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BRIEFING PAPER

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October 2005

Alternative Livelihoods: Substance or Slogan?

Alternative Livelihoods

This briefing paper seeks to clarify what is required to effectively pursue alternative livelihoods as a goal of the counter narcotics objective. It argues for an approach in which conventional development interventions are viewed through a counter narcotics lens in order to establish how they might impact on the drivers of opium poppy cultivation.

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Overview

In recent years Afghanistan has attracted significant international attention as the world's largest producer of opium, with its production representing an estimated 50 percent of GDP. Views on how to eliminate opium production vary, but considerable emphasis has been given to the development of alternative livelihoods for opium farmers. However under current conditions in Afghanistan there are still strong incentives to cultivate opium poppy: it remains a low-risk crop in a high-risk environment for both farmers and traders. While most stand to gain something from its cultivation, it is the few that gain the most.

The elimination of opium production in Afghanistan is dependent on more than encouraging licit on-farm, off-farm and non-farm income opportunities. Critical to the realisation of counter narcotics objectives is the achievement of broader development goals, including establishment of those institutions required for formal governance, promotion of a strong civil society and strengthening of social protection mechanisms. The multisectoral nature of the task, targeted more at nation-building and reconstruction than solely drug control, points to the need for broad ownership of the drug control agenda by the full range of national, bilateral, multilateral and non-government development actors.

Given the extent of opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan, the complexity of reasons for its cultivation, and comparative experience in other regions such as South-East Asia and Latin America, the model of "alternative development" based on discrete area-based projects is unlikely to contribute significantly to counter narcotics objectives. The emergence of an "alternative livelihoods" approach, which seeks to mainstream counter narcotics objectives into national

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Acknowledgements. The authors gratefully acknowledge input and helpful comments on drafts of this paper from Paul Fishstein, Sarah Lister and Meredith Lewis.

Pressure to achieve quick impact is generating unrealistic expectations of how and when “alternative livelihoods” can be developed.

development strategies and programmes, is an attempt to respond to the causes of opium poppy cultivation and to create links with the wider state-building agenda.

However there are already a number of dangers evident in the current alternative livelihoods response. The term itself, best understood as doing “development in a drugs environment”, is profoundly unsatisfactory, and allows much to masquerade under the label. There are unrealistic expectations of how and when alternative livelihoods can be developed, and the concept remains a virtual one as the results of this approach are yet to be seen. The push by authorities for a sharp decline in opium-cultivated area is in danger of establishing a *quid pro quo*, with an expectation of funding for alternative livelihoods on the basis of achievements in decreasing opium poppy area. This puts the cart before the horse.

The establishment of alternative livelihoods as a pillar of the government’s counter narcotics strategy confuses means and goals: it should be seen as the latter but it is increasingly becoming defined as a sector in itself that attracts its own funding, like eradication and interdiction. There is a tendency to badge programmes as alternative livelihoods, but these programmes are generally not implemented together in any given area – consequently the synergies necessary for maximising development impact and addressing the multi-functional role that opium cultivation plays in rural livelihood strategies are not developed. Few of these programmes pay much attention to a full analysis of the drivers of opium poppy cultivation, and their proposed interventions are heavily biased towards areas of high potential for agricultural production where opium poppy cultivation is not as concentrated.

This paper seeks to clarify what is required to effectively pursue alternative livelihoods as a goal of the counter narcotics strategy. It argues for an approach in which conventional development interventions are viewed through a counter narcotics lens in order to establish how they might impact on the drivers of opium poppy cultivation, and how more effective targeting, timing and coordination with other programming might together make a serious impact on the levels of opium production.

I. The Opium Economy and Livelihoods

In Afghanistan's current economic and political climate there are distinct advantages to cultivating opium poppy. It is a high-value, low-weight commodity for which there is a demand. Opium poppy is so well suited to Afghanistan's climatic conditions that it produces yields of opium and morphine that are higher than the global average and maximises returns on scarce irrigation water. There are sufficient returns at each stage of the supply chain and, despite Afghanistan's fractured infrastructure, there is a well-linked market in terms of credit, purchase, transport and processing. Some estimates suggest that for every hectare of opium poppy cultivated, as many as 5.6 jobs are created in the rural non-farm economy.¹

The traditional credit system, which provides an advance payment on a future crop, has increasingly favoured opium poppy cultivation over other crops. In areas where opium poppy cultivation has become entrenched, access to credit is dependent on a farmer's willingness to cultivate opium poppy. The willingness and possession of the requisite skills to cultivate opium poppy has increasingly determined sharecroppers' access to land, and the rental value of land is determined by potential opium yield rather than wheat productivity. Under such conditions there is no other crop that can provide the same range of benefits, and when it declines, the opportunities for on-farm income will also decline, driving people off the land.

