

Researching livelihoods and  
services affected by conflict

# Life in the times of ‘late development’:

## Livelihood trajectories in Afghanistan, 2002-2016

Working paper 50

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February 2017



# About us

Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium (SLRC) aims to generate a stronger evidence base on how people make a living, educate their children, deal with illness and access other basic services in conflict-affected situations (CAS). Providing better access to basic services, social protection and support to livelihoods matters for the human welfare of people affected by conflict, the achievement of development targets such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and international efforts at peace- and state-building.

At the centre of SLRC's research are three core themes, developed over the course of an intensive one-year inception phase:

- State legitimacy: experiences, perceptions and expectations of the state and local governance in conflict-affected situations
- State capacity: building effective states that deliver services and social protection in conflict-affected situations
- Livelihood trajectories and economic activity under conflict

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Front cover photo: Potato farmers working in Bamyan, Afghanistan, © Asian Development Bank, CC2.0

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# Acknowledgements

This paper has multiple debts that stretch across the three rounds of study on the trajectories of rural households in Afghanistan since 2002. It acknowledges the contribution and memory of Paula Kantor and her significant role in the second round in 2008–10. The support and contribution of the third round team, Giulia Minoia, Ashley Jackson, Ihsanullah Ghafoori, Wamiquillah Mumtaz, Massouda Kohistani, and Shukria Azadmanesh has been greatly appreciated.

We appreciate the comments of the external reviewers on this paper.

Above all we owe a debt to our informants who have patiently and generously given their time for the study.

# Abbreviations and acronyms

|      |  |
|------|--|
| ALT  | Afghanistan Livelihood Trajectories        |
| ASR  | Agricultural Sector Review                 |
| CDC  | Community Development Council              |
| EU   | European Union                             |
| NGO  | Non-Governmental Organisation              |
| NRVA | National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment |

# Executive summary

Since 2002, over three rounds of study, the fortunes of a small panel of rural case households in diverse locations in Afghanistan have been tracked over time. The evidence that has been collected offers a unique, deep and longitudinal insight into rural people's lives in Afghanistan and challenges many of the normative assumptions that have driven policy-making in the rural sector.

The case households come from villages with distinctive economies and institutional structures. This reflects agro-ecology and how the ownership of irrigated land is distributed. Generalising, higher altitude villages with less irrigated land tend to be grain deficit villages and have relatively small inequalities in land ownership. In contrast, villages in the lowlands or plains, particularly in the major irrigated areas, have major inequalities in land ownership with significant populations of landless households. These structural differences in land ownership are reflected in village economies and influence the opportunities for households to find farm and village based work and the degree to which village institutions function for the common good.

Over the 14-year period since the panel was established in 2002, a new generation has come of age. Households have aged, in some cases the older generation has died, daughters have married out and sons have brought wives into the household. Household dependency ratios have changed and where parents have died land has been subdivided, reducing farm sizes. Idiosyncratic events such as marriage and deaths, illnesses and other events have all placed demands that have to be met from household resources that cumulatively have had systemic effects on household assets.

The broader economic environment within which households have sought to make a living has for many been deeply hostile and volatile. On the positive side, the level of aid funding and military expenditure fuelled the growth of a service economy that had trickle-down benefits for those who sought work in its urban margins but by 2015 those opportunities had all but disappeared. The rise of the opium poppy cultivation from 2003 onwards drove the growth of a rural economy in many parts of Afghanistan. Its gradual suppression and corralling into the areas of greatest physical insecurity reduced farm labour opportunities. As insecurity in recent years has become more widespread, opium poppy cultivation has also gradually returned, raising rural labour wage rates.

The health of the rural economy remains poor. Most of the case households find themselves no better off now than they were in 2002 and in some instances they are worse off. Remittance income has become increasingly important and in some villages there has been more permanent outmigration.

Rural land and labour relations are not largely governed by market relations. Access to land is accounted for much more by patron-client relationships and non-contractual obligations than market forces. This explains why, on the whole, processes of land accumulation and dispossession have not taken place. Wages, often paid in kind rather than cash, are determined more by custom and segmented by gender, locality and age. Thus it is social relationships rather than market relations based on transaction costs and profit maximising that characterise the nature of exchange and economic behaviour. This heavily socially embedded economy offers relative security under conditions of conflict and this may in part explain its persistence.

For many there is no future in agriculture. They remain in rural areas for access to its distributional economy secured through the maintenance of joint households but derive their limited means of sustenance from outside it. It is time to rethink the old policy narrative of agricultural transformation and evolutionary structural change in Afghanistan. The challenge is what to do to help Afghanistan's 'surplus' rural population escape the rural poverty trap. A start would be to invest in the distributional economy through direct forms of social assistance or cash transfers and employment schemes. On the productive side much greater attention is needed to achieving food security both in terms of supply and access. This is not to reject the opportunities of market-oriented agriculture where it is appropriate, but

a much more measured approach to market development and the realisation of its limits, particularly in relation to employment generation is needed.



# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Background

It is perhaps difficult now to remember the optimism, hope and the sense of new beginnings that characterised Afghanistan in early 2002. Life post-Taliban was going to be different as the international community committed itself to rebuild Afghanistan into a democratic, modern prosperous society. Many hundreds of thousands of refugees began to return to the country from Pakistan and Iran. Sector reviews, strategic plans and national priority programmes were crafted to chart the way forward. Funds were committed, programmes and projects designed and rolled out in a fiesta of acronyms that now defy memory and translation. All were designed to put Afghanistan, as a late developer (Losch *et al.* 2012), on the path of economic structural transformation that other countries historically had followed in their development (World Bank 2009).

The period between 2002 and 2007 left a trail of policy documents prepared by international organisations, government and line ministries that consistently put agriculture at the centre of efforts to rebuild Afghanistan's economy (Zezo and Migotto 2007). All shared a vision of agriculture as the engine of growth for Afghanistan that would promote its economic development, provide the employment that was needed and reduce poverty. For all, a core assumption was that agriculture was the main source of livelihoods for a majority of the population. That vision has endured, as reflected in the 2009 National Agricultural Development Framework (MAIL 2009: 2):

*When the Afghan economy is overwhelmingly agricultural, agriculture is the dominant factor in the economy, in food security, livelihoods, sustainable natural resources and national security. Agriculture will determine whether Afghanistan will succeed or fail.*

But by 2015 poverty rates were similar to those of 2002 and an estimated 40% of the population remained below the poverty line (World Bank 2015). Afghanistan's economy was in deep trouble, scarcely registering positive growth following the international military drawdown and the pricking of the bubble of the service and contractor economy that had been created by military expenditure. Unemployment has risen from an estimated 9.3% in 2011–12 to 24%, and some 40% of the working population (and nearly 50% of women) are underemployed (World Bank 2015). Pakistan is actively pressurising registered and unregistered refugees who have been living in Pakistan for decades to return to Afghanistan and in early September 2016 some 5000 a day were returning home (International Crisis Group 2016). Not surprisingly, many younger Afghans are trying to leave and in 2015, 178,000 applied for asylum in European Union (EU) member states, around 14% of all EU asylum seekers (Eurostat 2016) at a time of deep hostility within the EU to such movement. Moreover the youthful age structure of Afghanistan's population, with some 47% of its estimated population of 32.5 million aged under 15, generating some half a million new job seekers each year, compounds the challenges that the country faces.

As the recent Agriculture Sector Review (ASR – World Bank 2014a) tacitly admits in its report title – *Revitalising Agriculture for Economic Growth, Job Creation and Food Security* – agriculture's contribution to employment and wellbeing has fallen far short of expectations.

But in common with the orientation of most agricultural and rural policy outputs in Afghanistan, the ASR's perspective is to the future with little retrospective analysis of why after 15 years we are back at the drawing board making the same claims and seeking the same means to realise the claimed potential for agriculture which it has manifestly failed to deliver on. What is new this time? In fact, very little, and the generalised model of agrarian transformation and 'higher yields in agriculture, access to non-farm rural income-earning activities, migration of family members to cities and transition to wage

employment' are again seen as the route to prosperity for Afghanistan's rural population (World Bank 2015: 1).

In early October 2016, in yet another round of talks about the future, Afghanistan's international donors met with the Kabul government in Brussels, hosted by the European Union. The policy document tabled by the Kabul Government, the Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework, 2017 to 2012 (IRoA 2016), in line with the trail of policy documents since the National Development Framework of 2002 was future positive with visions and ambitions for technocratic action. But again there is little retrospective analysis let alone tactical response to address the challenges that are still with us, of an agricultural sector that has refused to grow (except where it should not, with opium poppy), jobs that have not been created, corruption that has not been subdued and security not achieved, let alone a failed political settlement.

## 1.2 Livelihood trajectories in Afghanistan

What can we learn about the current conjuncture from the trajectories of Afghan households during these last 15 years, a period of almost a generation? What has contributed to or undermined their attempts to seek a life and secure their livelihoods? To what extent are the grim national statistics consistent with household specific experience? And where such trajectories depart partially or significantly, positively or negatively from the national trend, what might this tell us? Is this because interventions or markets have contributed to or failed to address their desire to make a secure living, an ambition which is undoubtedly there, or have they been irrelevant or even harmful to the best efforts of individuals and households? And if some have prospered and others have not, or have suffered a decline, why might this be so?

These are the questions that this paper addresses. It draws primarily on three studies undertaken between 2014 and 2016 of livelihood trajectories of case households in the provinces of Herat, Kandahar and Sar-i-Pul (Huot et al. 2016; Pain et al. 2016 and Huot and Pain 2017). They comprise the third round of a longer-term panel study, the Afghanistan Livelihood Trajectories study (ALT), tracking the fortunes of Afghan case rural households. The ALT panel was established in 2003 and a second round was carried out in 2009 and 2010 (Kantor and Pain 2011).<sup>1</sup> The ALT studies offer a unique, deep and longitudinal insight into rural people's lives in Afghanistan and a body of evidence that, as will be seen, challenges many of the normative assumptions that have driven policy making in the rural sector. The third round with European Commission funding has been part of a broader cross-country research programme on building understanding of livelihoods under conditions of insecurity undertaken by the Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium (SLRC).

Evidence from the first round of research in 2002 and 2003 called into question assumptions that rural Afghans rely on agriculture as their primary source of income, a policy assumption that still finds echoes in current agricultural policy documents (World Bank 2014a). The research found (Grace and Pain 2004: 1) that most households were involved in a combination of farm and non-farm activities. Of the non-farm activities, labour migration to Iran was particularly important. Significant variability was also found between villages in terms of access to education, health, and off-farm<sup>2</sup> labour opportunities.

In 2008 a second round of the study revisited a selection of the original sites and households to trace what had happened to the panel households under variable but continuing conditions of insecurity. Based on the evidence from 64 households from eight villages in Badakhshan, Kandahar and Sar-i-Pul (Kantor and Pain 2011), it found that while there were improvements in access to basic services, livelihood security had declined for the majority. Due to drought, the ban on opium poppy cultivation and the global rise in food prices, there had been decreases in agricultural production and food security

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<sup>1</sup> See Huot and Pain (2016) for a more detailed background to this study

<sup>2</sup> The distinction is made between farm income, off-farm income and non-farm income.

had declined. Households had responded by intensifying the search for non-farm employment, saturating an already crowded labour market and so depressing wages. Dependence on relatives and social networks to provide access to employment, assistance and credit increased. The 2008 study also drew attention to the significant variability in village contexts and the need to understand this better (Pain and Kantor 2010). It pointed out the significant role of social relationships in providing livelihood security (Kantor and Pain 2010). It observed that these relationships were variable in quality, offering differing levels of privilege, power, obligation and reciprocity (Kantor and Pain 2012), reflecting patterns of inequality rooted in the structure of Afghan society.

In contrast to the two earlier rounds, the investigations of the third round of ALT have been nested, in order to capture the scalar dimension of livelihoods (Scoones 2009), within studies of wider institutional dynamics which have separately examined the performance of village institutions (see Pain 2016) and the navigation of economic life. These have included investigations of the street vendor market of Kandahar (Minoia and Pain 2015), of saffron production in Herat (Minoia and Pain 2016) and the workings of the onion market in Nangarhar (Minoia *et al.* 2014). In turn, these market investigations have been linked to studies of provincial-level political dynamics in Nangarhar (Jackson 2014), Kandahar (Jackson 2015) and more generally (Jackson 2016).

Afghanistan has long had a market economy with surplus traded and exchanged between the hills and plains and labour migrations from the hills undertaken to secure grain supplies. Key commodities such as karakul skins, fruits and nuts have been part of a significant export economy and crops such as cotton have been grown for the market. For most, however, a subsistence economy has characterised their life and market engagement had not been compulsive. Capitalist relations driven by technical efficiency, competition and profit have not primarily structured rural relations. Land is of course individually owned and is bought and sold as has been labour. But both land and particularly labour are far from being fully commoditised, as we shall see, and the extent of sharecropping and payment in kind rather than cash in rural Afghanistan points to the significance of social rather than market relationships in gaining access to land and livelihood security.

One might read into the dynamics of opium poppy cultivation over the last decade as evidence of the deeper commoditisation or penetration of market relations of rural Afghanistan. However the dynamism of opium poppy cultivation tells us more about the relative isolation of marginal places and the particular needs of rural households for cash given the lack of other opportunities. While the spread of opium cultivation did lead to various forms of indebtedness, particularly in its early stages (Pain 2008) it did not lead to deep structural changes in land ownership patterns or higher degrees of commodification in the rural economy. It did however result in improved wage rates (Pain 2008) and, as we shall see, has done so again in Sar-i-Pul in 2016.

