

POLICY BRIEF

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO TAKE CONTEXT SERIOUSLY FOR RURAL DIFFERENTIATION?

Lessons from Afghanistan

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Why it matters

From 2001 to 2021, the development vision for Afghanistan was based on a market-driven transformation of agriculture. Billions of dollars were spent with little success, and with even fewer benefits being enjoyed by the poor and those who were food insecure. A significant reason for this failure is that a single model was used of how the rural economy works, leading to national programmes that were inappropriate for most of the population. There was an unwillingness to consider the huge diversity in local economies, in households within those economies, or in individuals in extended family households.

What aid programmers got wrong

A reliance on one development model reveals an implicit assumption of a high degree of uniformity in the rural economy across the country – otherwise, using similar intervention types everywhere would not have made sense.

That model was also so flawed that it hardly applied anywhere. It was assumed that poverty and food security would be eradicated by boosting agricultural production, and that this would happen through market-focused interventions. Agricultural production was not transformed, and few benefits went to those who were food insecure, for reasons that were entirely predictable based on the flawed assumptions.

It is surely impossible that some geographic differences were not understood (e.g., differences between highland and lowland farming), but these must have been seen as leading only to *technical* differences in farming. It was not understood how land types relate to land ownership patterns, which in turn affect people's relationships with the market and with each other, and thus all aspects of their economic lives. This is also linked to the flaws in how a single model of local governance was imposed across the country, regardless of the huge differences in how communities could work together – and for whose interests.¹

What was wrong with the assumptions?

Most rural households in Afghanistan have very little land, and in many villages most households are landless. By targeting support at increasing aggregate production, it was inevitable that investments were directed at those with larger, irrigated land holdings, i.e., by-passing those who were food insecure.

1 See the companion paper in this series: 'What does it mean to take context seriously for village-level governance?' (Pain and Levine, 2024).

It was false to assume that most households relied on farming. Those with little land relied on farming only for a small part of their consumption. Many households had no land at all, relying on selling their labour in precarious ways and remittance income with some subsistence input from small livestock holdings. As a result, little was done to try to address their risks and how they could improve their household economies.

Most of Afghanistan's rural households were *not* entrepreneurial farmers in waiting, i.e., their production could not be transformed by market improvements. People's land holdings largely determine how far they can take any economic risks. Understanding how many families could only produce small amounts of their food from their land should have led to an understanding that people needed to prioritise survival by reducing risks, including risks from market-oriented production.

Policy implications: getting it right

- It is impossible to use one model of development across the country. Understanding diversity means understanding where and who needs help most; and understanding which forms of support may be appropriate in helping them. Engaging with diversity starts with a recognition that it needs to be understood.
- Diversity exists within communities as well as geographies, so that even within one area, it is best not to have a single, standard product for all. A portfolio of choices can allow people to choose which ones fit their needs. This is particularly essential with new initiatives as it also allows for much to be learnt by understanding which options are chosen by whom and where.
- Higher production does not help everyone's food security. For some, food security can be better supported through greater on-farm employment, improved storage and non-farm income. This means understanding the diverse ways in which different crops contribute to subsistence, including their uses and storage qualities. It is also necessary to understand how different crops can contribute to support employment creation in different areas, rather than only thinking about potential market surpluses of different crops.

Why the context of rural differentiation matters

From 2001 to 2021, agriculture was at the centre of efforts to build Afghanistan's economy, as shown by the trail of policy documents prepared by international organisations, governments and line ministries. All shared a vision of market-driven commodity-focused agriculture as the country's engine of growth and economic development, providing employment and reducing poverty. This model of agrarian transformation occurs because the commercialisation of agriculture, a process driven by price and productivity growth, leads to the squeezing out of the small farm sector. The result is larger, more productive and more efficient farms, and the migration of rural households to waged urban employment, fed by the marketed surpluses produced by the commercial agricultural sector.

Two things were taken for granted: that agriculture was the main source of livelihoods for most of the rural population; and that, as farmers, they would seize market opportunities. Over time, a recognition emerged that this was not happening. Only large and medium-sized farmers were inclined to generate surplus for the market,

and even then, much depended on their location. Places that were close to urban markets and with irrigated land were very different from more remote upland areas with little irrigation. However, in planning the agrarian transformation, little attention was paid to these differences and to land ownership patterns, or even to the role of agriculture in rural livelihoods. As a result, the implications of these issues for interventions to promote commercial crop production were missed.

