

Transforming Afghanistan? Seeking coherence between technical solutions and political processes: lessons from the field

Key messages

- Afghanistan has a deeply impoverished rural population, many of whom are food insecure, without decent work and without the means to secure it.
- There is a huge gap between policy models and programme theories of change as to how things should work in Afghanistan's sub-national governance, markets and village life, and the reality.
- Village elites and 'networks of access' profoundly affect the ability of Afghans to access public goods and economic opportunities. External interventions need to factor this in to programme design and implementation.

In 2002, the future looked positive for post-Taliban Afghanistan. The international community committed to rebuilding the country into a democratic, modern, and prosperous society. New national plans were developed, funds committed, programmes rolled out – all designed to put Afghanistan on a path of political and economic transformation. Fifteen years on, Afghanistan remains a deeply troubled place with rising insecurity. Early gains made in expanding basic services such as healthcare or education, and infrastructure, are now being threatened or eroded. Its economy has all but collapsed and growth rates have fallen. Poverty rates have not declined since 2002; around one in four of the working population are unemployed; and according to the World Bank (2015), an estimated 40% of the population are still living below the poverty line. In spite of a persistent policy narrative that agriculture would be the engine of transformation for Afghanistan, many people in rural areas are trapped in a failing rural economy.

The Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) based in Kabul, Afghanistan, has been researching economic and political life at village, district and province level as part of its contribution to the Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium. SLRC is an eight-country, six-year research programme investigating how people in places affected by conflict make a living and access basic services. This briefing paper draws from a three year research programme examining how people make a living in rural Afghanistan and the role that government, aid agencies, markets and the private sector have played in this.

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Credit: Peretz Partensky



An animal market in Konar, Afghanistan.
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Now people are not giving credit to farmers as in the past but it does not mean that credit system or relations are totally finished, nowadays farmers solve their problems through personal connections and relations with shopkeepers, villagers and friends.

Methods

The Afghanistan research programme draws on a long term panel of households established in 2002. The third round of study has drawn its evidence from eight villages and sixty-four households in Herat, Kandahar and Sar-i-Pul provinces. In addition contrasting village contexts were characterized, labour and commodity markets were scrutinized and provincial and district political life investigated.

Main findings

The model for Afghanistan's agricultural development must be rethought

There has been enormous donor investment in an unsuccessful strategy for agriculturally-led economic growth that is out of step with Afghan realities. Many people in rural areas have not been enabled to make a secure living and are trapped in a rural economy that is failing them. Evidence¹ points to a large and growing landless rural population who do not and cannot in the future derive much of a living from being there, but survive on remittance income from local and distant migration. So why do they stay? In part it reflects the lack of options to go elsewhere. But it also seems to be a response to risk and deep insecurity through investment in social relationships: the mutual dependencies of poverty and a strong distributional economy provide certain – albeit limited – entitlements not available elsewhere.

Yet the view that agriculture will drive transformation for Afghanistan persists, most recently in the 2014 Agricultural

Sector Review (ASR)². However, the ASR appears to make assumptions without questioning why there are no signs of such a transition happening. The ASR's language of 'first movers' and a commercialising agrarian economy in locations with high potential may drive a market oriented agriculture in those places, but are unlikely to drive Afghanistan's entire rural economy into a full market economy that will offer decent jobs or generate the surplus that is expected. Meanwhile it leaves a very large residual rural population with limited land in marginal places who are not 'first movers', for whom at best social protection and food security might be offered.

The markets and private sector imagined in donor models and programmes bear little relation to how things in Afghanistan actually exist and work

Market relations at all levels are heavily socially embedded, structured by gender, identity and place. At lower levels, personalised relationships determine access to informal credit based on trust to lubricate the working of markets. Here it is credit in social terms – the reputation for fair and honest dealing – that is essential. It is assumed by the ASR that it is lack of formal credit that constrains market driven agriculture. But, as SLRC research into the regulation of Nangarhar's onion market makes clear³, the demand for formal credit is more likely to be an outcome of the growth of informal credit relations than the means by which credit supply grows.⁴

1 Pain, A and Huot, D (2016) Life in the times of late development: Afghanistan Livelihood Trajectories 2002-2016. SLRC: London

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

3 Minoia, G., Mumtaz, W., and Pain, A. (2014). The social life of the onion: the informal regulation of the onion market in Nangarhar, Afghanistan. Working Paper 26, SLRC: London

4 Tilley, (2005) Trust and rule. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

As a farmer in Jalalabad commented:

*'Now people are not giving credit to farmers as in the past but it does not mean that credit system or relations are totally finished, nowadays farmers solve their problems through personal connections and relations with shopkeepers, villagers and friends.'*⁵

At higher levels, the intertwining of the political and economic market place promotes rent seeking practices and the regulation of access to informal credit to control the market.