It is critical to recognise, however, that the economic advantages associated with cultivating opium poppy differ according to the assets that farmers have at their disposal. For the relatively few large landowners, opium poppy represents a high-value crop that can accrue even greater value if it is sold after the harvest season when prices rise. Through inequitable land tenure arrangements, a landowner can accrue up to two thirds of the final opium yield (despite contributing only 20 percent of the total costs of production) and

purchase opium in advance at rates considerably below the harvest price. This can lead to the generation of windfall profits. The position for the land poor is quite different. For this group, opium poppy is not just a source of income: it provides opportunities to access land on a sharecropping or tenancy basis as well as drawing on the labour supply of the household. It provides access to both on-farm income and, in the typical mixed cropping system practised in Afghanistan (even amongst poppy growers), the means of producing food crops for household consumption. In this way, opium can define the "creditworthiness" of the land poor. Without it, access to basic food items, agricultural inputs and funds for health care becomes severely constrained.

Opium poppy cultivation also creates a demand for itinerant labour to weed and harvest the crop. Based on UNODC's estimate that 131,000 hectares of opium poppy were cultivated in the 2003–04 growing season, the crop would have generated approximately 46 million labour days of which potentially one third² would have been for hired labour. Where a household has more than one male able to follow the staggered weeding and harvesting seasons, the off-farm income generated from opium poppy can last up to five months, and it is usually higher than the on-farm income they can earn as a sharecropper.

Given the different roles that opium poppy plays within household livelihood strategies, replacing only one of these, such as access to income, credit or food security, with a licit alternative will not be sufficient to eliminate opium poppy on a sustainable basis. There are no short cuts. If opium poppy is to be eliminated, even over a small geographic area, a broad-based and multisectoral effort is required over a number of years.

¹ John W. Mellor, 3 March 2005, "Poppies and Agricultural Development in Afghanistan", USAID/RAMP Project, Afghanistan, presentation at the World Bank South Asia Rural Development Forum.

² David Mansfield, December 2004, *Diversity and Dilemma: Understanding Rural Livelihoods and Addressing the Causes of Opium Poppy Cultivation in Nangarhar and Laghman, Eastern Afghanistan*, GTZ Project for Alternative Livelihoods in Eastern Afghanistan: Internal Document No. 2.

II. From Alternative Development to Alternative Livelihoods?

It is widely recognised by drugs and development specialists that given the scale and nature of the problem in Afghanistan, illicit drug cultivation cannot be dealt with in isolation from the wider state-building and reconstruction process – making it no different from other development problems. The more localised area-based project approaches of the “alternative development” model implemented in Afghanistan and elsewhere in the 1980s and 90s were not able to address the different motivations and factors that influence households in their decision to plant opium poppy. Nor could they deal with the extent of its cultivation.

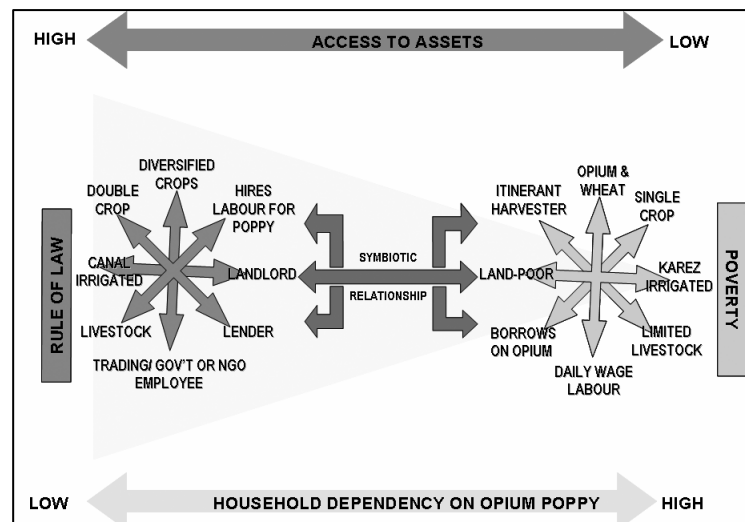
A critical component of the current counter narcotics strategy designed to eliminate opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan is the development of “alternative livelihoods”. This concept, which at present is an ideal rather than representative of actual practice, emerged from an analysis of the weaknesses of the so-called “alternative development” projects of the past, a recognition of the size of the opium problem in 2002, and the appreciation of the amount of aid allocated to reconstruction and development by the international community. But there remains significant confusion about the meaning and distinction between these two terms which Box 1 seeks to clarify.

