to their consequences at the micro level, partly because there is often no clear causal set of connections. The effects and reasons for the declining terms of trade for carpets, for example, are not simply explained even though the effects are observable. Macro theory on political economy and war is not very helpful in understanding consequences at micro level although clearly an important consideration.

5.2.4 Developing understanding of vulnerabilities

The fourth issue that emerges, and in a sense encapsulates many of the dimensions of the three earlier issues, is that of understanding vulnerabilities. In practice the notion of vulnerability has been poorly conceptualised and understood in Afghanistan and has been treated almost as a complete externality. Households and individuals have simply been described as ‘vulnerable’, and the appropriate intervention response seen to be the provision of more food.

Following Devereux (2001) vulnerabilities need to be broken down into a clear understanding of threats (those dimensions of the external environment that make people feel vulnerable), a definition of which segment of the population is potentially exposed to those threats and, within that segment of the population, which households or individuals are particularly susceptible as a result of that exposure and why.

Thus, in the case of the blocking of water in the upper reaches of the Faryab river, the threat of no water exposed the whole of the downstream population. The most susceptible part of that population is those individuals who are dependent on shallow wells adjacent to the riverbed, rather than those with access to deeper wells and lift pumps. Susceptibilities may be mitigated by claims determined by social relations to access that water and confounded by the effects of deeper wells lowering the water table out of the reach of shallower wells.

What is clear for Afghanistan is that the threats are multiple and complex and that they operate at various levels. Changing power relations between the Northern Alliance and the Taliban in part explain the capacity of Pashtun settlement to exert control over water. But this is within a context of overall shortage of water under drought, compounded by declining terms of trade for carpets, which have reduced other economic options.

5.3 Challenges posed to existing livelihood frameworks by their application in SCCPI

This discussion has identified issues of vulnerability, the complex nature of threats (arising from insecurity and changing power relations), the dissolution of boundaries between licit and illicit activities, and the need to understand sources of resilience as key areas in relation to the understanding of livelihood strategies in Afghanistan. While all are components of the livelihood framework these are not necessarily the elements that are best conceptualised or handled in terms of analytical methods and further work will be needed to build understanding on these dimensions.

Building on the work of Young et al. (2002), Pain and Lautze (2002) have argued that the Department for International Development (DFID) sustainable livelihood framework has inherent conceptual flaws (leading to weaknesses in implementation) in how it addresses vulnerability. The sustainable livelihoods framework treats vulnerability as an externality to which the programming response is to build resilience. It denies the relation between human agency and vulnerability under

conditions of political instability (and arguably under developmental contexts as well) where issues of power and violence are central in creating vulnerabilities. Pain and Lautze (2002) conclude:

‘It is important to adapt the sustainable livelihoods framework so that both policies, institutions and processes, as well as livelihood outcomes, be shown to generate *either* increased resilience *or* heightened vulnerability, depending on the way the war economy is structured or the manner in which power is distributed and exploited’ (Pain and Lautze, 2002: 25).

In programming terms this means that agencies need to respond to both building resilience and addressing risk, and recognise that building resilience (and household assets) can actually increase the vulnerability of households.¹²

Finally, it is clear that humanitarian practice in Afghanistan has not systematically set about ‘intelligent’ programming in terms of addressing specific, contingent and contextual vulnerabilities, developing strategies to address particular threats, identifying and addressing the needs of susceptible households and building understanding and developing strategies (licit or not) that both build resilience and reduce risk.

¹² An old woman asked in northern Afghanistan as to how she used the free food that had been distributed replied ‘First you disarm the warlords, then you come and ask me how I used the food’ M. Ali (personal communication).

6 An Approach to Building a Livelihood Monitoring System

The evidence from the case studies of livelihood analysis in Afghanistan presented in section 4 supports the argument made in earlier parts of this paper that past programming and interventions practices through being formulaic, delivery-driven and with limited understanding of context are unlikely to have had the expected impacts. Whether they have been harmful, or have reinforced exploitative power relations is unknown, although in the case of the opium control interventions it is clear that richer households have benefited substantially more than poorer ones (who may well have been deprived of alternative forms of access to credit or land for food production although this is not reported). There is some evidence that measures taken in response to the drought through drilling new and deeper wells and supporting the installation of private water pumps may have contributed to growing inequalities in terms of access to water, and have therefore increased vulnerabilities of particular sections of the community (Lautze et al., 2002).