The penetration of market-based competition in agriculture driven by price and productivity has not happened in Afghanistan. A class of commercial farmers with growing farm sizes has not emerged and nor have household members moved systematically into waged urban employment as part of the anticipated transformation. Part of the explanation is that the availability of irrigated productive land in Afghanistan has effectively run out, as evidenced by the high proportion of households without land in Afghanistan's villages and by shrinking farm sizes. The more marginal rainfed land is increasingly suffering drought from the effects of climate change. The rural economy, rather than being market-driven, has remained structured more by non-market institutions (non-monetary exchange). The primary need of survival has created a distributional rather than

a productive economy. The broader preconditions for agricultural growth – rising rural and urban demand, investment in infrastructure and state support – have also been absent.

Understanding rural differentiation

In aid programming Afghanistan's rural households were seen generically as entrepreneurial farmers in waiting. Attention to context would have highlighted the vast differentiation that exists in rural society in terms of agro-ecology (differentiation between geographic areas), land ownership patterns at a village level (differentiation within a geographic area), and the roles and the consequences of joint household structures in household survival (differentiation within the household).

Afghanistan has an extraordinarily varied agro-ecological landscape. At a macrolevel, it can be ordered around key river basins; the irrigated plains surrounding the main urban centres contrast with the upland or mountain regions that have limited and often seasonal irrigation sources. At a microlevel, conditions can change from one valley to the next, within valleys and even on slopes with different aspects. These have significant and localised effects on agriculture and cropping patterns, which can vary considerably even between the top and bottom of any set of valleys. These differences do not just lead to simple technical differences, e.g., in the most appropriate crop varieties to grow. They fundamentally shape people's economic constraints and opportunities, their relationship to markets, their risk landscapes and thus their ability to run risks. (The need of so many households to survive by minimising risk rather than by maximising potential income has been one of the fundamental reasons for the failure of market-driven approaches to rural development in Afghanistan.) Agricultural interventions have usually been designed and implemented without considering this variability.

There are known to be huge inequalities in land ownership in Afghanistan, even if accurate data on land ownership do not exist at national, provincial, district or village level (there are no comprehensive cadastral land records). Farm size is a primary determinant of how households secure their subsistence and food security. Households resort to very different livelihood strategies depending on how much of the food they need for the year they can produce for themselves from their farms. A simple but very useful way of grouping households is between those who can largely feed themselves from production (e.g., they can produce food for 10 or more months), those who can produce more than half their

own food (e.g., for 6–10 months), those who can produce less than half (e.g., for 2–6 months) and those who can produce little or no food for themselves (e.g., for less than 2 months). Each group needs to make good the deficit, for example by sharecropping,² working as a farm labourer or from non-farm income. The rationale of any proposed intervention must fit with the livelihood profile of the different population groups, which means that the strategies that each group tends to use in each area have to be identified and understood.

The way in which land ownership is distributed has wider consequences beyond those on the household economy. Because land ownership patterns are the main form of wealth inequality in Afghanistan, they shape the whole moral economy and social relations within a village. For example, where land is distributed more evenly, or where there are more households with larger holdings, the elites tend to be more dependent on social relations in the village, or there may be more competing sources of power. This tends to lead to village governance by the elites that is more responsive to the needs of the community as a whole. This is more likely to be the case in the highlands. On the other hand, where land is concentrated in very few hands (which tends to be more the case in the irrigated lowlands), elites often feel less need to worry about any dependence of the rest of the community, and local elites often behave in ways that are much less conducive to any common welfare. This, clearly, has implications for any intervention at local level, not only for those related to food security or land use.

In summarising the existing understanding of land ownership patterns in Afghanistan, several broad generalisations are offered (though these should be verified or tested for any geographical area of specific interest):

- Major inequalities in land ownership exist and while there are differences between villages that are close to each other, these inequalities are greatest in well-irrigated plain villages in contrast with villages that are primarily rainfed and in the upland or mountain areas.
- Large landowners in well-irrigated areas generate agricultural surplus and often sharecrop out their land, but agriculture may not be their major source of income; large landowners in more marginal locations may often own a significant part of the available irrigated land but may not necessarily generate an agricultural surplus; large landowners rarely constitute more than 10% of the total households in a village and often less than 5% of them. Thus, only a minority of village households gain food security from their own production.

2 Sharecropping is a way of renting land, where payment is made as a fixed share of the harvest. The effective rental cost can be between a third and a half or more of the harvest, depending on village context and crop.

- Medium and small landholding households constitute a variable proportion of total households in a village and usually less than 50% of all households. They typically do not meet household grain consumption needs from production, with medium-size households commonly generating sufficient requirements for 6–10 months while small-size households achieve 2–4 months. Nevertheless, they usually sell some proportion of their farm production (e.g., fruits) to buy grain and to meet other household needs. These are the people who tend to sharecrop the land of large landowners.
- By far the greatest proportion of rural households have very little land, and in many villages most households are landless. This can be up to 85–90% of households. Some may access land as sharecroppers but most probably rely on a mix of limited on-farm labour, non-farm labour and remittance income with some subsistence input from small livestock holdings.