Box 1: What are the differences between “alternative development” and “alternative livelihoods”?		
	Alternative development	Alternative livelihoods
Characteristic feature	Discrete area-based project approach	Mainstreaming of counter narcotics objectives into national development strategy and programming
Problem analysis	Problem definition usually limited to the presence of illicit drug crops within a specific area	Analysis of the drivers of the opium poppy economy
Agenda	Primarily reduction of illicit drug crop cultivation – treating the symptoms of cultivation	A wider state-building and development agenda – addressing the causes of cultivation
Actors	Designed and implemented by both national and international drug control organisations	Designed and implemented by development actors, coordination and technical support from drug control bodies
Method of implementation	Attempts to replace on-farm income generated by coca and opium poppy	Address the factors that influence households’ drug crop cultivation
Impact assessment	Measured in reduction of hectares of illicit drug crop cultivation	Measured in both human development terms as well as drug control indicators; seeks to understand the processes that influence households in their shift from illicit to licit livelihoods
Strengths	Previously the only way of delivering development assistance to marginalised illicit drug crop-producing areas	Recognises overlap between development and drug control agendas; part of national development strategy
Weaknesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor understanding of the process of change from licit to illicit livelihoods – often reduced to adoption of “conditionality clause” • Rarely linked to wider national development strategy • Ignores broader role of illicit drug crops • Little consideration of key development issues, poverty, gender and environment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Danger of being reduced to alternative income source projects and ignoring the broader institutional issues • Complex to implement

It must be emphasised that the merits of the concept of “alternative livelihoods” are to date potential rather than realised. The political pressures to achieve quick reductions in the level of opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan, combined with constraints on capacity in the field of drugs and development, have curtailed the move to the more idealised cross-sectoral approach supported by the “alternative livelihoods” model.

Like “alternative development”, “alternative livelihoods” has come to mean different things to different people. For many in the development community, alternative livelihoods is the same as rural livelihoods and a justification for business as usual. Implicit in this view is the assumption that by enhancing licit livelihood opportunities, opium poppy cultivation will automatically contract. Evidence from other countries indicates this is not always the case, and poor design, implementation and weak governance have meant licit livelihood opportunities and illicit drug crop cultivation have continued in parallel, or that cultivation has simply relocated elsewhere.

For some, using the term “alternative livelihoods” has opened up new options for funding by bodies which may not be critical of the development merits of proposed interventions as long as they can be seen to bring about a reduction (even if not sustained) in opium poppy cultivation. For others “alternative livelihoods” remains synonymous with “alternative development”, where the promise of development assistance is generally used as a bargaining tool with which to negotiate the maximum reductions in levels of



opium poppy cultivation from communities. In this case, success is measured in terms of reduction in hectares of opium poppy, rather than sustained improvements in the lives and livelihoods of rural communities and a diminishing dependency on opium as a means of accessing income and assets. Such practice sees development assistance as compensation rather than a means by which to promote equitable growth and empower the poor. This view requires that regardless of development impact and its differentiation by socioeconomic group and dependency on opium poppy cultivation, where a community fails to achieve the levels of reductions in opium poppy cultivation required by the authorities, assistance can be suspended and opium poppy destroyed. The failure to address the root causes of illicit drug crop cultivation, and in particular to meet the needs of the resource poor, means that relocation of opium poppy cultivation (and illicit drug crop producers) to neighbouring areas is an inevitable consequence of such practices.

III. Changes in Opium Poppy Cultivation in 2005: Lessons for Alternative Livelihoods

Field observations and other reports all point to a sharp decline in opium-cultivated area in 2004–05 compared with the previous season, which some have seen as evidence of success of the counter narcotics strategy. The causes of this are varied, ranging from strong pressures not to cultivate (accompanied with the promise

of development assistance), the threat and practice of eradication, concerns over access to wheat, previous opium crop failure and uncertainty over prices.

In 2005, the rapid pace of reduction in opium poppy cultivation in the provinces of Helmand and particularly Nangarhar has taken its toll on

Box 2: Consequences of the decline in opium poppy production in Nangarhar, 2005

- Area of opium poppy cultivation down by an estimated 95% compared to 2003–04.
- Reductions in the availability of land and credit to the most vulnerable as well as considerable shortfalls in on-farm, off-farm and non-farm income across the province.
- Significant downturn in the licit economy due to dramatic reductions in disposable income and fewer employment opportunities.
- Impact of the cultivation ban felt most in more remote areas where cultivated land is limited, population densities are greater and opium poppy cultivation has been most concentrated.
- Reductions in expenditure on food and healthcare, even in more prosperous areas and among relatively wealthy socioeconomic groups.
- Selling of assets including livestock and land, and a growing inability to meet loan repayment schedules on seasonal and accumulated debts. Potential for increasing local conflict over debts, absconding and greater concentration of assets in the hands of the wealthy and those involved in illicit trade.
- Opium poppy most commonly substituted by wheat; shift to high value crops limited to areas close to Jalalabad. Evidence of local authorities adding to existing constraints on increased cultivation of horticultural crops (such as access to seeds, irrigated land and physical infrastructure) through their control over transport routes and imposition of compulsory purchases.
- Little relief provided by “cash for work” from the loss of on-farm income derived from opium poppy and the potential five months’ employment from weeding and harvesting as an itinerant labourer.
- Seasonal urban migration in search of employment with evidence of both wage labour opportunities and wages falling in Jalalabad. Growing incidence of permanent migration to Pakistan and expectation that rates will increase once wheat harvest is complete. Predictions that continuation of ban for second year will result in increasing numbers of families leaving for Pakistan and Iran as they did during Taliban ban of 2001.
- Growing political discontent, particularly in more remote areas where licit livelihood opportunities are most scarce – potential implications for democratic processes and support for the state.