Thus if we are to examine the nature of change in rural livelihoods since 2002 using an analytical approach that simply focuses on the individual household, changes in its assets, income composition and activities, prioritising the agency of individuals and working with normative assumptions of what livelihood and agrarian transitions should be, we are not likely to come very far in understanding the nature of change over these last 15 years, how and why households have got to where they are now and what this might mean for their future. Such a pared down perspective on understanding livelihoods (Scoones 2015) offers us little appreciation of the structural constraints or the contextual specificities within which livelihoods have been constructed and developed. Not only do we need to bring a relational perspective into the analytical lens but an account is also needed of the scalar dimensions of context and the influence of meso and macro level processes on village context and household practices and the dynamics of change.

This paper thus draws on the extended livelihoods approach offered by Scoones (2015: 82), drawing on Bernstein (2010) and seeks to answer the following questions in its exploration of the livelihoods of its household case studies:

- Questions concerning the ownership of livelihood resources – who owns or has access to what?
- Questions concerning the social and gendered divisions of labour – who does what?
- Questions concerning income and asset changes of households over time and how they vary between households – who gets what?
- Questions concerning patterns of consumption, social reproduction, savings and investments over time and how these are achieved – what do they do with it?
- Questions concerning changing social relationships, institutions, forms of domination and control and relations between Afghan rural people and the Afghan state – how do social classes and groups in society and within the state interact with each other?

In asking these questions the paper deliberately departs from the technocratic practices designed to build democracy as seen in the National Solidarity Programme model, the proposed Citizen’s Charter (Pain 2016) and wider democracy programming in Afghanistan (Coburn and Larson 2014). As will become clear, conflict, argument, dissent and challenge – a core of what Mouffe (2005) calls ‘the political’ – are central to the analysis of change offered here and entirely appropriate to the deeply ‘political’ and power-laden context within which households lead their lives. While ‘loyalty’, ‘voice’ and ‘exit’ (Hirschman 1970) – or living with, protesting or getting out of hostile or oppressive conditions – might be seen as the options that are available for households to make, such an agentic and choice-laden terminology does not capture the structural constraints within which most households live their lives. Given the risks and uncertainties that they face, they need to perform a fine balance between achieving some degree of autonomy and gaining security: for many there is a sharp discount on the future in order to survive in the present (Wood 2003).

In seeking answers to the above specific questions, this paper seeks to contribute to the broader SLRC questions of ‘what do livelihood trajectories in conflict-affected situations tell us about the role of governments, aid agencies, markets and the private sector in enabling people to make a secure living?’

The paper proceeds (Section 2) with an account of the evidence base and its evolution and addresses some of the methodological challenges of panel studies. Section 3 lays out the core findings exploring the dynamics of change, its multi-scalar nature and the centrality of power in understanding opportunities and constraints. The fourth section summarises the findings, discussing the issue of surplus population and the persistence of agrarian identities and agricultural development models. The final section focuses on the policy implications, challenging the agrarian model and drawing on comparative evidence suggesting alternative possibilities. It also returns to questions of method and approach in undertaking this research and what a panel approach offers in contrast to other approaches to evidence collection.

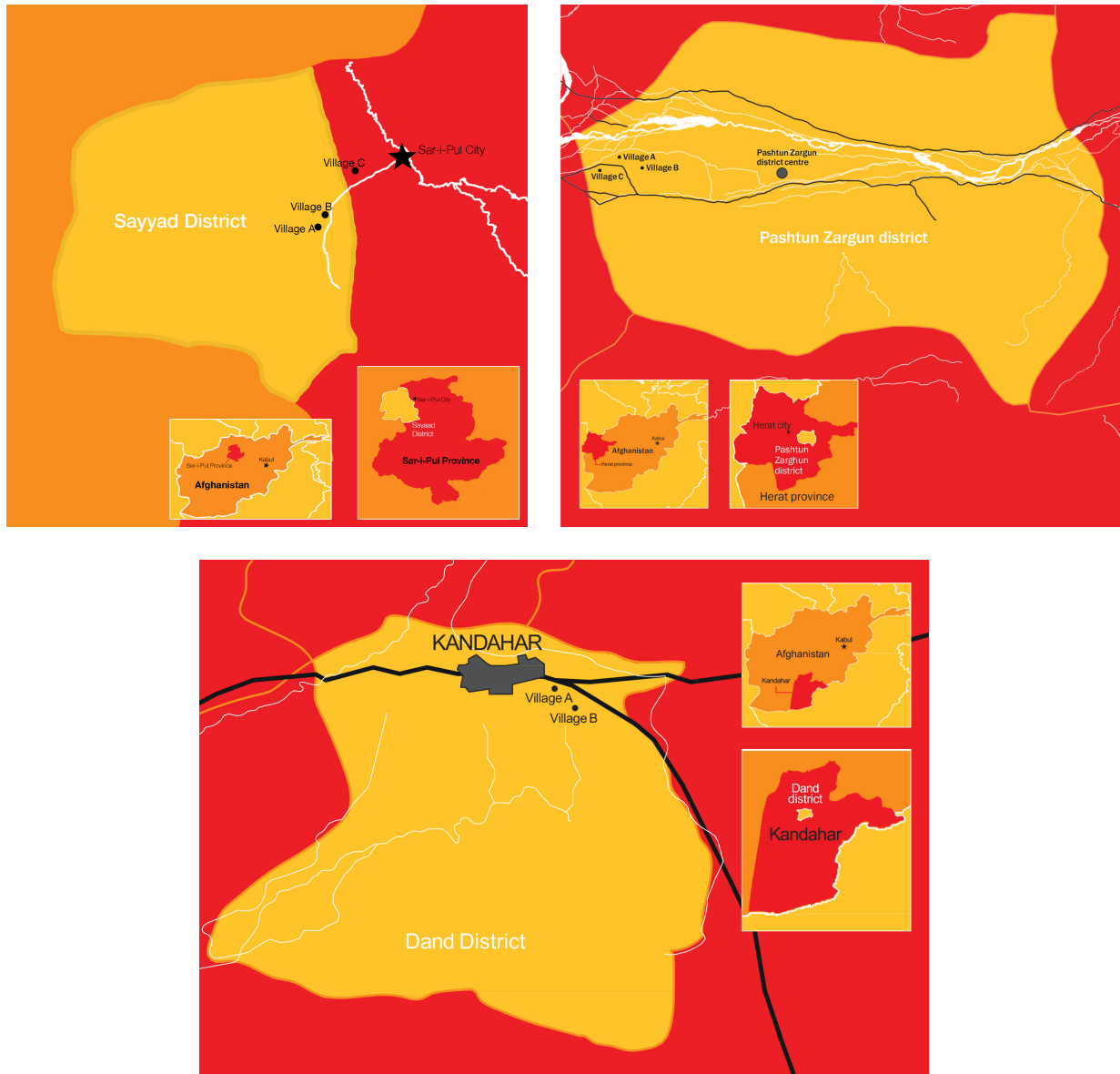
## 2 Data sources and methodological issues

### 2.1 The Afghanistan Livelihood Trajectory Study

The Afghanistan Livelihood Trajectory (ALT) study was initiated in 2002–3 by the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) in partnership with seven non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and with European Commission funding (Grace and Pain 2004). A panel of 390 households with different land and livestock assets (Table 1) was established in 21 villages in seven districts in seven contrasting Afghanistan provinces with the intention of tracking their fortunes over time. It sought to investigate what livelihood trajectories might tell us about the drivers of household-level changes, the nature and degree of that change and its effects on rural households' wellbeing. The selected provinces and districts reflected a variety of agro-ecological and economic circumstances. The aim of the first round of research was to build a baseline understanding of rural livelihoods that was not specifically linked to project interventions. It also sought to bring to policy and programming practice an understanding of the context in which rural people live and what they did to engage with the assumptions that people in rural areas are farmers. Thus the ALT study has aimed to bring complementary in-depth micro-level qualitative understanding to engage with the large sample representative cross-sectional data of the National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment (NRVA).

In 2008 a second round of the study (Kantor and Pain 2011) revisited a selection of the original sites and households in Kandahar, Badakhshan, Sar-i-Pul, and Faryab to trace what had happened to a sub-sample of the panel households under variable but continuing conditions of insecurity (Table 1). Five of the original seven provinces were selected for the restudy: Badakhshan, Faryab, Kandahar, Herat and Sar-i-Pul. Ghazni and Laghman were dropped at the design stage because of high levels of insecurity. Herat was abandoned after the start of restudy because of insecurity in the Hari Rud Valley. In Faryab, the research was also modified because of security issues.

Figure 1: Map of provinces



In 2013 as part of the Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium (SLRC), a third round of the ALT study<sup>3</sup> was conducted, returning to a selection of the original households in Herat, Kandahar and Sar-i-Pul. As with the second round study, insecurity has restricted access to many of the original districts and villages. In addition to excluding Faryab, Ghazni and Laghman, the Badakhshan sites became too insecure for fieldwork. The Kandahar and Sar-i-Pul sites were returned to and it also proved possible to return to the original panel households in the Herat villages. Together these three provinces provide contrasts (Table 2) in terms of levels of reconstruction funding and conflict and changing access to public goods, poverty rates, and levels of inequality. They also capture the differences between the relatively well irrigated high potential areas (Herat and Kandahar) and marginal rainfed areas (Sar-i-Pul), which fits with the ASR (World Bank 2014a) conceptualisation of high and low potential areas.

<sup>3</sup> The third round of the study was funded by the European Commission and as part of a cross-country programme, the Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium (SLRC) led by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) with general funding from the UK Department of International Development (DFID).

**Table 1: ALT sample provinces, districts and villages by survey round and number of households interviewed**

| Province/district            | Agro-ecology   | Survey round |                                    |                                    |
|------------------------------|--|--------------|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
|                              |  | 2002-3       | 2008-9                             | 2014-16                            |
| <b>Badakhsan, Jurm</b>       |  |              |                                    |                                    |
| B1                           | Valley and mountain with mixed economy               | 20           | 8                                  | Unable to return due to insecurity |
| B2                           |  | 20           | 8                                  |                                    |
| B3                           |  | 20           | 8                                  |                                    |
| <b>Faryab, Daulatabad</b>    |  |              |                                    |                                    |
| F1                           | River plain with irrigation system, mixed economy    | 20           | Started but became too insecure    | Not selected because of insecurity |
| F2                           |  | 20           |                                    |                                    |
| F3                           |  | 20           |                                    |                                    |
| <b>Ghazni, Jaghatu</b>       |  |              |                                    |                                    |
| G1                           | Narrow valley karez irrigated and subject to drought | 20           | Not selected because of insecurity | Not selected because of insecurity |
| G2                           |  | 20           |                                    |                                    |
| G3                           |  | 20           |                                    |                                    |
| <b>Herat, Pashtun Zargun</b> |  |              |                                    |                                    |
| H1                           | Plain of Hari Rud river 45 km from Herat             | 15           | Unable to return due to insecurity | 8                                  |
| H2                           |  | 15           |                                    | 9                                  |
| H3                           |  | 15           |                                    | 8                                  |
| <b>Kandahar, Dand</b>        |  |              |                                    |                                    |
| K1                           | Plain and peri-urban                                 | 20           | 8                                  | 8                                  |
| K2                           |  | 20           | 8                                  | 7                                  |
| K3                           |  | 20           | Too insecure                       | Too insecure                       |
| <b>Laghman, Alingar</b>      |  |              |                                    |                                    |
| L1                           | Valley and mountain; borderland                      | 15           | Not selected because of insecurity | Not selected because of insecurity |
| L2                           |  | 15           |                                    |                                    |
| L3                           |  | 15           |                                    |                                    |
| <b>Sar-i-Pul, Sayyad</b>     |  |              |                                    |                                    |
| S1                           | Narrow valley, seasonal flooding                     | 20           | 7                                  | 8                                  |
| S2                           |  | 19           | 8                                  | 8                                  |
| S3                           |  | 21           | 8                                  | 8                                  |
| N                            |  | 390          | 63                                 | 64                                 |

**Table 2: Contrasts in provincial settings (2015) for the three livelihood panel studies with respect to relative aid spending, conflict status and poverty outcomes and relative ranking (where data is available) against Afghanistan's 32 provinces (1 is best, 32 is worst).**

|                               | National | Kandahar | Herat     | Sar-i-Pul |
|-------------------------------|----------|----------|-----------|-----------|
| High Conflict High Spending * |          | ✓        |           |           |
| High Spending Low Conflict    |          |          | ✓         |           |
| Low Spending High Conflict    |          |          |           |           |
| Low Spending Low Conflict     |          |          |           | ✓         |
| Poverty Rates (%) **          | 35.8     | 13 % (2) | 35.3 (14) | 59.1 (28) |
| Depth of Poverty (%)          | 8.4      | 1.6      | 8.8       | 16.9      |

|   | National | Kandahar  | Herat     | Sar-i-Pul |
|---|----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Calorie Deficiency (%)                            | 34.7     | 29.0 (16) | 22.1(10)  | 56.4 (25) |
| Gini Index (%)                                    | 31.6     | 21.6 (8)  | 34.8 (32) | 27.2 (20) |
| Underemployment (%)                               | 18.6     | 10.9 (8)  | 15.7 (10) | 16.1 (12) |
| Girls to boys Net Attendance Ratio, Primary (%)   | 67.4     | 65.1 (21) | 103.6 (1) | 83.7 (11) |
| Girls to boys Net Attendance Ratio, Secondary (%) | 56.2     | 29.6      | 97.9      | 48.1      |
| Access to skilled antenatal care (%)              | 51.3     | 26.5 (27) | 64.9 (9)  | 73.2 (6)  |
| Safe drinking water (%)                           | 45.5     | 46.6 (10) | 52.8 (9)  | (25)      |

\*World Bank (2015: 11); \*\* World Bank (2014b)

## 2.2 Changing methods and sample

In the first phase of the study in 2002–3, the study worked with six partner NGOs and collected only quantitative data from the 390 households (Grace and Pain 2004). It had a longitudinal element in that two rounds of data were collected in each village between December 2002 and November 2003 to capture seasonal variability. It examined livelihood change over a short but volatile period as the country went through a range of transitions after the fall of the Taliban. The study documented how rural livelihoods were constructed, the variations that existed and women’s substantial contributions to household economic life. However, it only collected numeric data on what people did and owned; it did not examine how and why livelihood activities and outcomes changed. Given the social, economic, and political dynamics influencing Afghanistan in the following five years of reconstruction, in the second round (2008–9) the decision was made to revisit a sub-sample of the original study villages and households to examine the multiple factors associated with longer-term processes of livelihood change in a conflict environment.