Most people live within a family structure where there is a shared economy between – and defined roles for – individuals, couples and nuclear family units within an extended family. The maintenance of the joint household, or joint family, is central to the distributional economy of Afghan households. It has both benefits and costs. It is a risk-pooling mechanism, necessary given the scarcity of work and income; and it is a source of support in times of need such as in old age, in sickness and in marriage. There are of course considerable costs in terms of personal autonomy, particularly for daughters and daughters-in-law, but also for sons and younger brothers. Large, joint households are the one means by which freedom from threats, risks and hazards can be secured, but they often create considerable conflict which can lead to household separation.

Generation by generation, land holdings are shrinking for joint households in all landowning classes.³ Within this overall absolute reduction, the *relative* scale of large, medium and small landowners is likely to remain, unless market forces emerge that drive the commodification of land and that fuel processes of land accumulation. This would drive more landlessness. The more likely outcome may be for those with smaller and smaller parcels of land to work them more intensively to provide a small subsistence component or cash income as part of a portfolio of diverse but precarious sources of living.

What does ‘taking context seriously’ mean for engaging with rural differentiation?

Production-focused agricultural interventions are likely to skew benefits to those with more irrigated land, particularly where there is a grant or subsidy element. An appreciation of landlessness and households having very small land holdings should lead to greater attention on increasing on-farm *employment* rather than just production. Support could be for access to land for sharecropping or for post-harvest management. There is a need to think about non-farm rural employment too. Understanding the relationship between poverty and risk should also lead to designing interventions to support a rural economy that is primarily concerned with survival rather than productivity maximisation.

In Afghanistan, people designing agricultural interventions should consider the following:

- Interventions should be designed with a focus on food security outcomes rather than production outcomes. Apart from through higher production, food security can be supported through more access to land, greater on-farm employment, improved post-harvest storage and non-farm income.
- When choosing which agricultural commodity to focus on, consideration should be given to: the potential contribution to labour absorption or employment creation; the potential contribution to subsistence and use values of the crop⁴ (single or multiple); as well as storage qualities and local demand.
- There are links between economic and geographic inequalities that have consequences for the distributional impacts of interventions.
- The socially differentiated nature of rural households should be recognised, along with the fact that many rural households are multi-generational joint households. This has implications for targeting and for the autonomy of members of those households, both men and women.
- To engage with diversity, and also to learn more about it, it is best not to have a standard product that is incentivised for all households. A portfolio of choices can allow people to choose which ones fit their needs; and by understanding which options are chosen by whom and where, much can be learned about the differentiation that is important for rural development.

3 The population in Afghanistan is doubling every 20 years, i.e., on average, family land holdings are cut by half every generation. (Urbanisation has increased only a little over the last 20 years, from 22% to 26%.) Source: <https://data.worldbank.org/country/AF>

4 One of the many advantages of opium is that it not only generates on-farm employment and a high-value non-perishable product but that the crop has multiple uses: oil for cooking can be extracted from the seeds, the residue is used to feed livestock and the stalks can be used as a fuel.

References

Levine, S. and Pain, A. (2024) 'Ten traps to avoid if aid programming is serious about engaging with context: lessons from Afghanistan'. SPARC Policy Brief. London: ODI.

Pain, A. and Levine, S. (2024) 'What does it mean to take context seriously for village-level governance? Lessons from community development councils in Afghanistan'. SPARC Policy Brief. London: ODI.

Additional reading

Pain, A. (2019) *Growing out of poverty? Questioning agricultural policy in Afghanistan*. Kabul: Afghanistan Analysts Network (<https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/special-reports/growing-out-of-poverty-questioning-agricultural-policy-in-afghanistan/>).

Pain, A. (2022) 'Living with radical uncertainty in rural Afghanistan: the work of survival'. Kabul: Afghanistan Analysts Network (<https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/economy-development-environment/living-with-radical-uncertainty-in-rural-afghanistan-the-work-of-survival/>).

About this series

This paper is based on a briefing note written for the United Kingdom's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), and this version is published with their permission. It is one of series of five papers designed to help decision-makers to integrate a better understanding of Afghanistan into their work. The other papers in the series cover Community Development Councils, markets, informal credit and post-harvest storage and processing.

Based on the analysis of these five papers, an overview paper examines why it has proved so hard for aid actors to take context seriously (Levine and Pain 2024). It identifies 'Ten traps to avoid if aid programming is serious about engaging with context: lessons from Afghanistan'. Although based on a study of the failure to take context seriously in Afghanistan, the paper is written to be of wider relevance.

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