Derived from David Mansfield, *Pariah or Poverty?: The Opium Ban in the Province of Nangarhar in the 2004–05 Growing Season and Its Impact on Rural Livelihood Strategies*, GTZ Project for Alternative Livelihoods in Eastern Afghanistan: Internal Document No. 11.

economic growth, emphasising the interlinkages between the illicit and licit economies. Following an almost universal enforcement of the ban on opium poppy in Nangarhar, there have been noticeable downturns in opportunities as well as overall trade in various sectors, including transport, construction and retail. The decline is noticeable but less marked in Helmand.

Attempts to strengthen and diversify the licit elements of household livelihood strategies in Nangarhar have become all the more difficult due to the multiplier effect the ban has had on the wider economy. A 95 percent reduction in levels of cultivation in the province represents potentially 8 million fewer labour days and a reduction in a potential of 3.1 million days of hired labour. This calculation does not include the estimated 5.6 jobs created in the rural non-farm economy for every hectare of opium poppy cultivated.³

In 2005, interventions aimed at offsetting the income losses that households were expected to experience from significant reductions in

opium poppy cultivation mostly came in the form of “cash for work”. Although in Helmand cash for work combined with employment opportunities from continued opium poppy cultivation has mitigated migratory pressures, little has been done to address the other factors, including those of provincial governance, that influence households in their decisions to cultivate opium poppy. Short-term single-sector project interventions such as cash for work are unlikely to achieve much in areas where opium poppy has become an integral feature of rural livelihood strategies, and where poor governance continues to constrain the development of the licit economy.

Moreover, little consideration seems to have been given to the varying levels of dependency on opium poppy cultivation between different socioeconomic groups and areas. In Nangarhar, those without land – arguably the most dependent on the opium poppy crop (for accessing land, credit and food security as well as on-farm and off-farm income) – are those who have been largely excluded from the very development assistance that has been provided to offset the losses they have experienced due to the ban. There has been

³ Mellor, 2005

Box 3: Consequences of the decline in opium poppy production in Helmand, 2005

- Area of opium poppy cultivation down by 30–40%.
- Downturn but not a collapse in the rural economy.
- Numbers of migrant labourers and sharecroppers from outside the province sharply decreased.
- Many former opium-cultivating households in central irrigated area reported having not cultivated in 2005, or much reduced amount. Access to land for sharecroppers not an apparent constraint even where opium poppy area has declined, reflecting relatively large landholding sizes.
- Availability of cash for work paid through USAID at \$4 per day for 50–60 days providing a significant amount of cash, helping to keep seasonal migration numbers down.
- Some cultivators able to clear debts while others not.
- Situation in north Helmand different: less secure irrigation systems (*karez*) and limited land areas. Traditionally grain-deficit villages with livestock production and migratory practices a part of portfolio of livelihood strategies. Opium poppy area more in evidence, if reduced. Household debt levels possibly greater, for example mortgaging of land (and little opportunity for sharecropping). With limited livestock numbers, cash for work on *karez* cleaning, although substantial while available, appears to be providing little more than a holding operation, after which migration will be necessary.

Adam Pain, unpublished field work, June 2005

little recognition that village *shuras*, tasked with distributing assistance, have generally shared inputs such as cash for work, seeds and fertiliser in accordance with traditional rules – giving priority to those who own land or water within the community. Priority has not been given to those areas where dependency on cultivation is greatest and agricultural development potential at its most limited. There is a danger that the relatively wealthy, both in terms of assets and households who are least dependent on opium poppy, have gained preferential access to the benefits of project assistance – which seems to satisfy neither pro-poor nor counter narcotics objectives.⁴

Bearing in mind the time that it takes to deliver the kind of sustainable, well-targeted development assistance required to promote equitable economic growth and reduce illicit drug crop cultivation in an environment such as Afghanistan, it has not been possible to achieve much in improving access to credit, diversifying agricultural incomes and creating the non-farm income opportunities that are essential for a sustainable reduction in opium poppy cultivation. This year's experiences in Helmand and Nangarhar demonstrate the need for a more comprehensive and long-term approach that addresses the socioeconomic, environmental and political causes of opium poppy cultivation within a wider national development strategy.