The study integrated cross-sectional, retrospective and prospective elements into the longitudinal panel research design to examine livelihood trajectories from the 2002–3 baseline (Murray 2002; Baulch and Scott 2006). It used episodic interview methods to draw out guided narratives about different everyday life experiences (Flick 2006) among a subset of the households interviewed in 2002–3. The guided narratives collected data on: major events experienced and responded to and hazards negotiated during the recall period, and why specific responses were ‘selected’; current livelihood activities and outcomes; and how and why livelihood activities and outcomes have changed or not since the initial interview period. The prospective element of the research sought to link analysis of change at the micro level to the study of changes within the meso and macro level contexts of the village, district and province. This aimed to illuminate the structural, historical and institutional factors affecting efforts to build more secure livelihoods in rural Afghanistan, and how some families and individuals had or created more room to manoeuvre than others within these structures and what that meant to outcomes over time, leaving some chronically poor and supporting others to move out of poverty.

The quantitative data from the 2002–3 study guided selection of the subset of households to be interviewed in this study, providing variation in ‘starting positions’ as well as baseline data from which to assess change. These data were updated during the first stage of data collection in the study, through the process of getting to know the village and its residents. Each of the 15-20 households per village interviewed in the first study were revisited informally to assess changes in livelihood assets and activities as well as willingness to be involved in the second round study. This informed the selection of approximately eight households per village for in-depth study, with sample diversity in starting wealth positions and in initial indications of livelihood trajectories guiding final selection. It was important to represent households across wealth groups given the relational perspective informing the study and the



need to examine how livelihoods of households in different wealth groups inter-link and with what effects.

The reason for selecting a subset of the original 15 to 20 households was the depth of data to be collected – requiring three interviews per respondent – and the expertise and institutional oversight required to ensure data quality. Gender issues were explicitly integrated into the study design through interviewing both male and female household members for their stories of what had changed and how and why these changes came about. Thus, differences in perspectives and weight given to certain changes or outcomes, and different knowledge of events or activities due to differences in spheres of influence, provided gendered perspectives on experiences of livelihood change in rural Afghanistan.

A mixed methods approach was used in data collection, with some numeric data on issues such as debts, quantity of land owned, and major expenditures obtained in the midst of in-depth interviews, as relevant to the narratives told, to provide a sense of scale (Kanbur 2004). The analysis sought patterns in the factors associated with different livelihood trajectories, comparing these patterns within and across villages, districts and provinces through a process of progressive aggregation which moves from everyday experience to the institutional context in which this is achieved, which may offer opportunities to some at specific points in time while limiting the options of others (Bagchi *et al.* 1998; Murray 2002). Data at the meso and macro levels was collected through key informant interviews (from local NGOs, UN Political Officers, state officials, Provincial Reconstruction Teams) in the district and provincial centres. This involved looking at existing informal power structures and their links to local government through the lens of contention over scarce resources (e.g. water, land), regulation of markets and implementation of government programmes. Essentially, the same methods applied in the second round study were followed in the third.

In one aspect the analysis offered here falls short in its lack of detailed attention to the politics of natural resources and the relationship between environmental dynamics and livelihood trajectories in the research sites. Although drought and water shortage, which have had major effects on the Sar-i-Pul households' trajectories, and the floods of the Hari Rud, which have been a major shock to the case households in village H3, are drawn into the household accounts, the wider political economy of natural resources has not been specifically addressed. The sinking of wells in water-scarce areas for land intensification purposes, for example, found in the Kandahar and Herat villages in the study, privileges the land-rich and may also lay the groundwork for sharper processes of social differentiation, while their effects on the water table have long-term consequences that will disadvantage the poor. Greater attention to the political ecology of resources would have strengthened the study but was beyond its means to undertake.

### **2.3 Finding households<sup>4</sup>**

One might have expected that given the insecurity of Afghanistan, households would have moved elsewhere. In Herat despite a time lapse of 12 years, the research team with relative ease could find almost all of the original study households. Of 45 households interviewed in 2002–3, only three (two in village H2 and one in village H3) had left their respective villages, lost contact and could not be located. Four other households had moved to Herat City and were traced and interviewed.

In Kandahar 20 households were interviewed originally in 2003 in each of the two villages. By 2009, five in village K1's original 20 study households had already moved out and could not be found. The field teams in 2015 found 13 of the remaining 15 households, one of whom refused to be interviewed for the preliminary interview. Of the two households that could not be found, one had been a sub-sample household in 2009. This household had been headed by a widow living rent-free in a house owned by her brother with four young sons working as petty traders in Kandahar city. They had probably

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<sup>4</sup> Households cited in this report are coded by village and household number e.g. K1\_A04. Village numbers are not listed in the site reports.

moved to the city. The other which could not be found was in 2009 a large poor landless joint household of 19 people with the men all working as casual labourers and petty traders in the city.

In village K2 four households were gone by 2009 and a further one which was one of the sub-sample in 2009 could not be found by the interview team in 2015. Four of the households refused to be interviewed for the preliminary interview, including K2\_B48 which was one of the 2009 sub-sample. Two of the 2009 sub-sample case households, K2\_B40 and K2\_B50, were only interviewed for the preliminary interview and did not have follow-up interviews. The head of K2\_B40 did not allow the women of the household to be interviewed and made appointments for subsequent interviews which he did not keep; K2\_B50 also refused further interviews. As a result only seven households were interviewed in village K2 and only six of these had follow-up second and third interviews. In all cases the household that had moved on were those without land and most had settled in the villages relatively recently.

In Sar-i-Pul more households had left the villages on a permanent basis reflecting its more marginal agricultural economy. In 2009, of the 60 households first interviewed in 2002–3 only one household could not be found, two had moved to Sar-i-Pul city to work and two others were away working in Mazar-i-Sharif and in Pakistan. In 2016 in village S1 the field team was unable to find five households – one having permanently moved to Mazar-i-Sharif, two being in the desert grazing livestock, and two had ceased to exist because of deaths. In addition, another household migrated to Mazar-i-Sharif between interviews two and three. In village S2, again five households could not be interviewed as four had permanently migrated out of the village – two moved to Sar-i-Pul City and were in Mazar-i-Sharif making bricks during the research period, one had moved to Mazar-i-Sharif and one to Shebarghen. The fifth household could not be traced. In Village S3, two households had moved, one to Shebarghen and one to Faryab.

## **2.4 Ethical issues**

In the first round of study in 2002–3, the sample villages were those with which the NGO partners, through their various projects, had close working relationships that predated 11 September 2001. It was made very clear that the research was simply to build understanding and was not designed to lead to specific projects or other interventions in the village. It was also a time of optimism, hope and relative security and respondents were very open to the questions.

The second round of study by its very nature was more intrusive. It sought not just factual information but also views on power relations within and outside the household and between the village and wider world. Respecting the separate spheres that characterise the world of men and women in Afghan households, three rounds of separate interviews with men and women were held, which allowed the building of a relationship over the period. Sensitive and personal information was collected and principles of anonymisation were followed of all interview material and locations. Again it was made clear that no benefits would be forthcoming from the study. Generally most informants remembered the first round of the study and appreciated that there had been a return to enquire into how household lives were going, particularly in Badakhshan and Sar-i-Pul. In the case of the third round study in Herat there was still a memory of the first round and an openness to talk about what had happened.

The Kandahar interviews in both the second and third round were considerably more difficult to undertake, in part because of the gross inequalities in power in the villages. There was a greater reluctance by many but not all of the household heads to allow the women to be interviewed, and women reflecting this attitude in some cases refused to be interviewed. In the third round there was an evident hostility, particularly among the elite to the new government driven in part by the effects of the economic downturn. The comment was also made that many aid agencies had come and gone from the village with promises which had not been met and they were fed up with outsiders coming to the village to no benefit for themselves. This was not experienced in the Herat and Sar-i-Pul villages.

## 3 Findings

As will become clear, a number of common themes run through the discussion of the findings. First, there is a specificity to village economies reflecting agro-ecology and how the ownership of irrigated land is distributed. Generalising, higher altitude villages with less irrigated land tend to be grain deficit villages and have relatively small inequalities in land ownership. In contrast villages in the lowlands or plains, particularly in the main irrigated areas have major inequalities in land ownership with significant populations of landless households. However there is variation even within this basic contrast of altitudes. Second, these structural differences in land ownership are reflected in village economies and influence the opportunities for households to find farm and village-based work and the degree to which village institutions function for the common good. Thus the case households come from villages with distinctive economies and institutional structures.

However, and third, since the panel was established in 2002 a new generation has begun to come of age. Households have aged, in some cases the older generation has died, daughters have married out and sons have brought wives into the household. Household dependency ratios have changed and where parents have died land has been subdivided reducing farm sizes. Idiosyncratic events such as marriage and deaths, illnesses and other events have all placed demands that have to be met from household resources that cumulatively have had systemic effects on household assets.

Fourth, the broader economic environment within which households have sought to make a living has for many been deeply hostile and volatile. On the positive side, the level of aid funding and military expenditure fuelled the growth of a service economy that had trickle-down benefits for those who sought work in its urban margins, but by 2015 those opportunities had all but disappeared. The rise of the opium poppy cultivation from 2003 onwards drove for many parts of Afghanistan the growth of a rural economy with multiplier effects on employment opportunities, wage rates, the non-farm rural sector and food security. Its gradual suppression and corraling into the areas of greatest physical insecurity reduced farm labour opportunities. As insecurity in recent years has become more widespread, opium poppy cultivation has also gradually returned. It has reemerged for example in the Sar-i-Pul sites with positive consequences for household economies.

In general, however, the health of the rural economy remains poor. The reasons for this are complex and variable. In Kandahar direct effects of conflict are more evident but elsewhere they are more indirect, creating a more general environment of insecurity and bringing into play more subtle forms of silent or structural violence. Thus a discussion of direct conflict and its effects in the following account is quite muted but it is a persistent backdrop to a context of insecure livelihoods. Most of the case households, reflecting the wider evidence on national level poverty rates, find themselves no better off now than they were in 2002 and in some cases worse off. In Herat and Sar-i-Pul remittance income has become increasingly important to the case village households. In Sar-i-Pul there seems to be more permanent outmigration from the villages as its rural economy fails. These observations identifies a thread and a set of questions that are raised by the findings and are returned to in the discussion: what does it mean to be rural in Afghanistan if materially for many households their lives are built from resources outside the rural? Is their staying a commitment to a rural economy or merely a foothold that offers something else?

Details are needed to give substance to the broad contours of the argument laid out here, and we start by examining in more detail land ownership in the study sites.

### 3.1 Who owns what?

For Afghan rural households the core rural resource is the ownership of irrigated land. While the ownership of rainfed land and livestock can in good rainfall years create tradeable surplus, the good

rainfall years are infrequent and unreliable. It is for this reason that areas with limited irrigated land that are typically at higher altitudes such as Badakhshan and Sar-i-Pul have traditionally had grain deficits. This has fuelled long-term patterns of labour migration from these provinces to work respectively in the irrigated lands of Takar and Kunduz for grain or in the urban economy of Mazar-i-Sharif.

There are known to be inequalities in land ownership. Afghanistan's land Gini coefficient has been estimated by one source (World Bank 2005: 9) to be 0.57 given an estimated 2.2% of the population that holds about 19% of the land. However, accurate national, let alone provincial, district and village level data on land ownership does not exist, reflecting the absence of comprehensive cadastral land records (Alden Wily 2003). Data on irrigated land ownership distribution at a village level was collected from all the study sites in 2015 and 2016. The data is what was reported through group discussions and elements of under-reporting for the larger landowners must be allowed for. However, even on the basis of self-reporting it is very clear that major land inequalities exist (Table 3) and with the exception of villages H2 and H3, 64 to 85% of households do not have irrigated land and usually have limited rainfed land holdings as well. These figures are consistent with the national estimates of 62% of rural households having no irrigated land (CSO 2014).

**Table 3: Percent of landowners of irrigated land by land ownership class\* in study villages (2015–16)**

|                  | Large | Medium | Small | Landless | N    |
|------------------|-------|--------|-------|----------|------|
| <b>Kandahar</b>  |       |        |       |          |      |
| Village K1       | 2.2   | 3.0    | 12.0  | 85.0     | 500  |
| Village K2       | 1.25  | 3.1    | 31.25 | 64.4     | 320  |
| <b>Herat</b>     |       |        |       |          |      |
| Village H1       | 0.7   | 7.4    | 22.2  | 70.4     | 135  |
| Village H2       | 2.3   | 11.6   | 48.8  | 37.2     | 43   |
| Village H3       | 6.0   | 68.0   | 14    | 12       | 50   |
| <b>Sar-i-Pul</b> |       |        |       |          |      |
| Village S1       | 3.3   | 6.7    | 13.3  | 76.7     | 150  |
| Village S2       | 0.7   | 3.6    | 8.6   | 87.2     | 1400 |
| Village S3       | 7.5   | 6.0    | 10.5  | 76.0     | 670  |

\* Note the categories of large, medium and small are relative to each village; their values are given in the separate case study reports.

