



ACBAR Advocacy Series

NGO voices on agriculture and rural development



Ruth Purves
APPPA Advocacy Consultant ACBAR
April 2008

Introduction

The Afghanistan Pilot Participatory Poverty Assessment (APPPA) is a project that, through civil society involvement, aims to collect, document, disseminate and advocate the 'voices' of poor Afghans for inclusion in the upcoming Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS), and more broadly throughout civil society. APPPA will achieve this through a research component and an advocacy component.

This paper is one of a series of advocacy papers produced in the advocacy component, the purpose of which is to improve the quality of civil society—including non-governmental organizations (NGO)—engagement in sectoral debates and to provide recommendations for implementation of sectoral activities. This will be achieved through the presentation of the perspectives of the NGO community in relation to sectors identified, during the APPPA research component, as priorities by APPPA-target communities. For a more comprehensive understanding of the issues identified, further inquiry and discussion is advised.

Based upon the sectoral priorities identified by APPPA-target communities, a number of national and international NGOs working within the agriculture and rural development sector were approached for interviews and to participate in a subsequent round table discussion. The issues emerging from these interviews were tabled for validation in the roundtable discussion, which also allowed participants to prioritize issues and propose recommendations. The resulting draft advocacy paper was then circulated for comments to ACBAR's membership who provided feedback for integration.

It should be noted that this paper does not reflect an exhaustive investigation of the sector's technical areas, nor can it be presumed that the issues presented are held by consensus among the diverse range of NGOs consulted.

With 80% of the labour force dependent on agriculture, the significance of the sector cannot be underestimated¹. After more than 20 years of country-wide war and civil unrest, rural infrastructure has been degraded and mismanaged, populations have been displaced and related skills have been lost. The 1998-2002 drought blighted wheat yields, land, livestock and savings, displaced populations and caused the forced migration of rural workers. With up to 53% of the population living in poverty it is estimated that 6.6 million Afghans do not meet their minimum daily food requirements². Regeneration of the sector on which a majority of the population rely for livelihoods is of crucial importance and this paper aims to explore some emergent issues involved in this rebuilding as experienced by national and international NGOs.

NGOs identified the following 5 themes as priority issues:

1. The 3 C's: Communication, Coordination and Cooperation
2. Policy Problems and Implementation Issues
3. Agriculture Reinvented: Afghanistan and the Private Sector
4. Food Security and the Relief/Development Continuum
5. Addressing Provincial Governance

NGOs Consulted:

ActionAid Afghanistan, AfghanAid, Afghanistan Development Association (ADA), Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU), Aga Khan Development Foundation (AKDN), Agency for Rehabilitation & Energy Conservation in Afghanistan (AREA), Danish Committee for Aid to Afghan Refugees (DACAAR), Dutch Committee for Afghanistan (DCA), International Rescue Committee (IRC), Mission d'Aide au Développement des Économies Rurales en Afghanistan (MADERA), MercyCorps, Norwegian Project Office (NPO/RRAA), Oxfam GB.

¹ National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment (NVRA) 2005

² www.wfp.org



THE 3 C'S: COMMUNICATION, COORDINATION AND COOPERATION

Success of development in the agricultural sector is of crucial importance to both the Afghan people and economic regeneration, and as such, coordination of all development actors is of significant importance. This coordination could be significantly improved. Weak coordination and communication between the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD) and the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livelihoods (MAIL) was cited as a

constraint to effective rural development as was poor communication between donors. Lack of unity in approach towards dealing with regeneration of the agricultural sector has impacted negatively on those dependent on the sector for livelihoods.

“The core issue for us is managing the different approaches of different organisations. We want an integrated and organised approach to providing services in all areas. There are no good open fora for discussing this – there is no platform of decision making”
– NGO Staff Member

“The core issue for us is managing the different approaches of different organisations. We want an integrated and organised approach to providing services in all areas. There are no good open fora for discussing this – there is no platform of decision making” – NGO Staff Member

Roundtable participants commented on the particular need for harmonised approaches in donor agendas. A major divergence of approach was identified between the way in which the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) operates as compared to other funding bodies. USAID does not route the majority of its aid through the Government of Afghanistan but instead implements most of its programmes through large for-profit contractors. German, Canadian and British funding bodies were deemed to be coordinating well but because of the lack of overall cooperation between all funding bodies, confusing strategies and funding priorities are evident.

Government ministries could do much to improve the capacity of their provincial departments and to extend services to the district level. Lack of accountability, enforced unnecessary bureaucracy and in-fighting between MRRD and MAIL were cited as constraints to achieving coherent and effective rural and agricultural development.

Key Recommendations

Recommendation: There is a need for enhanced decision making platforms for NGOs, donors and the Government to facilitate understanding of both objectives and agendas. Terms of Reference (ToR) and a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) are to be discussed and disseminated to donors to outline mechanisms of coordination and arrange agreement of how to implement planned activities.

Recommendation: There needs to be expanded support for programmes which have proven successful at delivering resources to communities (i.e. National Solidarity Programme [NSP]). Consolidating the role of Community Development Councils (CDCs) and ensuring their long-term sustainability will enable donors and partner agencies to better serve marginalised rural communities and for those communities to have a stronger voice in district and provincial level government.