⁴ David Mansfield, *Pariah or Poverty?: The Opium Ban in the Province of Nangarhar in the 2004–05 Growing Season and Its Impact on Rural Livelihood Strategies*, GTZ Project for Alternative Livelihoods in Eastern Afghanistan: Internal Document No. 11.

IV. Alternative Livelihoods: Emerging Issues

An end state not a programme

Given the limited success of previous alternative development projects in Afghanistan, and with a range of national programmes aiming to deliver a wide array of services including social and physical infrastructure, credit and agricultural support, a more strategic approach is needed. The government of Afghanistan's Counter Narcotics Strategy demands that "the provision of development assistance to opium poppy growing areas is undertaken in the framework of the National Development Programmes", and it has outlined a range of interventions that will contribute to establishing the necessary socioeconomic, legal and political conditions in which a farmer will no longer need to cultivate opium poppy.

Unfortunately the Counter Narcotics Strategy designates alternative livelihoods as one of its eight pillars along with others such as interdiction and eradication, rather than setting it as a goal to be achieved through the appropriate targeting and sequencing of eradication, interdiction and conventional development assistance. With alternative livelihoods defined as a means rather than an end, it is easier to press donors to increase their financial commitment to the "neglected" alternative livelihoods sector to show their commitment to counter narcotics efforts in Afghanistan. It has also become easier to overlook the kinds of "best practice" that are required to design and implement effective development programmes once alternative livelihood programmes become primarily about achieving drug control objectives and not development outcomes.

The expediency associated with alternative livelihoods programming is at its most stark when programmes are charged with responding to the consequences of this year's dramatic reduction in opium poppy cultivation – a task they cannot adequately perform given the role that opium poppy plays in rural livelihood strategies and the limited scale and pace of the development impact of these programmes. There is real danger that if cultivation increases in 2006, it will be the alternative livelihoods programming strand that will be blamed for not delivering sustained reductions in levels of cultivation – a measure against which it cannot be judged, particularly

when the scope of the programmes that fall under this banner is considered.

Badging of programmes as alternative livelihoods

Under pressure to respond to the Afghan government's efforts to deliver a rapid reduction in opium poppy cultivation this year (which has partly been a response to external demands), the donor community has looked to boost its financial support for what are increasingly being referred to as "alternative livelihood programmes".

For those donors working through the National Development Budget these programmes have been easier to fund now that National Priority Programmes such as MISFA (Microfinance Investment Support Facility in Afghanistan), NEEP (National Emergency Employment Programme) and NSP (National Solidarity Programme) have been categorised as alternative livelihoods programmes. While some of these programmes have gone through a genuine process of assessing how they might best address the causes of opium poppy cultivation (such as MISFA with its establishment of a pilot opium debt refinancing package), for others it is business as usual. More and more, any development being undertaken in a poppy-growing area is becoming known as "alternative livelihoods".

There is some truth to this claim. The NSP not only sometimes creates employment opportunities, but it also seeks to contribute to building the social contract between communities and state that has proven so important in other illicit drug crop-producing countries. NEEP rehabilitates much-needed infrastructure and creates employment opportunities in the rural economy.

However, these national programmes are often not implemented in the same communities or even the same districts. While households in a village may benefit from some improved infrastructure and employment provided by NEEP, they may not have established local decision-making bodies and received a block grant from NSP, or have improved access to credit through MISFA. Other sectoral interventions such as irrigation and agriculture may well be completely absent. It cannot be expected that a uni-sectoral intervention will

solve the development needs of a community, nor can it be expected that a single national programme will develop an “alternative livelihood” given the multifunctional role that opium poppy plays in rural livelihood strategies.

If NEEP and NSP are to be included as alternative livelihoods programmes, why not the provision of schools and curriculum development? In the highlands of Thailand this has been critical in building the social contract and establishing legal and social norms amongst illicit drug crop-producing families. Why is the planned National Priority Programme for Skills and Market Linkages not included, given that in many of the areas in which opium poppy is most concentrated, population densities are high and the agricultural potential is limited? No other crop can provide the land-based economy that opium poppy does in such areas, and experience in other opium-producing countries suggests that out-migration has been instrumental in reducing opium poppy cultivation.

While an approach of badging development in poppy-growing areas as alternative livelihoods may appear attractive in the short term – bringing in funds for under-financed development programmes and showing financial commitment to the counter narcotics effort – in the longer term it could prove counter-productive. Experience in Latin America has shown that faced with criticism from drug control policymakers towards high spending in illicit drug-growing areas, and questions over the effect interventions have had on levels of cultivation, the common response has been to make assistance conditional on reductions in hectareage, rather than to make a more concerted effort to address the drivers of opium poppy or coca cultivation.⁵ A possible resurgence in opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan in the 2005–06 growing season is likely to result in such a policy response, as those who have funded “alternative livelihoods programmes” look for the “drug control” returns on their investments. The fact that many of these interventions on the ground may represent only a single-sector response to a community could well be overlooked when policymakers aggregate the total expenditure on “alternative livelihoods programmes”.

