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Briefing note on fieldwork in Balkh Province, May 2015

Opium poppy and rural livelihoods

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1. Introduction

The following notes describe very initial findings from fieldwork done in ten villages in Balkh Province’s Chintal and Char Bolak Districts during the first two weeks of May 2015. Located west of Mazar-e Sharif, these areas have been counted among the relatively insecure areas of the province, where households have moved in and out of opium poppy cultivation since it was banned in earnest in 2007. Balkh was classified as “poppy-free” from 2007 until 2012/13, when it became a “low level grower,” then was again considered “poppy-free” in 2013/14. Fieldwork took place during the main spring harvest season, in the larger context of a worsening security situation across much of the north, including neighbouring Sar-e Pul. Security in some areas of Balkh such as Jar Qalah was considered better due to the creation several years ago, under the sponsorship of Governor Atta, of the Afghan Local Police (ALP), which puts some money in local pockets, even if it raises concerns about long-term stability. Areas of Char Bolak, while not considered completely secure, were seen as better than two years ago. Taliban were said to circulate mainly at night, with elements from Koh-e Alburz (Alburz Mountains) attacking Chintal and also collecting ten percent *ushr* (traditional tithe paid to the *mullah* or other religious leader for their services) in order to keep the opium poppy fields safe. Variation in security even within the two districts underlines the localised nature of conditions in Afghanistan.

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2. Agriculture in the Fieldwork Areas in Spring 2015

Agricultural conditions were considered good this year, even better than last year. As in most of the country, accumulated precipitation in Balkh in 2014/15 exceeded the previous year (per Food Security Cluster). Farmers were anticipating a good wheat crop,¹ and due to the reduced incidence of melon flies, which had wreaked havoc in 2013, cultivation of melon had rebounded to some extent (the abandonment of melons by many farmers in two previous years contributed to the reduction in the presence of melon flies). Aside from wheat, the area's most important winter crops are cotton and melon/watermelon. The most important summer crops are cotton, mung bean, and sesame. Cotton is typically planted early in May and harvested in October-November, after which wheat is planted on the same land.

Most of the 30 surveyed households, including all 15 in Char Bolak, increased the amount of land and of high-value crops planted from 2013/14 to 2014/15. Some of the increase in cultivated area, especially in Char Bolak, was due to households taking on additional land through sharecropping. Unlike in some other areas of Afghanistan, such land does not stay in the same hands for many years; of the ten households which sharecropped land, four were in their first year, three were in their second year, and three were in their third or fourth years. The only surveyed household which decreased the amount of land it planted during the winter season had grown opium poppy on one *jerib* (0.494 acre or roughly one-fifth hectare) during 2013/14, and subsequently left that amount of land-fallow. During the main winter season, roughly half of the households in each district reduced the amount of wheat they planted. Only three of 30 households increased the amount of wheat they planted, while 16 grew less and the remaining 11 stayed constant. The reduction in planting of the staple crop may reflect last year's good harvest and the resulting lack of debt (see below), which has lessened the immediate threat of food insecurity.

Cropping patterns among the households reflect increasing diversification. The largest cropping shift was into cotton, especially in Char Bolak, where 12 of 15 households increased the amount planted, and only one grew less (and that household increased cotton area during the summer). Among the surveyed households, the percentage of total cultivated area planted to cotton in Char Bolak increased from 27 percent to 31 percent, with the percentage of wheat

area in Char Bolak decreasing from 47 percent to 38 percent. In the minor summer season, which starts in May, the proportion of land planted to the main crops of cotton, mung bean, and sesame remained constant between 2014 and 2015,² although the absolute amount of cultivated land increased in Char Bolak due to the wider use of tubewells (discussed below), and so the area planted to those three crops increased.

Perhaps reflecting a second consecutive good agricultural year, the number of surveyed households which had taken loans in the last year was low (4/30), and none had accumulated debt from prior years. Another possible factor here is that cotton brings in money as advances from traders, perhaps lessening the need for other loans. All reported loans were for routine household expenses and for farming (ploughing, inputs, etc.) - not to respond to household shocks such as illness or crisis. Similarly, very few (2/30) households had sold assets in the previous year; one sold livestock to meet household expenses, another sold livestock to purchase land. Twenty-seven households reported routine sales of livestock, which represents a source of household income. In fact, nearly half of households had purchased significant assets such as land, livestock, vehicle (car or Zarang [a type of low-cost motorbike which can be fitted with a variety of bodies and trailers to transport people and goods]), tractor, generator, or carpets.