It is clear that better understanding of livelihoods could lead to better analysis and programme design that is more responsive to opportunities and more focussed on addressing actual vulnerabilities and threats faced by communities. But will it and to what extent will the circumstances of an environment of insecurity and extreme uncertainty, the capacities of agencies working in the field, the reconstruction process peopled by a multiplicity of agencies, funding regimes and interests, and an emerging state structure allow it? Answers cannot be provided to all these dimensions but we conclude this paper by drawing together some of the key issues that must be addressed.

6.1 The need for better understanding

The first point that must be made and it should be clear from this paper, is that there is an absolute need to have a better understanding of how livelihoods are constructed, where the vulnerabilities are and for whom, what interventions work where and why, and what the impacts of such interventions are. Detailed knowledge of Afghanistan is either stuck in stereotyped misconceptions or a reflection of normative models of how things should be created by external agencies and institutions. These have to change.

6.2 The challenges to building better understanding

There are several major challenges to building this understanding. Prior to 11 September the Afghanistan aid landscape was characterised by a mosaic of independent actors, primarily NGOs operating on a relatively local scale, with a fairly restricted mandate and time horizon and with accountability largely determined by funding sources, related to donor agendas. Despite the best intentions of the Strategic Framework, the lack of commonality of methods and procedures severely limited understanding of the broader effects of actions and what could be learned from best practice. Coordination, where it occurred, consisted largely of sharing information about who was doing what and where and in part reflected the desire of agencies to protect spheres of action and interest. Capacity building as an objective was limited but there are examples such as the work of Norwegian Church Aid who over the years invested heavily in developing capacity in Afghan NGOs, and the work of the Ecumenical Office in Herat that functioned in a similar way.

The major strength of the agencies that worked on the ground prior to 11 September was their long experience and knowledge of the localities in which they worked. What has changed since 11 September is the scale of funding and the expansion in the number of agencies working on the

ground, many of them new and with little experience or understanding of Afghanistan. In addition the level of funding and scale of operation of most of the UN agencies has created more aggressive and territorial agendas. The arrival of UN agencies, international financial organisations and foreign military forces in Kabul has driven house rentals rapidly upwards, forcing some NGOs out of offices that they have had for years to the periphery of the city. The need to cooperate and coordinate has declined even further to the extent that there are cases of international agencies creaming off the best staff from the NGOs by offering better terms and conditions. In addition, there is an emerging central authority attempting to build lines of authority and control. There are then a complex of conditions that are both reinforcing centrifugal tendencies of agencies away from coordination and cooperation while compelling greater engagement and sharing.

The task that the AREU faces in attempting to build livelihood understanding and from this, monitoring systems across agencies working at the field level is enormous. It had already started on a wide process of discussion and exploration of what individual agencies were doing and where they were moving prior to 11 September, in an attempt to build coalitions of interest and joint action. It took the view that the function of the AREU was not to independently build its own monitoring capacity, but to work through well-established NGOs and other interested agencies in an attempt to build a minimum commonality of method, so that the interests of agencies the broader agenda of the AREU and could be served. That remains the strategy, not least because it is the AREU's view that it will be the NGOs and particularly the Afghan NGOs in the short- to medium-term who will effectively provide the field-level implementation and presence, whatever government structures and staffing appear at the provincial and district level. Through building NGO capacity the AREU also has the opportunity to build a constituency in support of its agenda and understanding. This is also a strategic decision in that if a political settlement fails to stick and Afghanistan returns to the warring factions of the early 1990s, then the NGOs will still be there on the ground.

There are positive institutional developments. Support for livelihoods appears to be a key objective of many policies and programmes, including the National Development Framework (Afghan Assistance Coordination Authority, 2002). A 'Livelihoods based vulnerability cell' is now being established with the Ministry of Rural Reconstruction and Development. The European Commission (EC) is in the process of commissioning a series of livelihood- based programmes through NGOs, and the AREU is likely to be closely involved in the building of methods and procedures. Livelihoods are very much on the agenda, even if the issues of poverty appear to be rather less specifically addressed.

However, there are concerns. No mechanisms have yet been established to specifically incorporate these overarching livelihood goals into more specific sector or programme objectives (Pain and Lautze, 2002). A key sector strategy in Natural Resources and Agriculture has been drafted. Despite its stated goals of seeking to improve rural livelihoods, its sub-sector objectives are conspicuously silent on livelihood issues and focus on classic sub-sectoral outputs (Pain and Lautze, 2002: 41–45), revealing substantial weaknesses in the current policy making processes. Related to this it is clear that external influences, most notably the 'Washington consensus' (Harriss, 2002: 77), on policy are strong and these tend to underplay the political nature of development processes. This does not bode well for informed understanding and response to vulnerabilities. There are clearly going to be challenges to engagement in policy processes if livelihood and poverty objectives are to be addressed (Pain and Lautze, 2002).