POLICY PROBLEMS AND IMPLEMENTATION ISSUES

There has been significant international input towards development of an agricultural policy. Local and national NGOs are in agreement that the adopted policy (Box 1) can and will be effective. The issue here is how the policy will be implemented.

Centralised forms of governance in Afghanistan have facilitated moves towards creating peace and stability but have resulted in little flexibility for adapting development responses to local circumstances.

It has been recognised that a 'one size fits all' approach is not appropriate in a country as diverse as Afghanistan. However, there are examples from within certain ministries which can serve as lessons to the other ministries involved in agricultural activities.

Box 1 The Agricultural 'Master Plan'

Developed in partnership with USAID the 'Agricultural Master Plan for Afghanistan' is a policy roadmap for accelerating market driven economic regeneration through export driven agriculture. Special attention has been given to exploring the mechanisms which will facilitate this growth, namely the development of an export market. High level inputs ranging from seeds, technical assistance and research and knowledge transfer have been outlined as well as institutional support. Policy clarity has been approved by national and international NGOs however there are concerns regarding both implementation and benefits for non-land owning rural inhabitants.
(www.agriculture.gov.af)

The National Solidarity Programme (NSP) was created by the government's MRRD to develop the ability of Afghan communities to identify, plan, manage and monitor their own development projects. The NSP aims to empower communities to make decisions and manage resources in an inclusive sustainable way. MAIL has been slower to develop national level priority programmes but now that their Agricultural Master Plan has been finalised, it is hoped that implementation efforts will expand the roles of Community Development Councils (CDCs).

Consultations with agricultural NGOs revealed however, that they do not advocate for, at this time, a decentralisation of agriculture policy as this would create unnecessary bureaucracy and fail to facilitate implementation.

Key Recommendations

Recommendation: Increase decentralisation of implementation strategies to account for regional differences and approach diversity with sensitivity. In terms of crosscutting issues like gender and security, support from the central government is essential. However, it is at the local level that these issues need to be addressed.

Recommendation: Expand capacity building efforts for provincial and district level government. Expand programmes that increase local governance skills in advocacy and accountability, as well as programmes that increase central government responsiveness to local concerns. NGOs have the potential to offer capacity building support at district and provincial government levels.

AGRICULTURE REINVENTED: AFGHANISTAN AND THE PRIVATE SECTOR

Agriculture and related off-farm trades will provide the backbone for economic growth in rural Afghanistan. Central to this growth is the adoption of free-market economics and emphasis on exporting agricultural and horticultural produce. Governments, donors and NGOs are all working with the private sector to achieve agricultural regeneration.

Box 2: Dumping or Pricing Policy

In economics, dumping can be referred to any kind of predatory pricing and in international trade law is defined as the act of a manufacturer in one country exporting a product to another country at a price which is either below the price it charges in its home market or is below cost of production. Advocates of this practice are against protectionism and perceive it as beneficial for consumers. However, advocates of workers and labourers believe that safeguards are necessary and can help to alleviate shocks of free trade between economies at different stages of development. In Afghanistan, wheat dumping is a classic example of predatory pricing. Wheat from outside of Afghanistan is imported and sold cheaply or distributed freely, preventing sustainable development of domestic wheat production and increasing dependence on international aid.

Famine Early Warning System Network (FEWS NET) 2007.

Many inputs will be needed to revitalise rural entrepreneurialism, particularly a considerable expansion of rural finance institutions and business development skills training. In the meantime basic needs and livelihoods security of many communities are not being met.

Another issue highlighted was that of limited civil society participation in formulation and implementation of the Agricultural Master Plan. Civil society was not included in this highly participatory process and CSOs are advocating for increased inclusion of all stakeholders.

Of major concern in Afghanistan is the area of imports. A combination of weak governmental institutions, dumping (see Box 3) and poor enforcement of regulation and quality control have created a situation whereby imports of poor quality are flooding the country and preventing development of quality production of food and non-food items.

Although attractive in an economic restructuring phase, these free or cost price items serve to undermine both the capacity of the government to be able to provide for the dependent population and also reverse the work done by civil society, donors and government institutions in terms of sustainable livelihoods and development.

Key Recommendations

Recommendation: There needs to be immediate cessation of all dumping practices. This will require political will to ensure enforcement of necessary laws, commitment from the international trade community to create equitable import/export conditions and participation of civil society to ensure accountability. There are quality control and import regulation laws both within Afghanistan and internationally and these need to be supported, respected and implemented.

FOOD SECURITY AND THE RELIEF DEVELOPMENT CONTINUUM

As previously discussed, the agricultural system of Afghanistan is under reconstruction. This phase comes with serious question about how the immediate food security needs of the populace are to be met and who is going to meet them. CSOs commented that 'trickle-down' benefits from international trade would not be immediate and food insecurity would need to be acknowledged and addressed.