⁵ United States General Accounting Office, “Drug Control: Efforts to Develop Alternatives to Cultivating Illicit Crops in Colombia Have Made Little Progress and Face Serious Obstacles”, GAO-02-291.

Impact not commitments, and the re-emergence of conditionality

Recently there has been mounting focus on the amount of funding that has been committed to alternative livelihoods programmes. Figures released by UNODC⁶ estimate that US\$490m has been committed to alternative livelihoods programmes in 2005–06. Given the lack of clarity about what constitutes an alternative livelihoods programme, it remains to be seen what interventions have been included under this headline figure. Furthermore, regardless of definition it is unclear how much of this funding has actually been disbursed, particularly in the southern region of Afghanistan where security remains a concern. What is even more difficult to define is the effect this assistance has had on the lives and livelihoods of farmers given the current dearth of impact monitoring.

It appears that correlation has become confused with causality, as some policymakers have sought to explain low levels of cultivation as a function of the levels of development assistance provided, rather than recognise that this year’s commitments have largely been a reaction to the Afghan government’s efforts to produce dramatic reductions in opium poppy cultivation.

It would seem that questionable analysis of both levels of expenditure and causal relationships are informing renewed calls for making development assistance conditional on communities’ reduction of levels of opium poppy cultivation.⁷ This takes little notice of the well-documented failings of conditionality in Afghanistan⁸ and in other illicit drug-producing source countries.⁹

Incorporating the “drivers” of opium poppy cultivation

While there is an attempt by the government and some donors to distinguish between alternative livelihoods programmes (which presumably are more directly targeted at reducing levels of opium poppy cultivation) and conventional development programmes, there

⁶ UNODC, 2005, “The Opium Situation in Afghanistan as of 29 August 2005”, http://www.unodc.org/pdf/afghanistan_2005/opium-afghanistan_2005-08-26.pdf, p. 4

⁷ UNODC recommends “A commitment by farming communities to refrain from drug cultivation in exchange for greater development assistance”, *The Opium Situation in Afghanistan*, p. 10.

⁸ See David Mansfield, 2002, “The Failure of Quid Pro Quo: Alternative Development in Afghanistan”, papers prepared for the International Conference on Alternative Development in Drug Control and Cooperation, Feldafing, Germany, 7–12 January 2002.

⁹ See Commission on Narcotic Drugs, 28 February 2005, *Alternative Development: A Global Thematic Evaluation, Final Synthesis Report*, E/CN.7/2005/CRP.3, p. 12–13, <http://www.gtz.de/de/dokumente/en-thematic-evaluation-ae.pdf>.

is little effort to ensure that the former actually address the structural (such as agro-ecological, socioeconomic) or institutional (such as risk and uncertainty) factors that influence farmers in their decision to cultivate opium poppy.

The lack of a common understanding of the causes of opium poppy cultivation within the development community is well illustrated by the recent agricultural sector priorities for alternative livelihoods produced by the Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Husbandry and Food and the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation for 1385–86 (2006–07):

The term “Alternative Livelihoods” recognises that the struggle against opium production in Afghanistan will be achieved through mainstream rural development... This principle is recognised by all rational experts in the field, based on experiences in other countries. It has been clearly expressed in relation specifically to Afghanistan by the prize-winning agricultural economist, John Mellor: the strategies one would apply to counter opium production are the same ones that one would apply to achieve broad-based rural development.

There seems to be little recognition in the above statement that while broad-based rural development is necessary, it does not sufficiently address the specific drivers of opium poppy cultivation. Many alternative livelihoods interventions target the landed and those in areas with high potential for agricultural production. Those who have previously gained access to land through sharecropping opium poppy would only seem to gain from this shift to licit cultivation by obtaining the same share of a larger final yield of whatever replacement crops are produced. Where replacement crops are less labour intensive than opium poppy (as is usually the case) the land poor will find it increasingly difficult to access any land at all. There is a potential for the land poor to lose out significantly from a shift in cultivation patterns – losing access to land, on- and off-farm income, and credit – prompting relocation of both people and opium poppy cultivation to neighbouring areas.

Similarly, little consideration is given to those areas where both land and irrigation are scarce, opium poppy is at its most concentrated and agricultural potential is limited. Linkages with interventions targeted at the land poor – such as labour-intensive agro-processing, vocational training, land reform, or improving

access to agricultural inputs – could all contribute to addressing this risk, but are currently not explored. The assumption is very much that the benefits will somehow trickle down to those most dependent on opium poppy cultivation.