6.3 Developing a livelihood monitoring system

Perhaps at a somewhat late stage in this paper, the case should be made for why a livelihood monitoring system needs to be established and what its components should be. In part the answer is that it is the mandate of the AREU to generate understanding of the effects of the overall aid effort although AREU will develop close collaboration with both the emerging central authority and other information management and coordination structures of the UN (e.g., the Afghanistan Information Management System, AIMS)

The argument prior to 11 September was that the scale of aid intervention and its potential impact had to be seen in context. Annual aid then was valued at some US\$300 million with an estimated unofficial trade at some US\$2.5 billion (although much of this was in transit trade and was of little benefit to most Afghans) and levels of remittance from the Afghan diaspora both from Pakistan and further afield were also significant. The impact of aid at the household level had therefore to be assessed in relation to other financial flows, which could contribute to consumption expenditure and asset investment or depletion.

The case was made that there was a need for a monitoring system that would provide an understanding of what was happening to households and where and how humanitarian interventions were contributing positively (by promoting or at least reducing the rate of erosion of household assets). It was envisaged that a combination of a core framework of a household-asset tracking system working with a structured sample of a cohort of households that could be returned to, would be *combined and underpinned* by more qualitative contextual but systematic observations. It was strongly felt that a cohort system would provide a much richer and potentially more reliable source of programme-relevant understanding and longitudinal tracking, than random, sample-based surveys.

That remains the model on which the system will be built, with additional modular components in relation to particular sectors that could be added according to agency interest and competences. One obviously would hope that monitoring household assets could be used equally as an indicator of the extent to which household are able to ‘succeed’ in the particular contexts (defined by the interplay of micro, meso and macro) in which they are situated. This could also link into any systematic system of poverty monitoring that might be established.

There is, of course, a tension. If anything this paper has emphasised the importance of context to understanding. The moment one moves into attempting to build ‘consistency of practices in learning and monitoring’ (see section 1) then a more rigid and formulaic set of methods is implied. There clearly needs to be a balance between consistency across contexts to meet regional and national needs where robust comparative data is required, and context specific qualitative information to meet locality-specific programming.

The limitations of past programming and design have already been commented on. There have been severe disconnects between context, analysis, strategy and programming, all of which have been poorly characterised and elaborated. The understanding of locality with respect to villages, characteristics of different households and the interplay of micro, meso and macro political, institutional and economic issues have been missing. The variation in livelihood strategies between different households and social actors has rarely been analysed. There has been therefore little understanding to inform the development of strategies, or to explore diversified initiatives, interventions and institutional approaches. Programming has rarely been systematically built on analysis and feedback. Where baseline studies were implemented, the methods used and results presented restricted the use of such studies both for comparative purposes and for within-site comparisons over time.

There was a clear need to develop more appropriate tools to support programming. The project therefore aimed to build systematic quality livelihood baseline data at a local and national level and by so doing to support improvements in programming practice. By learning more about context and how different sorts of households in contrasting locations managed to cope and survive, and where and how they found opportunities to create livelihoods, and to maintain or even build on asset bases were programming opportunities. There was a need to know not only what led to displacement, but also what the social and economic relationships are between those displaced and those who remain, and between those who return and their host communities. There was a need to understand how and the extent to which, both humanitarian and development interventions had helped maintain or expand household assets and opportunities, how this related to patterns of displacement and return, and how returns can be made more viable. There was a need to learn from 'best practice' in relation to interventions and impact and to consider more systematically issues of scale and how village-level interventions that work can be scaled up cost-effectively to work at a broader level. And, it must be emphasised, to create an overall balance between building understanding and improving delivery.

Writing now, none of those dimensions have essentially changed. Pre-11 September when the drafting of this paper started it was anticipated that it would be possible to elaborate clearly exactly how the monitoring system would be built up, what its methods would be, and how it would be implemented. The programme would have been very much field-based. Finalising this paper in 2002 it is much more difficult to be certain how matters will work out. There are two related issues here.

The first pertains to the general role and position of the AREU and the need for its engagement in, and response to, national-level policy processes. These would tend to emphasise more an advocacy and support role working with the multiplicities of the livelihood-related cell, units, research and surveillance projects that seem to be popping up. However advocacy without field-based experience and evidence is an empty process. The second issue is to build field-level understanding and processes. It is hoped that both of these issues will be addressed through selective field engagement under a project funded by the EC for an initial 18-month period.

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