In the relatively well irrigated villages the land concentration is striking: in village K1, one large landowner was reported to own 50% (100 ha) of the village irrigated land, another 10 households owning a further 30% of the irrigated land and thus 2.2% of the households owned 80% of the irrigated land. In village K2, four households owned 30% of the irrigated land. In the Herat villages in H1 one land owner owns one-third (20 ha) of all the irrigated land with the 10 medium landowners owning another 50%, while in H2 one landowner owns 77% (170 ha) of the irrigated land. All these large landowners have agricultural surplus that they sell.

The corollary of this skewed landownership is the large number of landless households in the well irrigated villages – respectively 85.0, 64.4, 70.4 and 37.2% of households in villages K1, K2, H2 and H2. If we include here the small landowners who rarely hold more than a hectare of irrigated land, which is often insufficient to provision the household for a year, then the effective landless populations (and the number of households who must look for work) is near 90% for all four villages. Account also

has to be taken in the Kandahar villages of an additional small population of *hamsaya*<sup>5</sup> households (tied labour), who work as servants for the major landowners and are tied in dependent relations.

In the less-well irrigated villages a different picture emerges. In H3 the three largest landowners each own between 1 and 1.2 ha of irrigated land, comprising some 10% of the village irrigated land. The medium landowners who are the majority of landowners own each 0.6–0.8 ha of irrigated land and together own the bulk of the irrigated land. In the Sar-i-Pul villages there is almost no permanently irrigated land and the water source is unreliable floods at the beginning of the season. None of the largest landowners here have agricultural surplus from their irrigated lands. In S1 the five largest landowners own up to 0.2 ha each of such land with additional holdings of rainfed land and livestock. In S2, which is a large village, about 10 households have up to 2.0–2.2 ha of irrigated land and larger holdings of rainfed land, and in S3 the 50 biggest landowners each have up to 1 ha of irrigated land. In the less well-irrigated villages of H3, the landless population is relatively small at 12%, although the largest landowners in this village only have 1–1.2 ha, but in the Sar-i-Pul villages the landless population ranges from 76 to 85% of households.

There is wider evidence of land inequalities. In Herat province in Injil district, which surrounds Herat City, and lies to the west of Pashtun Zarghun (SMEC 2005: 31-32), an estimated 7000 households were reported to be living there in 2005. Three thousand of these (45%) were reported as landless, and 35% of households were small landowners with landholdings of less than a hectare. 15% of the households were medium-sized landowners (around 2 ha each) with about 40% of the irrigated land and some 5% of household were large landowners with 20% of the land. Research on village contexts (Pain and Sturge 2015) found that in a survey of 47 Nangarhar villages including both valley and hill villages (and excluding two villages that were entirely landless) some 64.5% of the 21,323 households were landless. In over 40% of these 47 Nangarhar villages, large landowners constituted less than 1% of the households. In Badakhshan, a province that lacks the extensive irrigated plains of Nangarhar, 39 villages were surveyed (excluding four villages that were entirely made up of landless households). About 40% of the 10,039 households were landless and in only just under 8% of these villages did large landowners constitute less than 1% of households.

In sum, the findings on the degree of land inequality in the study villages are not atypical of land inequality elsewhere in the provinces or in Afghanistan. However there is considerable variability between villages, even those that are geographically close. Moreover, a simple contrast of landowners and landless does not account for access to land, and sharecropping arrangements are common but not universal. This has to be understood in terms of wider power relations and village institutional structures which is further discussed Section 4.2.

Given the stereotypical representations of gender in Afghanistan it might be assumed that the ownership of land for productive purposes is strictly gender segregated and exclusively the preserve of men. This may be true of Kandahar but there is variability (Grace and Pain 2011). In Herat, one household (H2\_B30, see Huot *et al.* 2016) was found where the woman inherited her father's assets including land in the absence of another direct male heir and she and her husband (from another village) moved back to the village to manage the lands. This did however have consequences since six years ago the house was burnt down and it was suspected that it was done by her cousins who felt she should not have inherited her father's assets.

However there is also wider evidence from Herat and Sar-i-Pul that women have been able to gain access to land in order, in the former to cultivate saffron and in the latter to graze livestock and sharecrop (Minoia and Pain 2016; Huot and Pain 2017). One woman in Herat, a widow, had taken 0.2 ha of land on lease and worked it with her family. A second had taken a lease of 0.4 ha with her father

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<sup>5</sup> Olesen (1994: 107) gives the following definition: 'hamsaya...literally means "common shadow" but also carries the connotation of "neighbour". The word is used euphemistically about the kind of tenants who do not pay rent in money but in the form of services'.

and a third party but she was the effective manager. In other cases women had claimed a share of household land on which to cultivate saffron under their management. In Sar-i-Pul it was not uncommon for women to sharecrop land for growing melons (see for example household S2\_B4 and S2\_B7). Women also had equal access to livestock and were often responsible for grazing them in the desert (household S1\_A1). Thus women do have access to and use of land either through inheritance, through marriage or contractual arrangements such as leasing. In Herat these women often came from better off households but this was not always the case; the first wife of one poorer household was able to lease land for saffron cultivation in order to secure a degree of economic independence. Women's access to land and casual labour opportunities in Sar-i-Pul may reflect its more liberal environment generated through long periods of collective exile in Pakistan or Iran.

Gender is one dimension of differentiation in terms of access to resources but note also needs to be made of working age (and married) sons (or brothers) living in joint households and the degree of autonomy and access to household resources that they have. Again there is cultural as well as household variability. At one end of the spectrum, household A10 in village K1 was now headed by the eldest of four brothers after the death four years ago of his father. He, like his father (Pain 2010b) appeared to be in complete charge of all matters (Pain *et al.* 2016) and his younger brothers deferred to him suggesting they had little autonomy. In village K2, the head of household B40 on the other hand had children from four wives, who upon their father's death separated their assets so to minimise conflict among the stepbrothers and remained mutually supportive with respect to credit and so forth even after the separation. Much depends therefore on household-specific factors that influence the extent to which sons and siblings have access to and authority over household resources. As will become clear in section 4.4, household and networks of relations are fundamental to access informal credit. This is central not only to access to productive resources but underpins the distributional economy as well.

The discussion here has focused on ownership of and access to irrigated land. Dryland or rainfed land is a much less valuable resource but livestock, particularly small livestock such as sheep and goats, may play a crucial role in household economies, particularly in the rainfed Sar-i-Pul villages, and women may often have authority for these assets and control the income from them (Grace and Pain 2011). A particular case in point is household A03 in village K1, whose wife owned the livestock and retained the income and used her savings from this income to make a loan (about USD 2400) to her uncle without consulting her husband (Pain *et al.* 2016). In village H1, the wife of household A8 was given a cow by her father-in-law. When the cow gave birth she sold the calf for about USD 106, gave money to the mosque to fulfil a vow and bought a television. She continues to sell the milk and keep the profits. In Sar-i-Pul women appear to play a much stronger and more visible role in the grazing of livestock, but livestock populations here have suffered severe attrition due to an earlier drought (Shaw 2010) from which they had not fully recovered in 2015.

Generation by generation and given the size of joint households with up to five sons, land sizes per household for all landowning classes are shrinking, reducing the land resources available to each successive generation. The relative scale of large, medium and small landowners is likely to remain, unless market forces emerge driving the commodification<sup>6</sup> of land and fuelling processes of land accumulation. The more likely outcomes may be involuntarily<sup>7</sup> intensification processes for those with land whereby to the extent possible smaller and smaller parcels of land become worked more intensively to provide subsistence or a cash income. As we will see in the following section, the bald figures on land ownership do not reveal the key pivotal role that land plays in underpinning social relations within and outside the village.

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<sup>6</sup> A process by which the value of land is assessed only by its market price or what it can be exchanged for.

<sup>7</sup> The process of balancing shrinking farm size with increasing intensification just to stay in the same place.

### 3.2 Who does what? The few and the many

Section 4.1 summarised land ownership distribution, identifying the significant proportion of landless households. However, access to land depends on more than ownership and Table 4 summarises five broad patterns of access to land by rural households if those that have no land and do not cultivate any are included. Sharecropping is the most common means by which rural households gain access to land to cultivate and for which they are paid a share of the harvest. There are examples of the direct renting of land. However, this tends to be done by better off households well connected to the landed elite and with significant non-farm sources of income, or in the case of Herat, major saffron growers.

Account also has to be taken of crop specificities and a distinction needs to be made between land that is cultivated for wheat, which may also be cultivated if there is sufficient irrigation water with a second crop, and grape orchards or vineyards, which are under permanent cultivation and sharecropped in and out under a very specific arrangement. Access to sharecropped land usually depends on residence within the village and marks the significance of social relationships in gaining access. It is less common to establish a sharecropping arrangement in a village in which you are not resident.

**Table 4: Five patterns of accessing land in Afghanistan**

|                     |   |
|---------------------|---|
| Landed household    | (a) Owning and cultivating their own land   |
|                     | (b) Owning and cultivating their own land and sharecropping (or renting) in additional land |
|                     | (c) Owning and sharecropping out land, either partially or totally                          |
| Landless households | (d) Not owning land but sharecropping (or renting) in land for cultivation                  |
|                     | (e) Not owning land and not cultivating any land  |

(Adapted from World Bank 2005: 10)

In the Kandahar villages the large landowners are primarily category (c) in Table 4, sharecropping out most of their land, functioning as landlords and securing most of their income from non-farm sources. Medium-sized land owners fall within category (a) and landless households are predominantly in category (e), not owning or cultivating land. Small landowners often do not sharecrop-in additional land but find non-farm work. There is a limited area of grape gardens but these were not often reported as being sharecropped out or in.

In Herat there are considerable differences in patterns of access to land between the villages. In village H1, which has reliable irrigation, there is a significant area of irrigated grapes owned by both large and medium landowners and investments have been made since 2002 in expanding grape production. Sharecropping in and out of these lands was often reported, although mainly by small and medium landowners for the purpose of gaining further access to vineyards or to realise cash for immediate needs. Labour for vineyards is usually hired on a cash basis. The one large landowner of H1 sharecropped out his wheat lands. In village H2 there was one large absentee landlord (working in the High Court in Kabul) and until about four years ago his lands had all been sharecropped out, managed by an overseer. However, the landlord had progressively pushed out the sharecroppers. First he mechanised the wheat harvest, displacing labour, and with the spread of saffron he leased out a portion (14 out of 156 ha) of his lands to a saffron grower in the district, ejecting the sharecroppers. Given the unreliable irrigation in the village, which the landlord had addressed by sinking his own wells, few other sharecropping opportunities were available. So both small and landless households have had to seek work outside the village. In the case of village H3 the small size of landholdings and problems with flooding meant that few sharecropping opportunities were to be found within the village.

In the Sar-i-Pul villages, given the limited irrigated land holdings and marginal nature of the rainfed lands, sharecropping though practised does not carry the same significance.

A form of sharecropping of livestock was also found in a few cases, permitting households with no or limited livestock holdings to build up their herds. It was not reported in Kandahar or Sar-i-Pul, but in Herat the word *mazarabet* was used to describe sharing inputs for livestock and splitting the outputs, i.e. the sale of dairy and/or calves. Household C25 in village H3, for example, was headed by a widow and shared a cow with her married daughter, each of them taking the money earned from dairy sales in alternating weeks.

In sum there are some clear differences between villages. In those villages that are well irrigated there tend to be a few large landowners with extensive holdings of land who sharecrop out their land to multiple sharecroppers. The terms and conditions under which these are undertaken are variable and depend on the crop – wheat or grapes – as well as location.

In village K1 sharecropping with the main landlord is on the basis of a 20:80 division, with the larger share going to the landlord on the stated grounds that the landlord provides the land, water, inputs and ploughing and the sharecropper only provides the labour. If there is a second crop, such as vegetables, the division is 50:50 between the sharecropper and landlord. In village K2 the sharecropper gets a slightly higher share of 30% for the wheat crop on the basis of the same division of inputs. In the Herat villages where wheat land is sharecropped out, the division is 40:60 between sharecropper and landlord.

The sharecrop arrangement is far from being one between equals, in part reflecting the limited supply of sharecrop possibilities and the demand for them, which has increased, at least in the Kandahar villages as the city economy has slumped. As one informant observed:

*Now the labour market has come down and about 65% of people at the village level are free and they are not able to find work for themselves. About eight years ago, this percentage was about 10%, and these 10% people were busy in agriculture activities at the village level. The other 90% of people were busy in work outside of the village<sup>8</sup>*

Underpinning the sharecrop arrangement are deeply unequal patron-client relations, reflecting a set of interlocking contractual arrangements which if lost can imperil the security of the sharecropping household. The head of K2\_B46 had his sharecrop arrangement terminated after 20 years, leaving him to struggle with whatever casual labour he could find. The 20 sharecropping households in village H2 lost their access to land equally abruptly after 40 years or so of working as sharecroppers. With the loss of a sharecrop also goes a loss of access to informal credit and a relationship that they need to call on in times of trouble. Landed elites in the villages are often the only ones with connections to higher authorities at the district, provincial, or national level, and poor sharecropping households rely on their landlord's access to these networks. A case in point was the son of K1\_A01 (Pain *et al.* 2016) whose son was arbitrarily seized by the intelligence department after a kidnapping and they needed their landlord to secure his release.

Observing the choice of sharecroppers made by the main landlord in village K1, an informant commented:

*He is a very smart person ... he searches for farmers who don't have any income, are very weak, and can't do other work. He searches for a person who will always accept what he says.<sup>9</sup>*

Thus with the sharecropping arrangements come other obligations to undertake whatever the landlord may ask of the sharecropper. Household K1\_A16 had become sharecroppers for this landlord after their father died and felt it was the best option for them and were happy to provide him with other services when he asked for them:

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<sup>8</sup> HH B40, male respondent, interview 2

<sup>9</sup> HH A01, male respondent, February 2009, (Pain 2010b: 12)



*If he asks me for any kind of support ...such as taking some wheat to the mill or a damaged machine to the workshop I will do it because he is a good person ...in such kind of works if he doesn't pay I will not ask.*<sup>10</sup>

Not all sharecropping arrangements involve such loss of autonomy and other households (e.g. K1\_A03, Pain *et al.* 2016) had managed to establish more equal relationships, in part because they had other sources of income. But the fact remains that given the scarcity of opportunities in these villages, and as urban economies have declined, access to a sharecrop arrangement is seen to be a desirable option, whatever the long-term costs to autonomy.