Access to public goods has improved, but is uneven: village elites and networks of access determine who gets what

It is misleading to see education, health and safe drinking water as public goods available to all. Cultural values mediate availability, as the contrast between Kandahar and Herat in access to education for women makes clear.⁶ But equally significant is the role of village elites and 'networks of access'.⁷ As the evidence on provincial governance makes clear, state building interventions have been unsuccessful at building democratic societies, enhancing rule of law encouraging market economies. Rather, the evidence suggests that there is no dichotomy between state and non-state practices or even a clear hybrid order⁸, but a non-hierarchical networked limited access order.⁹

Relationship-based networks of access produce and regulate power through the distribution of resources¹⁰ and are characterised by connectivity, personalised relationships, short term futures and compulsory engagement. As one informant explained about services in Kandahar:

*'if you want better access to services in Kandahar, you need three things: power, money and relations.'*¹¹

Findings from SLRC's village context work¹² point to a more general lesson about the incoherence of interventions with existing structures of accountability. A village traditional leader is often also the head of the Community Development Council

(CDC). The rules of the Afghan National Solidarity Programme (NSP) – an initiative to develop local democratically-elected institutions to identify, plan and manage local reconstruction – expect him to behave in a good discipline-based manner of accountability within the CDC, between the CDC and NSP, and between the CDC and households. However, households within the village expect him to behave in an entirely different way, using networks of access and discretion through patronage connections to secure resources or assistance. How can the CDC be expected to build impartial technocratic linkages with line agencies at district level, when it knows that the village head can leverage resources for the village more quickly through personalised relations?

These issues of incoherence between design assumptions and logic of sub-national governance programmes and actual practices are, if anything, even more salient at district and provincial level. Short term programming with technocratic models of how things should work and little understanding of the logic and practices that drive current relationships of accountability are unlikely to achieve the effects that they desire and may, through the resources they provide, be fuelling the very practices and behaviour patterns that they seek to address.

Conclusions and recommendations

There are considerable gaps between policy models and programme theories of change as to how things should work in sub-national governance, markets and village life and how they actually work. One core message that emerges is that de-contextualised technocratic practices, delivered through fast-track, short-term programmes with shallow reach interventions have not delivered durable impacts. They are often part of the problem, as a result of often being poorly grounded in context, paying little attention to actual implementation effects, and systematically failing to learn lessons. Whilst there are no easy answers to what should be done instead, there are important indications about what may work better in the future.

Incoherence at a programmatic level between design assumptions and actual practices is one challenge. A greater one is the lack of policy coherence within the international intervention. This is reinforced by short-termism and abstract technocratic models of change that failed to take account of friction when they hit the ground and the existing logic of practices. Thus, rather than a focus on how actual or everyday government falls short of an ideal model, much greater attention is needed to how public authority is being made and practiced through conflict, competition and politics.¹³ In the current context, enduring instability is the most likely trajectory. At the higher levels of policy and programming the important lessons to carry forward are of what should not be done and how not to do programming. Politically this means continuing engagement with the elite is necessary but for the long game rather than short term goals.

5 Respondent 6b, Jalalabad, Nangarhar, February 2014. From: Minoia et al. (2014). The social life of the onion: the informal regulation of the onion market in Nangarhar, Afghanistan.

6 Pain and Huot (2017). Life in the times of 'late development': Livelihood trajectories in Afghanistan, 2002 – 2016. ODI: London

7 Jackson, A. (2016). Seeing like the networked state: subnational governance in Afghanistan. ODI: London

8 Meagher, K., De Herdt, T and Titeca, K (2014) Unravelling public authority: paths of hybrid governance in Africa. IS Academy, Research Brief #10.