Many alternative livelihood interventions have a narrow focus on economic alternatives within a model of idealised market structures¹⁰. They reduce the livelihood concept to that of income, microeconomics and farmers as profit maximisers, and assume that this will be sufficient; this is too limited. The content of programmes needs to be much broader to address the reasons why opium poppy is cultivated and the motivating forces and risks that different actors face.

In sum, not only is there very limited analysis of the structural (natural, economic and social) dimensions of the drivers of the opium economy in agricultural sector priorities, but the institutional and agent (capacity and action of individuals to make choices) analysis is also inadequate. The evidence from Nangarhar and Helmand shows how critical these dimensions are, and how a failure to address them may compound rather than resolve them.

These issues are further illustrated in the irrigation sector where interventions may have impact on those who cultivate opium poppy and the levels of cultivation. Without the requisite interlinkages with programmes aimed at extending the provision of credit, agricultural services and vocational training, as well as the roll out of governance and law and order, there is every possibility that increasing the amount of land under irrigation could also increase the amount of land cultivated with opium poppy. This is not to say that the Afghan government and the international community should not give priority to irrigation, but that a thorough analysis of the different socioeconomic groups involved in opium poppy cultivation, how they will benefit and lose from a programme, and what their likely responses will be, is required to make a full assessment of the likely counter narcotics and development impact of a programme. This will also identify what measures can be incorporated to reduce the threat of the relocation (or indeed the expansion) of opium poppy cultivation.

¹⁰ See S. Lister and A. Pain, 2004, *Trading in Power: The Politics of “Free” Markets in Afghanistan*, Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit – presents evidence the challenges this view.

Fragmented planning

The need to understand and respond to the different drivers of opium poppy cultivation, and the recognition that these differ according to context, have also led to attempts to decentralise the development planning process. The European Commission in particular, through its work with GTZ, has pressed for a more decentralised approach to the planning of development interventions, to reduce opium poppy cultivation through piloting work in Nangarhar at the district level. The Badakhshan Development Forum has also tried to bring different development actors together to try to map who is doing what and identify how greater synergies might be established in order to maximise development *and* counter narcotics impact.

However, the move to a more comprehensive regional or provincial development plan in which counter narcotics analyses and objectives are mainstreamed continues to remain elusive. Not only is there a lack of clarity about the government's position on coordinated planning, it seems there are still too many agencies pursuing their own, sometimes conflicting, objectives to allow for better strategic direction and coordination of development plans at the district and provincial level. Various agencies have adopted different implementing partners at the provincial level: some are working through governors' offices (despite governors' lack of formal authority over line agencies), while others are working through individual line ministries. At the policy level these interventions, although located in the same province, may have contradictory views on key issues such as "conditionality".

The National Priority Programmes working in Nangarhar, for example, have no policy position on conditionality at all. This confusion continues despite the common position agreed at the Alternative Livelihoods Working Group meeting in June 2004, which established milestones for provincial-based development planning by which the efforts of provincial and local authorities could be judged, including improvements in security, corruption, administrative reform, disarmament and counter narcotics.

Perhaps the recent establishment of a common framework for development assistance intended to contribute to an alternative livelihood outcome, the nascent Alternative Livelihoods Implementation Plan (ALIP), will provide the vehicle for greater cohesion in both policy development and the implementation of development interventions at the national and provincial levels. This effort will be supported by the development of the Interim Afghan National Development Strategy and it is important that counter narcotics efforts are mainstreamed both within this and any post-Bonn Compact agreed with the international community. However, if greater coordination is to be achieved, immediate consideration will need to be given to identifying the appropriate mechanisms for developing provincial and district development plans within a common national framework. The current mosaic of disparate programmes and implementing agencies operating at the district and provincial level does not seem to make the most effective use of scarce resources in the pursuit of either development or drug control achievements.

V. Ways Forward

There are significant dangers in using alternative livelihoods as a means of implementing the counter narcotics agenda. Elimination of opium poppy is being pursued at a dramatic rate, using opium area statistics more as an indicator of dealing with the causes of the disease rather than as a symptom of them. In the process, this pursuit is marginalising the rural poor both economically and politically. Policymakers from the drug control field and observers at the international level must temper their expectations of what fast-tracked "alternative livelihoods" can deliver. So far, alternative livelihoods programmes, impact monitoring in national programmes, and

applied research have not generated a clear understanding of what influences households in their decision to move from illicit to licit livelihoods and how this differs by socio-economic and gender group, as well as location. Moreover, models of behavioural change on which interventions and programming have been based give undue weight to individual choice and insufficient attention to the context within that choice is made. Greater priority should be given to generating knowledge building and to skilling-up both development and drug control professionals so that counter narcotics can be

effectively mainstreamed within the government's National Development Strategy.