There is a second form of sharecrop available associated with the vineyards of Herat, which was not reported in Kandahar. Grape gardens are a valuable asset – one informant<sup>11</sup> assessed the returns per jerib (0.2 ha) for vineyards as reaching USD 1500 a year in comparison with USD 122 from a jerib of wheat. But they are costly in terms of labour and time to develop and a specific form of sharecropping called Nema Kari has developed around them, again illustrating the limits to which land has been commoditised. The land is divided into three parts which the sharecropping farmer develops into a grape garden, providing all the inputs of labour, plants and fertiliser. After 5-6 years, once the grapes start yielding, one-third of the garden – both the land and harvest – becomes the property of the sharecropper while the remaining two-thirds with its grape harvests return to the landlord. It thus provides both a means for a sharecropper to acquire land and a grape garden and for a landlord to avoid the costs of developing their land. In this the sharecropping arrangement is similar to that which is practised for livestock where a share of the offspring of an animal that is being cared for becomes the property of the sharecropper. However, in the case of the grape garden sharecrop it is unlikely for reasons of cost or time to be an option for a landless household without reliable income from other sources – it is an investment for the future that few can make given the need to survive in the present.

Gaining access to a sharecrop arrangement can be a sign of dependence or independence depending on the circumstances. But for many such arrangements are not available and if farm work is to be found, it has to be primarily as an agricultural labourer. Other work such as house construction or wall building can also be found.

The most skilled work available is that of working in the grape gardens. For those with the reputation of being careful and efficient pruners, higher-paid seasonal work can be found working on a garden-by-garden basis. Household H1\_A09 is one of the vine pruners and reported that he was able to negotiate wage rates and had recently been paid USD 91 for three weeks' work (about USD 5/day) pruning in one vineyard. Thus the work is both higher paid than working on the wheat harvest, for example (USD 3-4 day), and of longer duration. In the past, labour used to migrate seasonally from the Kandahar villages to work on the grape harvest of the neighbouring districts Arghandab and Panjwal but because of insecurity that possibility is no longer available.

The other major source of employment in casual labour is in the wheat harvest but the work is of relatively short duration – three men can harvest 0.2 ha of wheat in a day and are paid at the rate of about USD 3 per day or in kind. Although there is also casual work available at ploughing and harvesting time, for irrigation and for weeding, the amount of work is limited, available only on a casual basis and quite often paid in kind rather than cash. Few individuals are able to find more than 100 days of agricultural labour work in a year (about 50% of full employment), an income that is not sufficient to feed an average household of 6-8 people, emphasising the need for a household to have multiple working members for it to secure a living, let alone to prosper.

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<sup>10</sup> HH A16, male respondent, interview 3

<sup>11</sup> HH A12, male respondent, interview 3

In Kandahar and Herat, no women were reported working on the wheat crops or in the grape gardens. However, with the rise of saffron cultivation in Herat, this has generated a demand for labour in the 20-30 days of its harvest and this increases over the 5-6 year cycle of the saffron crop. An estimated 5000 women and children are now hired for the harvesting, cleaning and processing of the saffron flowers (Minoia and Pain 2016). Older women and children are able to work in the saffron fields and the processing can take place under secluded conditions, making it acceptable as women's work. The work is piece rate and significantly lower paid than comparable work by men. The agricultural wage labour for men as noted above is about USD 3 per day but women are paid half this rate or on a piece rate of about one dollar per kilo of flower harvested or half a dollar per kilo of processed flowers. The justification given is that it is easy work and not physically demanding but the simple fact that women can be paid less and are thus cheaper is what underlies the practice.

The Sar-i-Pul villages are primarily dependent on remittance income and here both men and women migrate to the brick field of Mazar-i-Sharif to work. Landless households seasonally relocate for between three and five months. Their work is paid at a piece rate for the family labour group and as the household needs to maximise its labour resources, women and children also work. Households are paid USD 7-8 for every 1000 bricks they make, and can make between 1000 and 3000 bricks per day for a daily income of between USD 8-24 (HH S1\_A03). This however varies depending on how many people are working and how productive they are. Generally, elderly women and men accompany the household to make food as they cannot actively work, but all other physically able women, men and children work in the season. Although women work in the brick kilns, the earnings are paid to the male household head.

There is a third group of rural labour: men and women who are essentially servants and work for and live in housing provided by the landlord. These are the *hamsaya* households found in Kandahar. Sometimes they can be paid in cash but at rates over which there is little scope for negotiation. The head of household K1\_A01 (Pain *et al.* 2016) who had been a sharecropper but grown old, had been offered work by the landlord to manage the landlord's dairy cows which would be shared with a second person. The second person soon left, unable to tolerate working for the landlord, but with no other option the head of K1\_A01 stayed working for the same salary, doing twice the work and now managing three times the number of cows as when he started. The salary was often not paid on time and had to be requested. The head dare not look for work elsewhere as the landlord would become unhappy if he did<sup>12</sup> and, as noted above, they are crucially dependent on his patronage.

The head of K1\_A01 is at least paid a salary. However, the head of household A12, a widow along with her daughter in law and son work as servants for the main landlord of the village baking his household bread. They are not paid a salary but are given food three times a day along with the other servants of the landlord's household. She was clear about her position:

*If I do not cook their bread and my son does not graze their cow they will take that house from us. After that someone else will come and live here. Because there are a lot of people that want to have such an opportunity.*<sup>13</sup>

Thus, for the many who do not have sufficient or any land resources, access to labour opportunities or access to the land itself, which is owned by the few, is severely limited. With landless households comprising a significant majority of households in each village, there is insufficient land and work in the rural economy. Even in village H3, which has the lowest proportion of landless households of the eight villages, land holdings are not sufficient and having at least one household member migrate to Iran for work is essential. As the head of one household put it:

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<sup>12</sup> HHA01, female respondent, interview 2

<sup>13</sup> HH A12, female respondent, interview 3

*[if I were to rank the income for people in the village] I would say working in Iran comes first, then working in construction (in Guzara) and lastly agricultural income. We don't have [so much] land in the village that people [can] totally depend on it.<sup>14</sup>*

The same is true for most households in village H2 and even in village H1, which is the best resourced of all villages. In Kandahar the city economy has provided in the past opportunities outside the rural economy but it is not clear now that this will continue and migration further afield may result. In the case of Sar-i-Pul, most households have a member working in the brickfields of Mazar-i-Sharif or in Iran or Pakistan and except for a minority of large livestock owners this is the most significant source of income for households.

What do we conclude from this? Only a minority of households are, through owning land or livestock, in a position to derive their livelihood solely from agriculture. While the largest landlords are in a position to have a wholly agricultural economy, in fact, as we shall see, the major part of their income comes from non-farm sources. Their landholdings act more as means of leveraging their role as patrons and their position of power within these villages rather than as a resource to be mobilised for profit and production. The non-commoditised basis of the sharecropping relationship – the payment in shares for the sharecropper for example, linked to other interlocking factors such as access to informal credit and protection for the sharecropper – are what define it. Even the ways in which grape gardens are sharecropped have a significant relational dimension. For the many households who cannot access land through such sharecropping relationships, the opportunities for labour are also limited and where they can be found can be paid in kind as well. For most, however, their major source of cash income comes from labour outside the village. Saffron (and possibly opium poppy) emerges as the most commoditised of production activities, bringing women both into its production and its labour force. But as has been seen, despite the greater role of women in its production and processing, it is the non-economic factors of gender inequalities that structure their returns to labour.

### 3.3 Who gets what?

In the second round of the ALT study in 2009 it was found that only 13 of the 64 households interviewed had prospered since 2002 (Table 5). However, it should be remembered that in 2008–9 there was a serious drought and wheat prices increased significantly in Afghanistan leading to consumption rationing (MoEC and World Bank 2012). Ten of these prospering households were located in Kandahar and three in Badakhshan. No households in Sar-i-Pul had either prospered or even maintained their position. Forty-five of the 64 households across the three locations were worse off than they had been in 2002 with over half of these coming from Sar-i-Pul.

**Table 5: Case household livelihood trajectories by provinces [2003–9] 2009–16**

|            | Prospering | Coping | Declining | Total 2009 | Total 2016 |
|------------|------------|--------|-----------|------------|------------|
| Kandahar   | [10] 6     | [3] 6  | [3] 3     | 16         | 15         |
| Badakhshan | [3]        | [3]    | [18]      | 24         | -          |
| Sar-i-pul  | [0] 7      | [0] 9  | [24] 8    | 24         | 24         |
| Herat      | [-] 4      | [-] 9  | [-] 12    | -          | 25         |
| Total      | 13         | 6      | 45        | 64         | 64         |

Source: Kantor and Pain (2011); Huot et al. (2016); Huot and Pain (2017); Pain et al. 2016.

The drivers of improvement for these prospering households in 2009 differed by location and variously combined inherited wealth in the form of land, the deployment of social connections to gain salaried

<sup>14</sup> HH C22, male respondent, interview 2

employment for sons or access to business opportunities in Kandahar city, opportunities in the urban informal economy and shifts in household composition that had made the joint household labour rich. Notably, land played a key role for the prospering primary elite households in the Kandahar village whose networks of access (Jackson 2016) to provincial and national power-holders provided enormous opportunities to gain salaried employment for sons and access to other opportunities. Households who were well connected to these primary elites benefited even if they had little or no land (Kantor and Pain 2010: 13). However the concentration of prospering households in Kandahar also owed much to the economic opportunities available in Kandahar city at that time. In the politically and economically more marginal province of Badakhshan, land inheritance played no role for the three prospering households. Rather it was salaried employment with NGOs for household members that was the key mechanism along with, in one case, the availability of male labour at a key juncture in the rise of the opium economy that allowed a household to prosper (Pain, 2010c).

The downturn in Kandahar's economy has affected all households. By 2016, only six of the 10 households that had prospered between 2002 and 2008 in Kandahar could be said to have maintained their economic status. The landed households that had become significantly better off between 2002 and 2008 had not continued on a rising trajectory but had maintained their economic status. However in both the two richest households in terms of land, K1\_A10 and K2\_B40, the original head of the household had died by 2015. In household K1\_A10, the land had not been divided and five brothers were living together in a joint household. In household K2\_B40, which had been a large joint household of 62 members containing four families, the estimated irrigated land of 32 ha had been divided equally between the four families, reducing each to about 8 ha of irrigated land, still a sizeable holding. Each of the four families were also joint households so by the next generation, land division is likely to severely reduce the land area per inheriting household. The deaths of the former head of each household had also led to a loss of the household's social position. According to informants, the new heads of household did not have the social status that their father's had, affecting both their standing within the village and their ability to command connections outside it.

Only one household, K2\_B42, had increased its land holdings, with the head investing in a grape garden using income from his son's salaries from working with provincial and national politicians, and probably from the dowries of his three daughters. Two other 2009 prosperous households in Kandahar, both without inherited land but owners of businesses, had suffered a decline in their fortunes with the economic downturn. However, they were still in a position to continue to lease land from the primary elite within the village and secure household consumption needs. Finally, one household, K2\_B56, from very modest beginnings (Pain 2010b: 40) but through dint of hard work, was still continuing its slow upward trajectory: the head had managed to secure a salaried position in the city and was leasing land from a relative.

The other nine households in Kandahar had either coped (6) or suffered a decline (3) between 2009 and 2016 assessments. Five of these were landless in 2009 and remained so in 2016. Among the four landed household one had sold land to meet debts and costs and the others had limited land holdings that were not cultivated due to drought or lack of ability to invest in them. All struggled with lack of work opportunities and the effects of the declining city economy in combination with specific shocks associated usually with medical costs. For several of these households the key asset that they could deploy was maintaining a dependent relationship with a more powerful patron – as a servant, for example.

What of the Herat households? Since 2002 four of them had prospered: three through investing in the development of or buying grape gardens; and one who had grape gardens also gained a salaried position as headmaster of the girls' school and appointed family members to work in it as well. The resources to invest in grape gardens had come from either remittance income from household members working in Iran or from bride price received for the marriage of daughters or a combination of both. Three of these households had come from H1 and one from H2, the head of which also worked as

the supervisor of the major landlord of the village. Twelve of the Herat households – three from village H1, four from village H2 and five from village H3 – had experienced an economic decline since 2003. In five of these households (three from H1 and two from H2) there had been a significant loss of land assets through sales to meet marriage and medical costs, failed attempts to diversify into the urban economy and the effects of conflict or opium addiction among family members who had worked in Iran. Of the other six households, one household in H2 had lost a sharecrop arrangement and five came from village H3 where a combination of shocks (floods and deaths), and limited land resources made an already marginal household economy even more insecure.

Of the nine households that had remained more or less in the same economic position, only two had sufficient land assets to make a significant contribution to the household economy; both lived in H2. The remaining seven households (two from H1, two from H2 and three from H3) were all effectively landless households dependent on labour migration to Iran.