9 North, D., Wallis, J.J. and Weingast, B.R (2009) Violence and Social Orders: A Conceptual Framework for Interpreting Recorded Human History. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

10 Jackson, A. and Minoia, G. (2016). The rules of the game: towards a theory of networks of access. Briefing Paper 19, SLRC: London

11 Interview with human rights official, Kandahar City, November 2014. From: Jackson, A. (2016). Seeing like the networked state: subnational governance in Afghanistan. ODI: London

12 Pain, A. (2016). Using Village context analysis in Afghanistan: Methods and wider implications. Working Paper 46, SLRC: London

13 Lund, C (2016) Rule and Rupture: State Formation through the Production of Property and Citizenship. Development and Change 47 (6): 1199–1128



A farmer weeds his vegetable field in Nangahar Province, Afghanistan, as part of the AusAID-supported National Solidarity Program. Source: Flickr. Licence: CC BY 4.0.

NSP and community-based development models have been effective in some contexts in delivering villages' public goods, but are formulaic and urgently need to be refined and refocused.

Continuing support to villages for public good provision is recommended but changes to community based development approaches are needed. Our context analysis argues for a greater understanding, agility and flexibility in design and implementation practices than has been given so far to the CDD model, given its ambitions for coverage and uniformity of process. These ambitions are raised even higher by the proposed 2016 Citizens Charter, which aims to improve delivery of core infrastructure and social services to communities through strengthened development councils. Village context analysis cannot help with the more fundamental challenges of taking forward such an ambitious agenda in a country fractured by conflict, where central government is increasingly losing control of large swathes of territory and in which the layers of government above the village remain massively dysfunctional.

Political settlements at all levels have a profound influence on access to public goods and economic opportunities, and need to be better considered in programme design and implementation. Donors and ministries are often criticised for not focusing enough on technical and financial aspects that would improve the quality and effectiveness of interventions, but there is a deeper problem. Interventions frequently overlook political factors that can work against qualitative improvements and more open access. The failure to adequately understand what existed before, and what new political and social dynamics emerged after the fall of the Taliban, meant that the international community did not adequately factor the right constraints and challenges into their programming approaches. A study of healthcare and education found stark differences in both

quality and access largely due to local political settlements¹⁴. The development of smarter tools and approaches, employing sophisticated analysis that is responsive to local political dynamics, is required.

Urgent attention is required to address the immediate 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. These should be prioritised, with attention to supporting the distributional economy as much as the productive one. On the distributional side direct cash transfer payments directly to households would be one approach. Since the evidence is that women keep the income they generate, targeting such transfers to women might be possible if appropriately framed as a family payment or child welfare. There is no doubt that in some regions this would be seen as deeply subversive. Employment schemes that generate work on a reliable and sufficient basis for public good investment may be another or complementary mechanism to provide sufficient work and cash income to households. This needs to be linked with continuing support for both improving the quality of and access to education and health services. 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.

Much more must be done to address the underlying causes of food insecurity, an issue largely neglected since 2001. When a country is at a very low level of economic

14 Echavez, C (2016) The Political Economy of Education and Health Service Delivery in Afghanistan. Kabul: AREU

development, failure to ensure 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 to focus on the promotion of staple crops¹⁵. But it requires a level of public investment to which current policy approaches are hostile, in support of infrastructure and input and output markets to reduce risks. There are opportunities for a market-oriented agriculture where it is appropriate but a much more measured approach and a realisation of its limits is needed. This should include imposing modest import tariffs for key competing cash crops (e.g. vegetables, fruit) to give a degree of protection and counter the price advantages that imports often have, due to support to these crops in their country of origin. But the biggest challenge is jobs, and the possibilities for international migration are progressively becoming blocked. Long term decent job creation is more likely to lie in the urban than the rural economy. However it is difficult to see under current circumstances how this will come about. In the short term focused labour intensive rural infrastructure and urban public work programmes could do much to address the acute need for work and income of Afghanistan's rural population.

This Briefing Paper is based on a range of SLRC research in Afghanistan, including SLRC Report 12 *Seeing like the networked state: subnational governance in Afghanistan*. Jackson, A (2016). *SLRC Working Paper 46: Using village context analysis in Afghanistan: methods and wider implications*, Adam Pain, July 2016 ; (http://www.securelivelihoods.org/publications_details.aspx?resourceid=415&Page=2)

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Potato farmers working on their farm in Bamyán, Afghanistan.
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15 Losch, B., Freguin-Gresh, S and White, E.T. (2012) *Structural Transformation and Rural Change Revisited: Challenges for Late Developing Countries in a Globalizing World*. Africa Development Forum series, Washington DC: The World Bank