Compounding the issue of uncertain national food security is awareness of the breakdown in the relief development continuum. Relief interventions should ideally be linked to longer-term sustainable development initiatives and it is this linking of both relief and development that is referred to as the continuum. In Afghanistan, this balance has been disrupted and there seems to be little or no connection between relieving human suffering and building skills to prevent the suffering from occurring repeatedly. Whilst donors are advocating a move away from relief efforts in favour of more market orientated programmes, chronic food insecurity is still prevalent.

Food security is a contentious issue in Afghanistan, caused partly by huge geographic regional diversity. A deeper examination of the concept has revealed that it is not just about daily calorie intake, but about quality of the food and ease of access to it. Both interviews and roundtable discussions provided evidence that the issue is not always about availability of food, but distribution of it. Inequities in food distribution were viewed as fundamental to the food security debate and a sustainable approach was suggested to address this but details were lacking and further discussion and decision making forums are needed.

Compounding simplification of food security definitions and regional diversity is the lack of practical government intervention strategies. Both MAIL and MRRD lack clarity in terms of approaches regarding what they want to implement or achieve in areas with chronic food insecurity. Many donors have also turned away from focussing on achieving food security. There is concern that assumptions of 'trickle-down' benefits from private sector growth will come too late.

Key Recommendations

Recommendation: Donors and the Government should not neglect extremely poor rural communities' food security needs at the expense of private sector growth strategies.

Central to food security issues is the breakdown in the relief/development continuum. This collapse of an effective transitional policy regarding food security whilst moving from humanitarian assistance to long term development has hindered the government's understanding of its role. NGOs have unanimously decided that it is their role to facilitate this understanding and urge for donor cooperation and political will from all associated government ministries.

Recommendation: Immediate practical action is needed by the government to adopt and implement its strategy to address chronic food insecurity facilitated by NGOs and UN agencies who work in the area of food security.

ADDRESSING PROVINCIAL GOVERNANCE

Within the agricultural sector there is a need for farmers and rural populations to be able to access information and inputs in order to make economic growth and poverty reduction a reality. Without properly resourced provincial level governance the achievement of ANDS targets, and sub-national development, will not be realised.

Rural and agricultural extension programmes, farmer field schools (FFS) and increased technical inputs have been identified as essential for sustainable development of rural Afghanistan. With increased provincial resources and decentralised implementation policy these visions can become a reality.

Key Recommendations

Recommendation: Expand efforts to develop and support the institutions that increase provincial government effectiveness. Consolidate and expand capacity building of (CDCs). These local governance structures have the potential for key roles in coordinating delivery of agricultural support and extension.

Recommendation: Support adequate training of District Development Assemblies (DDAs) and Provincial Development Councils (PDCs) so that they can advocate for the needs identified by CDCs.

THE BIGGER PICTURE: AFGHANISTAN'S LONG-TERM DEVELOPMENT GOALS

Common understanding of the ANDS and ministry development objectives and implementation frameworks needs to be considerably strengthened. Establishment of platforms for ongoing discussion of ANDS achievements should be encouraged.

At the policy level the Master Plan (see Box 1) is very clear but the concern is that the government may not be able to adapt and deliver on time. The Master Plan is an aggressive economic strategy, one which will call for the government to demonstrate careful management.

It is therefore essential that all agencies involved, including farmers and non-farming rural populations, are familiar with and understand the development framework in which they operate. This situation of understanding is dependent on several factors. Government (both MAIL and MRRD) need to be clearer about their role in development. It is the responsibility of government ministers in association with civil society to commit themselves to facilitating understanding of rural stakeholders about the long term development goals of Afghanistan.

Key Recommendations and Conclusions

The agricultural and rural development sector is characterised by a lack of communication between development implementers, the Government and beneficiaries, together with low stakeholder participation. There needs to be increased stakeholder participation, support of government capacity building and continued dedication of local and international NGOs working in the sector. Increased stakeholder participation is essential to ensure policies are developed in partnership with civil society, donors and the government.

Accessibility to provincial levels of agricultural and animal husbandry goods and services are essential if farmers are to make economic growth a reality. NGOs have suggested that without resourced provincial level governance, implementation of central policy will not materialise. NGOs advocate for a continued and sustained effort to develop and support the institutions and processes which are making increased provincial governance a reality.

Private sector growth is in the early stages and therefore may not initially be able to deliver stated goals such as economic regeneration and poverty reduction. NGOs are advocating for recognition of this transitional period and advise caution and awareness regarding social responsibilities to the rural population whilst economic restructuring occurs.

With the move from subsistence to commercial farming come serious questions regarding how immediate food security needs are to be met. Civil society is advocating for acknowledgement that 'trickle down' benefits are not going to be immediate and from this, ask for development of safeguards in terms of food security. Lacking are appropriate responses, approaches and sector wide understanding of roles and responsibilities. NGOs have identified themselves as a key vehicle in accelerating understanding of the issues.





Published as part of ACBAR's
Advocacy Series with funding
from Asian Development
Bank.

Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief (ACBAR)
House # 69, Charah-ye Shahid, Shar-e-Naw.
Kabul, Afghanistan
Tel: (+93) 700 282 090 / (+93) 700 276 464
www.acbar.org