In the Sar-i-Pul case villages, livestock combined with rainfed lands have in the past been the key asset that households have held. In 2009, as a result of the drought and the failure of the rainfed wheat crop, all case households had suffered either a gradual or deep decline in prosperity evidenced by sale of assets including livestock. Nine of the households had essentially been without assets since 2002, owning neither land nor livestock, and most were relying for survival on seeking casual work in Mazar-i-Sharif or migration to Iran or Pakistan. Household fortunes largely depended on the amount of labour they could muster or the distress sale of land or livestock to survive or a combination of both. By 2016 conditions had improved although were still not good and seven households had reported a modest improvement in their economy, nine were maintaining their position and a further eight were in decline. Two villages (S2 and S3) were slightly better endowed with respect to natural resources compared to the first (S1). Five of the prospering case households came from S2 and S3 and their recovery was underpinned by social position ensuring access to other economic opportunities and wider networks combined with a degree of land ownership. For the two prospering households in the poorest village, S1, the availability of male labour to migrate for work had ensured their survival. While some of these households had managed to maintain their asset base, there were no cases of asset accumulation in livestock or land but sufficient livestock holdings had allowed them to meet medical costs and other shocks.

Of the nine households that were maintaining their economic position, the seasonal migration of male labour to the Mazar-i-Sharif brick fields, work in other of Afghanistan's cities, and longer-term migration to Iran were key. For those case households that were struggling to survive, an absence of land and labour were the key characteristics. However, the re-emergence of an opium poppy economy in the district in the last three years has raised the demand for rural labour and daily wage rates for the crop are double those of wheat (at USD 6–8), which has injected a level of cash not seen in the rural economy in recent years. The dynamics behind this rise are returned to in section 4.5.

In sum, two phases mark household livelihood trajectories since 2001, although the specifics of these phases are context specific. In the case of Kandahar the turbulence of the Taliban period and post 2001 allowed powerful individuals to leverage further control of assets on the basis of existing land assets or personal connections during the Mujahideen period. These assets included land and, as the military spending rose after 2001, use of social networks to access other resources. The rise of the opium economy during this early period would have reinforced their advantages, allowing the accumulation of urban land for other investments and the placement of sons in salaried positions with key political players.

Households without these land assets had one of two possibilities. The first, if one had the social connections or sufficient position, was to tie the household fortunes to the village elite and benefit through their connections, a relation of secondary inclusion. For landless households without social

status, the option (if not entirely a choice) was to become a dependent client of a powerful patron. A third group of households sought to establish a degree of independence from these powerful players.

After 2008 and particularly with the decline of the reconstruction economy, opportunities to accumulate assets sharply diminished. While those who did well before 2008–9 have managed to maintain their assets and position and with sufficient land assets achieve food security, for many others with declining opportunities for work in the city or on farms that has not been the case.

Herat has offered none of the windfall gains available to those in Kandahar with connections, although the Herat city economy like that of Kandahar's has seen a downturn following the international military drawdown. Two of the Herat villages have the same level of land inequalities as those in Kandahar but, it would appear, not the entrenched patron-client relations seen in the latter and certainly no dependent households living as servants. This may be because the high value end of the agrarian economy has been based around vineyards which require intensive investment and management. This requires certain skills and, while vineyards might be sharecropped out for debt management purposes, the socio-economic relations around them appear to be different for wheat.

The economic decline of a few landed households in the Herat villages has been marked by the loss or lending out of their vineyards. For most of the other Herat case households it is the general paucity of physical assets and the significance of farm labour (where they can get it) and labour migration to Iran that characterises their household economy. Labour migration is also what characterises the economy of the Sar-i-Pul households, although in the years before the drought hit and up to 2006 an opium economy in the province had helped secure household food security. The 2008 drought hit the households hard but the re-emergence of an opium economy in the district over the last few years has provided significantly better opportunities for agricultural labour.

Despite these dynamics, it is difficult to find significant patterns of rural differentiation driven by market forces in agriculture. Rather, what emerges is continuity of past patterns of considerable social differentiation or class structures, the strikingly limited degree of commoditisation of land and labour and the persistence of an economy that is primarily geared towards survival and subsistence in a high-risk environment. All of this is taking place within an agrarian economy that seems to be gradually running out of opportunities for the many households that live in it.

### **3.4 What do they do with it?**

An assessment of the overall outcomes for the case households since 2002–3 in the study sites would conclude that most are now no better off than they were 13 or 14 years ago in terms of income or food security. It should of course be noted that they are also not significantly worse off either, which is something of an accomplishment in a context of conflict and state weakness. There is clearly locational as well as household variability and account has to be taken of the rise and fall of the military and reconstruction economy since 2001 and the rise and fall (and perhaps return) of the opium economy, both of which in their various ways have either directly or indirectly contributed to periods of relative prosperity.

Contextual factors of the post-2001 reconstruction effort are clearly important and the contrast between the high conflict–high spending, high spending–low conflict and low conflict–low spending settings (Kandahar, Herat and Sar-i-Pul, respectively) are an indicator of the dynamics of resource flows. But these have been superimposed on different cultural environments; the educational and health outcomes of each province, for example, can be accounted for more by these dimensions, with the more culturally permissive environment of Herat achieving better education and health outcomes. Sar-i-Pul, while more culturally permissive than Herat with women labouring, both locally and in Mazar-i-Sharif, and girls attending primary school at nearly equal rates to boys (girls to boys net attendance ratio of 83.7%), is economically and politically isolated, lacking influential networks to the centre

(Jackson 2016). It is the province with the highest levels of poverty and one of the lower levels of aid spending, with a significant lack of investment in safe drinking water.

All households live in a high-risk environment although the nature of those risks vary. All have experienced the costs and effects of health events, long-term sickness and deaths and dealing with inadequate health services. The effects of natural disasters such as drought, particularly in the case of the Sar-i-Pul households, or floods in the case of the households in village H3, are a significant part of the risk environment. Conflict has of course been pervasive: it has closed off past economic opportunities, such as the migration of labour from the Kandahar villages to the extensive vineyards of neighbouring districts, and has caused direct injury – local commanders have closed schools in the Herat villages and there have been abductions (H1\_A14) which required the sale of assets to meet ransom demands. There are also the violent actions of authorities and informal power-holders at village, district and provincial level that are a pervasive threat which can lead to arbitrary imprisonment or harassment. Predatory action by authorities with checkpoints and arbitrary taxation were found in the Kandahar market study (Minoia and Pain 2015). Certain activities such as the labour migration to Iran always carries risks associated with the actions of smugglers (as in H1\_A07 whose son was detained by the smuggler and had to pay USD 485 for his release), being caught at the border crossing or living and working underneath the radar in Iran. In addition, the specific hazard of developing an opium addiction while in Iran, particularly if you are imprisoned, has long-term effects on households in terms of costs and reputation.

But despite these risks and the evident poor health of the rural economy most households are still living in their villages even if their means of living straddle the rural-urban divide or are almost wholly urban. Very few households have actually moved out of their birth village, at least in the case of the Kandahar and Herat villages. Where it has happened, as in the case of K1, the village was relatively recently settled. Moreover given both its power structures and its proximity to the city it is not surprising that those who did not wish to subjugate themselves to powerful landowners left. In Sar-i-Pul, with the most marginal of rural economies, many households have stayed even if the brick fields of Mazar-i-Sharif are what hold household economies together. In Herat, those that have moved to the city were driven either by physical fear, escape from reputational damage (H3\_C23) or absolute destitution (H1\_A07). Most households have stayed resident in their villages even if the opportunities for making a living in their villages are limited for most of them. The reasons, as evidence from case household shows, are the tightly embedded social networks upon which people depend for access to credit, assets, and marriage arrangements, as well as long life histories in the village.

Indeed very few of the households, even those that are land (or livestock) rich, could be said to have a significant let alone wholly agriculturally based livelihood. While the large landowners of the Kandahar villages are not centrally located in the Arghandab irrigation system and are therefore not water rich, they are certainly food self-sufficient and live well, largely through the labour of sharecroppers. For those that have prospered since 2002 it has been largely through the fact that their landed status gives them both authority within their villages and the networks of access to key power-holders in the province. They have leveraged this to gain salaried employment for their sons and diversify into urban businesses. Those connected to them, the secondarily included, have also done well. With the downturn in the economy their agricultural resources have allowed them to maintain their wellbeing.

In Herat, where little evidence was found of the degree of connectivity by the landed elite to provincial power-holders seen in Kandahar, the large landowners are also food self-sufficient, again largely through the labour of their sharecroppers but have also particularly in H1 invested in the development of vineyards. This is also the area where saffron cultivation has expanded and certain other larger landowners have expanded their cultivation through the purchase or leasing of land, particularly in H2 from the village landlord. This led to the displacement of the sharecroppers.

But most households, having insufficient or no land, have little opportunity to accumulate land or make productive investments. Where there have been better times, the first indicator has been improved consumption. When times are worse food consumption is reduced, as measured in the decline in frequency of eating meat from one a week to once a month to never. Rather their survival has hinged on seeking casual agricultural labour work in an already saturated labour market, finding marginal petty trading opportunities in the urban economy or male household members migrating for work. This has either been within Afghanistan, as with the labour migration from the Sar-i-Pul villages to the brickfields of Mazar-i-Sharif or, as in the case of the Herat households, for work in Iran. The absence of out migration to other countries from the Kandahar villages might be accounted for more by the proximity and scale of Kandahar city economy.

In sum, the opportunities to find work in the productive economy or make productive investments have been severely constrained by lack of assets, inequalities in land ownership, the lack of growth in the rural economy and a saturated labour market.

The one area of investment that is common to all households is the investment in marriage and efforts to maintain the joint household wherever possible. This points to the significance of the distributional economy in relation to the survival of households. Four aspects are addressed here: the imperative to marry sons and meet the costs of doing so; the bride price realised for the marriage of daughters and its use; the desire to maintain the joint household; and the effects of the death of the head of household on the next generation. The specific gendered issues are discussed further in the following section.

The largest investment that most households reported was in the marriage of their sons. In the Herat villages the figures ranged from USD 6,000 to 10,000, in Kandahar from USD 2,500 to 6,000 and in Sar-i-Pul from USD 2,300 to 5,400. The reasons for these locational differences are unclear but may relate to a calculus balancing the wider economic opportunities with the need to maintain the household taking into account local economies. These figures which exceed by several fold the potential annual income (USD 750) of an agricultural labourer working full time and are by any criterion a significant investment.

For some commentators the investment levels in marriage are seen as irrational and incomprehensible and the Afghan government has tried without effect to reduce them. However, as Ferguson (2015) points out with respect to South Africa, these social investments are an indispensable part of maintaining the distributional economy, where money is essential to the 'mutualities of poverty'. In the absence of sufficient employment and decent work, the ability to be able to make claims on the resources of other households becomes essential to survival and these relationships require investments and they are built through marriage ties. As the evidence on household debts makes clear, there are few households without debts and where households have few assets that can be mobilised for cash needs, recourse to borrowing from neighbours and relatives is essential.

How are these costs met? It is clear that the ability to marry sons or brothers is a major preoccupation of households which requires strategic thinking and mobilisation of resources. In the case of the Herat households, young men migrated to Iran to work for several years to accumulate sufficient funds. It may also require the sale of land assets (see H2\_B31 for example) and many households carry debts associated with marriage costs. For the Kandahar households money was often borrowed from relatives (Pain *et al.* 2016:) and the Sar-i-Pul households also borrowed cash from relatives to pay for wedding costs.



A key resource that many households have to deploy is their daughters. A common practice among poorer households is exchange marriage,<sup>15</sup> through which they can avoid significant marriage costs, though it is seen as a socially inferior practice. Where a household has more daughters than sons then the daughters can become an asset to be realised and some households reported that the received bride price was used either for investments or to generate income for consumption. Indeed, household needs for survival may put them under pressure to marry their daughters and to do so at a young age. Households are well aware of the dilemmas in such decisions and the trade-offs between survival in the short term and the long term wellbeing of their daughter. Take for example household K1\_A01, who were forced to exchange their 14-year-old daughter in order to secure a marriage arrangement for their son. The household head's wife lamented the situation and feared for her now pregnant daughter's health, but as she says, 'what could I do when there was no money in my hand to marry my son?' H3\_C18 said that if they received a proposal it would be extremely difficult to turn down given their current financial situation: 'because we are poor people, the bride price solves a lot of problems for us.'<sup>16</sup>

Household H3\_C23 in Herat engaged their daughter when she was 11 years old and she became severely depressed:

*My daughter was going to school and madrassa. She was very intelligent and able to teach younger children ...but her fiancé's family told her to stop going both to school and to the madrassa because they didn't like that their [future] bride studied. Her fiancé was also a lot older than her. As she grew up she started to hate him and she tried to commit suicide twice.*

The family broke off their daughter's engagement and fearing that her former fiancé's family would try to harm her, relocated to Herat City.

The head of household K2\_B57 in Kandahar, by contrast, married his seven daughters without collecting bride price as he was opposed to the dowry system on moral grounds, saying that it conflicted with Islamic principle and exposed the bride to being traded as a good.

The imperative to maintain the joint household is central to the distributional economy of these Afghan households and has both benefits and costs. On the benefit side it can be seen as a risk-pooling mechanism given the scarcity of work and income and a source of support at times of need, both in old age, in sickness and in marriage. In the case of the Herat households where a son had become addicted to opium and unable to work, the joint household took on the responsibility of looking after his wife and children (H1\_A01). There are of course considerable costs in terms of personal autonomy for sons, younger brothers and daughters-in-law and such joint households are often sites of considerable conflict which can lead to household separation. Cases were found where elder brothers felt they were carrying undue costs to their detriment and separated from their father's household. This did not necessarily lead to complete autonomy, or where an elder brother separated from his other brothers – a loss of ties. In the latter case (household K2\_B40) when the elder brother found himself in difficulties later his brothers supported him. But household separation has economic effects and in a number of cases the loss of income when a son separated from the household had significant effects on the income of the household from which he separated.