While care must be taken in drawing lessons from other drug contexts, some examples of what has been found *not* to work¹¹ are relevant, and include:

- Directly linking alternative livelihoods to law enforcement measures; lessons on the ineffectiveness of coercion as an instrument of policy can also be drawn from the history of forestry management in South Asia, where policing the forest failed to prevent the decline in forest resources and even exacerbated the problem¹²;
- Using conditionality criteria in the disbursement of funding;
- Separating programmes and projects from broader development planning; and
- Minimal use of participatory processes; the strong emphasis on project delivery and achievement of opium area reduction has given little, if any, opportunity to build consensual agreement on behavioural change. Participatory processes would imply that outcomes are negotiable. Their absence is in part because of the emphasis that has been given to economic motivations rather than to contextual factors influencing how individuals can behave. Useful lessons on the building of participatory processes can again be drawn from forestry policy as well as poverty reduction strategies.

There is a clear need to deploy a broad range of multisectoral instruments to respond to the drivers of the opium economy, each of which is necessary but not sufficient on its own. The key considerations in which balance, synergy and appropriate sequencing must be sought include:

- Addressing the governance environment that creates the risk and uncertainty making it rational for households to grow opium poppy because the illicit economy is seen to be more predictable and less risky than the licit one;
- Ensuring that there is a balance in interventions between high- and low-

potential areas as determined by access to markets and agro-ecology. This will mean not only appropriate investment according to location, but also greater attention to context-specific programming informed by an analysis of how and where opium poppy production will retreat to and persist when it is under pressure;

- Paying particular attention to the needs of the poor who have less room to manoeuvre; this will require a move away from production-based interventions to a longer-term focus on employment and opportunities for off- and non-farm activities;
- Developing effective monitoring systems must be a central element of the alternative livelihoods approach – these are fundamental to building knowledge management systems. Delivery of programme inputs is not enough; monitoring systems must be established that seek to build evidence of positive and durable change having been brought about. The burden of proof that viable alternative livelihoods exist and are accessible lies not with the poor but with the implementers – conditionality must be reversed. Understanding the processes by which households move from illicit to licit livelihoods is critical to policy development, as well as to programme design and implementation.

Through strategic interventions supported by a robust evidence base of “what works” and well-targeted advocacy with key actors, it will be possible to bring the full forces (and funding) of the development community to bear on counter narcotics – not simply pursuing the “business as usual” model of rural development that is most commonly applied at present.

Recommendations

The hype for “alternative livelihoods” flowing through Kabul is based on a virtual alternative livelihoods model: the promise of what it could become rather than what it already is. Specific recommendations that could contribute to giving substance and credibility to an alternative livelihoods approach include:

- Undertaking robust analysis of the drivers of opium poppy production (and how they change over time) that is context-specific and pays attention to structures, institutions and actors. It must be used to inform

¹¹ Commission on Narcotic Drugs, 2005, *Alternative Development: A Global Thematic Evaluation, Final Synthesis Report*

¹² N, Sundar, 2000, “Unpacking the ‘Joint’ in Joint Forest Management”, *Development and Change*, 31:255–79

- programming design and this must be linked to ongoing micro-level analysis of the spatial and temporal changes in opium poppy cultivation;
- Building analysis and programming content that responds to variability in agro-ecological potential, market access and the needs and resources of different socio-economic actors engaged in production;
 - Making reform of governance structures at provincial and district level a necessary condition for building sustainable alternative livelihoods and other elements of the counter narcotics strategy. This may well be compatible with the initial targeting of areas with a short history of opium poppy cultivation rather than those conventionally associated most closely with drug crop production;
 - Establishing alternative livelihoods as a long-term goal and not an instrumental means of achieving a reduction in the area under opium poppy in the short term;
 - Paying particular attention to participatory processes at all levels in order to build a constituency of support for alternative livelihoods and its role in the counter narcotics strategy. Mixing coercion (such as linking eradication and interdiction) with development assistance through forms of conditionality is likely to be counter-productive, particularly where there is a deep history of cultivation;
 - Building and using monitoring systems as a critical component of alternative livelihoods programming: impact must not be assumed from delivery, and high standards of evidence should be expected; and
 - Giving priority to skilling-up both development and drug control professionals so that counter narcotics can be effectively mainstreamed within the government's National Development Strategy.

The Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) is an independent research organisation that conducts and facilitates action-oriented research and learning that informs and influences policy and practice. AREU also actively promotes a culture of research and learning by strengthening analytical capacity in Afghanistan and by creating opportunities for analysis, thought and debate. Fundamental to AREU's vision is that its work should improve Afghan lives.

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Current funding for AREU is provided by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), the European Commission (EC), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Stichting Vluchteling (SV), the World Bank, the United Kingdom Department for International Development (DFID), and the governments of Canada, Sweden, Switzerland, and Denmark.

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