The other point at which household separation may take place is after the death of a father at which point a division of the assets may be triggered. In the case of one large land rich household where the father had had four wives, there was an equal land division between the families of the wives but the informant made the point that they still strongly supported each other covering between the families the

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<sup>15</sup> A reciprocal arrangement whereby the son of one households marries the daughter of a second household and in turn a boy from the second household marries a girl in the first household

<sup>16</sup> HH C18, female respondent, interview 2

significant debts of one step-brother in a trading enterprise that failed. In many other cases brothers do not divide the assets and continue to live as joint households (e.g. K1\_A10).

One investment that shows considerable cultural variation between the sites is in education. The differences between the study sites are consistent with the data on school attendance at the provincial level, although this of course says nothing of educational quality. Ranked first in terms of attendance by both girls and boys were the Herat villages, where all children were reported to be at school and girls who had graduated were becoming teachers in the village school further enabling older girls to go to school. In Sar-i-Pul, school attendance was more mixed, with the poorest village (S1) finding it difficult to send sons to school because they were needed to work and the lack of a girls' school stopped their daughters attending. In the second village S2 there was access to both girls' and boys' schools and attendance was higher; village S3 also had both boys and girls going to school although the girls' school had only been built in the last four years. In contrast, in Kandahar, almost no girls go to school because of the lack of a local primary school while boys go to school in Kandahar city. But behind this summary data on school attendance is a more important story about the role of village elite in providing access to public goods.

### **3.5 What does this tell us about class and groups in society?**

Afghan women and men live within a family which is often part of a joint household, sharing its assets of land, livestock and labour, but under the authority of a patriarch. The household exists within a web of relations of other households based on descent, marriage or neighbourliness. In turn, these households are located within villages, each with distinctive economies and land ownership patterns and their structures of authority and government, some customary, some introduced. The villages themselves are linked, mainly through personalised networks controlled by the village elite who are often also the village authorities, to district and provincial authorities and sometimes to national-level power-holders as well (Pain 2016). At every link in this chain of networks of access (Jackson 2016) personal relationships are the glue that can bond everything together. The structures of the semi-corporate institutions of the village and household and their strong patriarchal attributes, underpinned by gendered norms, clearly carry costs with respect to individual autonomy. But the ways in which these are played out against the benefits gained depend on personality, gender, age, family structure, economic class and location.

The metaphor of a chain is useful because it is ambiguous: for some it is a tether that keeps the individual in place, offering security but at a price of autonomy, but for others it can provide a means by which they can gain access to resources and prosper. But as Jackson makes clear (2016), the higher up the chain of networks, the more the networks can be governed by expediency, exclusion and brute power. What do our findings from the long-term trajectory of our panel households tell us about these relationships and networks, particularly at the household and village level? While the discussion here is primarily focused within the village it also draws from findings with respect to connections between the village and the wider world (Pain 2016), the networks of economic life that stretch from household to market place (Minoia *et al.* 2014) and the political networks that operate at district and provincial level and above (Jackson 2016).

We start with the household because as it is an institution that has endured despite, or maybe because of the conflict and, as Nancy Dupree has remarked (2004: 1), it is 'the most influential social institution in Afghan society'. But the institution of the joint household, with shared income and expenditure, is a location both of cooperation and conflict and allegiance to it comes at the cost of autonomy, for both men and women. There are few men and even fewer women who can easily exit from its constraints. Within the household, decision-making can be best conceptualised as separate spheres (Lundbert and Pollack 1993) where men and women have their own domains of authority and work is gender-segregated. At its most severe, as in many but not all of the Kandahar households, particularly of the elite, the sphere for women is deeply constrained. They have limited mobility, almost no opportunity for

economic activity and in some cases are effectively barred from any external communication – witness the response of a woman when asked if she had a mobile phone:

*one of my youngest brothers-in-law asked my husband to buy a mobile phone for me, as I am the older woman in the household. He told my husband that sometimes no one (a man) is at home and there should be a mobile phone at home ... My husband just looked at him and said 'you are my brother otherwise I would get angry; never say such a thing as to buy a mobile phone for women of this family'.<sup>17</sup>*

Yet in that very example, a younger brother asking why his sister-in-law should not have a mobile, there are signs of change. In another household (K1\_A03) it was the wife who managed the livestock and accumulated sufficient income to make a USD 2000 loan to her uncle without her husband being aware of it. Even more interesting is the case of the widow (K1\_A00) – and being a widow allows the pushing of norms – who even as a dependent household of the major landlord of the village had a mobile phone, ran a small cleaning enterprise, commuting to the city to work, and also refused marriage offers for her daughters, saying that they should be educated first and ensuring that they went to school.

The Herat villages have a less conservative environment than those of Kandahar and the majority of girls go to school, as women work as teachers in the village school, are more economically active, working as labour in the saffron fields (although for smaller wages than men) and in some cases leasing or using household lands for independent saffron production. In the Sar-i-Pul households, women are even more visible, migrating with their husbands to work in the Mazar-i-Sharif brick fields (Huot and Pain 2017).

For sons and younger brothers mobility and economic activity is not constrained, but even when married they still live subject to the authority of their father or elder brother. The ties can be broken by exit from the household, and conflict within the household can induce this. This separation can have economic consequences for the household as well as for the departing family.

Yet it is the joint household, with its assets of labour, land and livestock, that is the key economic unit and, as we have seen, its survival through seeking food security and investments in marriage is for many households the primary motivating force for action. Few households have either the land resources or connections to have been able to invest to prosper and without wider economic opportunities in Afghanistan are essentially trapped in a subsistence economy. But it is the relationships between the few with land and the many with little or no land – in other words class structures – that order both the economic and political life of the village.

For those with the fewest resources, tying oneself into a dependent relationship as a *hamsaya* in a large landlord's household in Kandahar is a means to survive, but no more. Those in such a position have to show loyalty because the cost of protest would be ejection. The next level up is the position of a sharecropper, but this carries with it interlocking contracts related to access to informal credit, protection, as well as sharing of production. As cases both from Kandahar and the Herat H2 village show, such arrangements can be terminated by the landlord at a moment's notice. Nevertheless the Herat villages show a marginally better return to sharecroppers than the Kandahar villages, reflecting their less hierarchical structures.

Outside these tied unequal relationships there are limited seasonal opportunities for agricultural labour over which there is little room to negotiate unless there are particular skills such as the pruning of vines to be offered. For most there is insufficient work within villages to ensure that basic food security needs are met, let alone provide for major household investments such as marriage. Accordingly, a considerable amount of labour in villages migrates out – to Kandahar city to work in the urban margins

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<sup>17</sup> K2\_B42, female respondent, interview 2

as petty traders or small shopkeepers, from Herat to Iran, and from Sar-i-Pul down to the brick fields of Mazar-i-Sharif. So why do so many households remain in villages where there are no economic opportunities now and where there are unlikely to be more in the future?

In part, the explanation is in the web of relationships that are available at the village level that support a distributional economy and where relationships offer some entitlement. The informants from a household that had moved to Herat city (H3\_C23) talked repeatedly of the incomparable quality of education and health clinics in the city as opposed to the village. But in their view their quality of life was worse in the city, primarily because the strength of relationships with their community had been diminished.

While power as structured by inequalities in land ownership play themselves out in terms of access to work opportunities, it is the link between land ownership, village elites, village authority and the provision of public goods that reveals the deeper workings of power. Take the cases of the Kandahar villages where the village landed elite regulated access to public good provision and captured it for their own benefit. There were many comments about how the village land elite, who both in their customary role as village heads or Maliks and in their assumed roles as head of the formal Community Development Councils (CDCs) of the National Solidarity Programme ensured that road construction serviced their houses or relief food was retained by them. Even more, while working within the cultural norms of limiting access for girls to school, many informants criticised the elite for failing to act to ensure that building of a primary school within the village so that their daughters could go to school. But there was also the reality that they needed these elite to intercede on their behalves, because they had the external connections, when the arbitrary action by security forces led to the seizure and brutal treatment of household members. Of course individuals could act to distance themselves from these elite, and did so at times but confrontation was rarely an option to be pursued.

The village elite in villages H1 and H2 acted in a similar way, if to a lesser degree, capturing public goods such as drinking wells for private benefit (village H2) and recruiting family members to work in schools or in the local militia village (village H1). In Sar-i-Pul the head of S3\_C2 was completely open about the cut that he took from project funds. Here as in the Kandahar villages, the village elite had good connections up to the district level which needed to be called upon at times of need. The Herat villages and the surrounding district have also seen the expansion of saffron cultivation, promoted both by donors and government as a legal alternative to the cultivation of opium poppy and as a crop to enhance women's participation in economic activities. The saffron growers associations that have been formed and seen as a key part of the intervention have usually been established by the village landed elite who act as lenders of credit to other farmers and who are connected or are even part owners of key saffron trading companies. But it is a semi-perennial crop with a five to six year cropping cycle with high capital investments costs and returns that only come from the second year onwards. It is a crop that only those with sufficient land or reliable sources of other income are able to grow it. Those who have grown it have gained considerable benefits, leading in one case to both the substantial purchase of lands and leasing of additional lands in village H2.

The Sar-i-Pul villages in contrast are politically isolated: the study district has no provincial council member, the governor is from another district, comes to the office only once a month and has limited connections in the district. The main channel that the village elites have used to gain connections at the district and provincial level is through the CDC, but this has limited leverage. It is the labour brokers or *jammadors* who provide the key external connections to the brick kilns in Mazar. However, this is a relationship often founded on debt, which may lead to longer-term debt bondage (Huot and Pain 2017).

## 4 Discussion

So in sum, what do these rural household livelihood trajectories tell us? Consistent with the national-level statistics (World Bank 2015) they point to a survival economy for many, about life standing still and a dribbling away of the assets that they have. The signs of running out of options were visible in 2009 (Kantor and Pain 2011) and matters now are no better, if not worse.

Without question, there is both temporal and spatial variability and it is not all one long decline. Over time the increasing investment in village public goods through the National Solidarity Programme and in education and health have all contributed to a wider availability of public goods in many if not all villages – witness the Kandahar villages and the missing primary schools for girls. However, even those gains are faltering as public good provision become subject to district-level political settlements and rent-seeking practices over which central government has no control (Echavez 2016). The flow of funds from military and development expenditure created a reconstruction economy from which a few drew enormous benefits and from which the many derived some trickle down benefits in a cash-rich economy. The rise and fall and perhaps now return of the opium economy brought a level of cash income and food security to many rural areas that had not been seen before, but it was a short-term prosperity.

There are also strong contrasts to be made between specific locations – the differences between the rainfed villages of the Sar-i-Pul hills (or the mountain villages of Badakhshan, Pain 2010c) and the irrigated villages of Herat which in turn can be contrasted with the peri-urban villages of Kandahar. Also striking is the distinctive nature of village economies within a location, as in Herat, structured by the availability of irrigation water, history, land ownership patterns and the practices of the village elite. All these elements are contributory structural factors that have shaped the idiosyncratic trajectories of individual households.

But the rural economy has not grown and what is striking is the extent to which land and labour relations remain fundamentally not commoditised. Access to land is accounted for much more by patron-client relations and non-contractual obligations than market forces, explaining why on the whole capitalist processes of land accumulation and dispossession have not taken place. Wages, often paid in kind rather than cash are determined more by custom and segmented by gender, locality and age. These are grounds alone to be deeply doubtful about the assumptions made in the ASR (World Bank 2014a) about the potential for agriculture growth to create jobs. Thus, it is social relationships rather than market relations based on transaction costs and profit maximising that characterise the nature of exchange and economic behaviour. The enduring nature of this heavily socially embedded economy is far from unique and continues to characterise rural India, for example (Harriss-White 2004). But it is the relative security that it offers under conditions of conflict that may in part explain its persistence.

Of course there are markets in rural Afghanistan and the buying and selling of agricultural commodities has been long been a characteristic of it. Equally, there have been processes of technical change in the past with the spread of new wheat varieties, expansion of vegetable cultivation in Nangarhar and the spread of new fruit varieties in Wardak, for example (Fitzherbert 2007). Rural Afghanistan has a monetised economy with both subsistence and market elements. But while the growing of crops specifically for the market such as onions in Nangarhar (Minoia *et al.* 2014), saffron in Herat (Minoia and Pain 2016) and even opium poppy may have made the social institutions that underpin market exchange in Afghanistan more economic in their content and role, it is still the social institutions that drive the nature of economic action.

The social institutions that underpin economic life in the study villages are closely related to patterns of inequality in land ownership, with many villages having a small proportion of households owning most of the land, with many more households landless. Given the historical and continuing persistence of the

importance of the village in the social and economic life of households and the achievement of livelihood security, the effects of these differential land ownership patterns and the way they underpin the playing out of power relations both within the village and its external connections (Pain 2016) need understanding. They form the basis of the nature of relationships that exist between households and variously determine (Kantor and Pain 2011) whether such relations are reciprocal between equals, hierarchical with varying elements of exploitation and obligation, or forms of elite inclusion where better-off households establish alliances to maintain their position (as seen in K1). Many households as we have seen are embedded in hierarchical relations and are not autonomous.

The fact that many, even if not all households remain tied to these relationships by forms of loyalty does not mean that they are unaware of the costs of these dependencies even if in their calculus the advantages outweigh them. They comment on the unfairness of it but the options of exit for many are limited since the world outside the village is characterised by similar relational networks of access (Jackson 2016; Pain 2016) that govern the village world. The access and opportunities outside village life are limited and only the bold, albeit with the necessary supportive networks are able to take those steps. Many are acutely aware of the degree to which the landed elite act in their own interests, capturing resources for themselves or failing to act in the best interests of the village such as in the provision of primary schools for girls. Equally, they are aware of when the village leadership does act in the interests of the village as a whole. But opportunities for resistance are limited and where options have run out, households do exit (household H3\_C23).

There is within the accounts of most households and villages a pervasive undertone of what might be termed a quiet or silent (and not so silent) violence (Boyce and Hartman 1983; Watts 2013; Pain *et al.* 2016) generated through the social and cultural hierarchies that characterise village life and the world outside them. It is variable in its intensity and effects. The most systematic form of its expression is in the restrictions that women face through deprivation of access to communication, education and economic activity, although as we have seen in the case of certain women in Kandahar, some women do find ways to accumulate income, work outside the home and achieve a degree of independence. It is more difficult in Kandahar than in the Herat villages, where most girls go to school, while in Sar-i-Pul the necessary involvement of girls in non-farm labour as a consequence of poverty may reduce access to education.

Another dimension of this violence is the visible anxiety and insecurity that dependent households live with, never sure whether the patron-client relationship that exists today may not be arbitrarily severed tomorrow, requiring them to serve and respond to whatever is required of them in order to maintain that dependence. When the sharecroppers of village H2 were no longer needed they were simply ejected, despite the long history of their work for the landlord. Equally the powerful – often the village leader or Arbob – are in a position to threaten and command and do so (see the case of H2\_B35). Lack of obedience to their commands carries the risk that they can have you jailed. Indeed, arbitrary action by district authorities and various security forces is a constant threat to be lived with. In turn, negotiating with these authorities to secure the release of a member of your household or to resolve a conflict requires the connections and actions of the village elite to mediate on your behalf. Opportunities for resistance to these elite are thus limited.

Underpinning these deeply unequal structures, particularly in the well irrigated villages, is a basic fact: the resources to live an agricultural life are held by a very few while there are very many who seek the possibility to have such a life, because of lack of other options. It puts those with resources in an enormously powerful position that they do not hesitate to use to their advantage and it is one reason why there can be no negotiation over wage rates. Many of course cannot find sufficient work even to survive in the village and have to leave to find casual work in urban areas or abroad. Yet they stay living in villages and in joint households for what they offer – access to a distributional economy.

Afghanistan of course has not run out of land but it has hit the buffers in terms of the availability of irrigated land and little in the short, medium or even long term is likely to change that. For the many landless there are few future productive or employment opportunities to be found within agriculture, except for at best a very marginal partial subsistence component. They are surplus to the ability of an agricultural economy to absorb even if it were to grow. As the European Union seeks to return those who have escaped from it back to Afghanistan, Pakistan ejects its long-term refugee population and Afghanistan's urban economy fails to take off, the size of the surplus population, those unable to find gainful or productive employment will grow in number. People will continue to try to leave for lack of anything better. In this Afghanistan is not alone as jobless growth in Asia has blocked agrarian transitions elsewhere, trapping many with little work and sustenance in the rural economy (Li 2013).

#### 4.1 The imagined 'rural'

So why do rural Afghans, government and donors still, despite the evidence, hold faith in what an agrarian economy could do for them and for Afghanistan? Most rural Afghans describe themselves as farmers even if most if not all of their cash income comes from non-farm sources. It is a definition of residence and a distributional economy but not for many an economic reality. Tania Murray Li (2014), in observing exactly the same puzzle in the Sulawesi highlands, termed this 'frontier thinking', where memories of the past structure aspirations for the future. This is not as she says false consciousness but reflective of a deeper cultural memory and identity seen through rose-tinted glasses of a better non-conflictual past. The hope is still that the old repertoires might return, or at least not go quite yet, but it is difficult to envisage new repertoires or what a different future might be.

Policy thinking has not helped. Donors and policy-makers have also stuck with the old script of transitions from rural to urban (Dercon, 2013) and reapplied used models of evolutionary structural change to new contexts and countries. The assumptions in the ASR (World Bank 2014a) are an act of faith: the language of 'first movers' and a commercialising agrarian economy in high potential places – close to markets and with good land and water – and the actions that might follow are unlikely any time soon to wrench Afghanistan's rural economy from its social foundations into a fully commoditised economy or one that will offer decent jobs or generate the surplus that is expected. It does of course leave a very large residual rural population who are not 'first movers', for whom at best social protection and food security might be offered. But that has not been available for them over the last 15 years.

The ASR (World Bank 2014a) is based on assumptions about the possibility of an agrarian transformation in Afghanistan, led by large and medium sized farmers in the best resourced and market-linked parts of the country. There is a striking absence of any substantive discussion on the extent of landlessness in rural areas and what this might tell us about agrarian change processes and prospects. What drives the prospective view of the ASR are assumptions of possible market driven transitions and what they might do for employment creation, although the sums, mechanics and assumptions around employment creation are largely absent from the main document.

One reading of the extent of landlessness in Afghanistan is that it evidences the fact that supply of cultivable land in Afghanistan has run out or these households would not be landless. The degree of outright landlessness tells us something about the scale of land scarcity and it is not something that could be addressed by land reform, which anyhow would not be politically feasible. There is not of course an absolute shortage of land in Afghanistan but the cultivated area is a very small percentage of the total land area. Irrigated land is no more than 5.1% and rainfed land 7% of the land area.<sup>18</sup> There are also extensive areas of common lands often used for grazing but over the last decade in many areas these have been *de facto* privatised by the powerful and sometimes not so powerful with the installation of deep wells to provide irrigation for opium poppy or tree crops. But rainfed land is

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<sup>18</sup> <http://www.fao.org/ag/agp/agpc/doc/Counprof/afgan/afgan.htm>, accessed December 30th 2016

cultivated opportunistically and is only productive in good rainfall years. The core productive land resource is irrigated land and it is the limits of water supply that constrains expansion of cultivable land.

To this the standard policy response is that we need to invest in new irrigation structures, make irrigation more efficient and the area of irrigated land could be increased. The case has been repeatedly made but there has been limited action. Even with the best of intentions, available resources and an implementation efficiency that has not been seen over the last decade, and given the lead time to realise the investment, an increased area of reliably irrigated land is unlikely to keep pace with the rural demographic expansion (see Box 1: The decline of the Balkh River Irrigation System). Moreover, it assumes a reliability of rainfall which ignores the likely effects of climate change leading to reduced winter rainfall – on which Afghanistan’s irrigation systems depend.

#### **Box 1: The decline of the Balkh River Irrigation System**

The evidence from the Balkh River irrigation system on the northern Turkmen plains (Pain 2010a) identifies the challenges faced in increasing the area of reliably irrigated land. The Balkh system dates back more than 1000 years and has a command area of around 425,000 ha providing irrigation water to four districts of Balkh through an extensive network of canals. Districts in other surrounding provinces also in theory receive water from it. However, the system has all but broken down with the progressive unavailability of irrigation water the further downstream you go. The reasons are complex but combine elements of reduced water flows, increasing demands through crop intensification processes balancing decreased individual farm sizes across the generations and expanded non-agricultural uses from a growing urban population. Superimposed on these are abuses of power by upstream districts over downstream districts and corrupt government, a feature also of the Sharshashma river that feeds the Sar-i-Pul villages that were studied (Huot and Pain 2017). These long-term processes are progressively marginalising downstream rural households, reducing the land they can cultivate and the agricultural component of their livelihood.

## **4.2 ‘Late development’**

But why the term ‘late development’ and what might this mean? This could be read as stating that Afghanistan is ‘behind’ both in its state formation processes, in its economic development and achieving good welfare outcomes for its citizens. It could also be seen as Afghanistan having come late to the processes of structural transformation that have characterised the development of other countries (Losch *et al.* 2012). These are both true to a point and much of the intervention model applied to Afghanistan has explicitly assumed this and that the transitions of the past are possible in the present. The persistent narrative of agriculture as the driver of Afghanistan’s economic development, visible in the Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework 2016 and bolstered by the World Bank-led ASR (World Bank 2014a), assumes that Afghanistan can follow the model of agriculturally led development and agrarian transitions that have happened elsewhere in the past (World Bank 2009). ‘Late’ therefore is simply a question of catching up through a turbo-charged fast-track intervention.

But the conditions of the past are not those of the present and Afghanistan comes to the normative development transition narrative with some singular disadvantages. For a start, its demographic transition has already taken place, in contrast to earlier agrarian transitions as in Europe where the demographic transition followed the agrarian one. The safety valve that was present in the past to dispose of surplus population, that of international migration when some 60 million people between the period of 1850 and 1930 migrated out of Europe, (35 million alone going to the US – Losch *et al.* 2012: 4) is no longer available. In the past the west enforced captive markets through colonial empires, but under conditions of globalisation Afghanistan is severely handicapped in its economic competitiveness (Chang 2002) and faces challenges from its neighbours which a free trade policy only exacerbates.



It may therefore be more of an issue not of 'late development' but of being 'too late' and that the conditions of the past no longer apply in the present. As will be seen, a reading of the evidence on livelihood trajectories cannot but lead to a very pessimistic assessment for the future of agrarian based livelihoods in rural Afghanistan. Some tough questioning of the assumptions that a sufficiently large productive economy can be generated in rural Afghanistan is in order. The evidence from this paper shows strongly the existence of a distributional economy – entitlements and claims on household resources and networks – and a moral economy linked to patron-client relations that hold the fabric of rural Afghanistan together. But in line with Li (2014), Ferguson (2015) and Rigg (2016), this paper concludes that there is a large and growing 'surplus' rural population. This is not surplus in a Malthusian sense – too many people to feed – but surplus to the ability of a rural market or capitalist economy to provide the means to live through productive activity or decent work. There is no room left for many rural people within Afghanistan's rural economy. Of course they are still there – where else can they go? – but the struggle to risk all and generate remittance income through local and more distant migration points to the meagre opportunities that are available locally to them.

Thus, returning to the broader questions of what we might learn from livelihood trajectories in Afghanistan about the role of government, aid agencies, markets and the private sector in enabling people to make a secure living, the outcome is clear that many have not been enabled to make a secure living. While access to and use of public goods has certainly improved, it has been uneven. This unevenness needs some comment: if one refers back to Table 2 the unequal spending between provinces is striking. Sar-i-Pul of the three provinces has the highest rates and depths of poverty but it has received the least funding and its outcomes in terms of safe drinking water are extremely poor. The reasons for this are that conflict status has driven decisions on expenditure patterns (and see wider evidence of this in Pain 2012: 19). From an equity point of view, it is difficult to defend the neglect of provinces such as Sar-i-Pul. The markets and private sector imagined in donor models and the supply-side programmes that have emerged from these bear little relation to how things actually exist and work; as Jackson (2016) makes clear, the broad effect of interventions across many spheres has been to help build a state constituted of informal networks of access. It is those relationships that regulate people's lives.

## 5 Implications

What might this mean for the future? Before coming to this, a point needs to be made about method and evidence generation. The evidence and analysis offered in this paper with its supporting case studies has been built on an inductive process with no grand assumptions of what should change or models against which to test and question the specific changes found. The data is not representative in a statistical sense but in keeping with the depth and understanding it has been interested in, it has been keen to locate households in their specific institutional and resource contexts. It has been an iterative process across the phases, learning over time and slowly building understanding at various scalar dimensions to link the micro with the meso and above.

It is difficult not to wonder why the ASR is still reworking the older arguments about the possibilities of agricultural transitions. There is an existing critical literature, (Losch *et al.* 2012; Dercon 2013; Li 2009; 2013), which the evidence from this paper supports that casts strong doubts on its universal validity or the means by which it can be achieved (Chang 2009). Even more surprising is the fact that little enquiry appears to have been made or shown in the exercise as to why agriculture for the previous 12 years had simply failed to do what was expected of it. The scene setting is normative, descriptive and short, preceding the main task of saying what should be done, without of course having made any attempt to analyse why this has not come about already.

So what should be done if, as is suggested, the ASR is at best likely to follow other policy documents into Afghanistan's policy archive? In asking that question this paper is not in a position to develop arguments and policies for Afghanistan's economic development to drive the growth that is undoubtedly needed. Rather its focus is on the more immediate and specific needs of a deeply impoverished rural population, many of whom are food insecure, without decent work and without the means in the near future to be able to secure it. If there is indeed a 'surplus' rural population as this paper suggests, its short and medium-term needs are what should be prioritised. This requires attention in the short term to supporting the distributional economy as much as the productive one where efforts have so far been exclusively located.

On the distributional side, direct forms of social assistance through cash payments to households are an obvious option. There will undoubtedly be challenges of doing this without rent-seeking practices inserting themselves but there is scope to learn from other countries where it has been done. Employment schemes that generate work on a reliable and sufficient basis for public good investment may be the easiest mechanism to bring into operation and there are clearly lessons to be learnt from India's National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) which guarantees the right to work for 100 days on a public works project at the official minimum wage (Li 2009). The lessons relate not only to how these programmes work but also to the social forces in India that brought both 'a right to food' and 'right to work' onto the political agenda (Li 2009), social forces that are notably absent in Afghanistan. The establishment of these rights needs to be linked with continuing support for quality education and health services and access to them. Both, however, need to be based on a careful analysis of context to take account of the ability of local power-holders to control and capture external resources.

On the productive side much greater attention to achieving food security is needed. As Chang (2009) argues, there is a hierarchy of human needs and food is the basic consumption good. When a country is at a very low level of economic development, as Afghanistan is, not ensuring basic food security, both in terms of supply and access, has short-term as well as irreversible negative long-term consequences for health and educational outcomes. The priority is thus to focus on the promotion of staple crops (Losch *et al.* 2012), a feature of Food and Agriculture Organisation's programme in Afghanistan prior to 2001 that was discarded in the new political dispensation (Fitzherbert 2007). None of this is to reject the opportunities of market-oriented agriculture where it is appropriate, but a much more measured

approach to market development and the realisation of its limits is needed. However, it is likely to require a level of public investment in support of infrastructure and input and output markets, including tariffs to reduce risks, which was seen in the past (Chang 2009) but which current policy approaches are hostile to.

The biggest challenge is jobs – and if there is any chance of long-term decent job creation, that lies in the urban rather than the rural economy. However, it is difficult to see under current circumstances how this will come about.

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