1 Elsewhere in the north, there were concerns that if the security situation in Kunduz did not improve in time to allow the wheat harvest, food security might be affected.

2 Because fieldwork was done before summer planting was completed, information for summer 2015 season is based in part on stated intentions.



Figure 1: Tubewell use in Char Bolak

3. Markets

The market for cotton continues to be active, with a set of traders now established at Charahi Balkh, the intersection just outside of the Balkh district centre. In addition to smaller buyers, a couple of large factories are located there. Much of the cotton goes to Pakistan, some of it bought up by Pakistani traders in small quantities to avoid driving up prices. Farmers seem to have increased awareness of the price premium gained by sorting and by keeping shreds from the plastic bags in which cotton is transported from becoming mixed with the cotton, although post-harvest devaluation remains significant due to bag materials, lack of standards, and obsolete ginning equipment. Women are often employed in picking cotton, although at lower wages (150 Afs [USD\$2.6] per day as compared with 250 Afs [USD\$4.3] for men) in part because they work fewer hours due to household responsibilities. There is also a local tradition of women keeping their wages for their own clothing. Cotton has a long history in Afghanistan and is considered a “strategic industrial crop,” especially in the north and in the Helmand River valley, despite its longer growing season and greater water requirements compared with other oilseed crops. Despite some donor-funded initiatives which have had mixed results, many believe that strategic investment in the value chain - from cultivation to post-harvest processing through production of textiles and clothing - for cotton (and oilseeds more broadly) over the last 14 years would have boosted Afghanistan’s industrial development, reduced dependence on imports of edible oils and textiles, contributed to food security, supported the livestock sector (through cottonseed cakes for animals), and created employment.³

³ See “Technical Report: National Conference on Development of Oil Seed Crops. A Joint Initiative of MCN, MAIL and Balkh University, Supported by UNODC”. Amiri Hall, Mazar-e Sharif, Balkh Province, 9-12 November, 2014.

Due in part to improved roads and increased availability of transport, farmers in the surveyed areas have a choice of markets in which to sell their outputs: village/farm gate, district centre, Balkh city, and Mazar. While only a few households (four) reported constraints on marketing their crops, two-thirds complained about the low prices they received, largely because prices fall at harvest time when there is a glut. All surveyed farmers affirmed the desirability of cold storage facilities for fruits and vegetables, but this seems an idealised view which assumes that the facility would be in the village and would be free to the farmer. (The existing modern cold storage facilities in Mazar are all located on the east side of the city, close to the airport and the road to Kabul, but farther away from the main agricultural areas west of the city. The post-2001 experience with building cold storage has been very mixed.)

Two farmers who reported constraints on marketing complained about “*mafia*” control over the melon market. A Member of Parliament (MP), former *jihadi* commander and associate of Governor Atta, has built a new market, Azadi Market, just to the west of the city. Because Azadi Market is on the road by which most melons enter the city, farmers are unable to bring their produce past the market; rather, they are shunted into the market, where they have to pay for the privilege (50 Afs [USD\$0.9] per Zarang load, according to one respondent). Most farmers would prefer to sell their outputs at either the *mandayi* (historically the central grain market, but more generally a market) in the centre of town or else the newer produce market on the eastern (Kabul) side of the city, as the volume of traders is greater there and therefore better prices can be had, but are prevented from doing so. As one farmer reported, “I wasted a day because I was forced to sell at Azadi Market. I don’t know what the price was in the other places.” Larger traders typically go directly to the villages to purchase crops at



Figure 2: Use of plastic sheeting for melon cultivation

harvest. The MP has also obtained the franchise for tax collection on an *ejara* (contract) basis. One other farmer said that he had constraints only on selling *chars* (hashish or the plant from which it comes), while a fourth said that he had to pay high transport costs, as well as sometimes money to police at checkpoints.



Figure 3: Application of herbicide

Due also to the improved roads and transport and, perhaps, necessity, in recent years there has been increased sale of household dairy and other goods in town. In the past it was considered a shame to bring yogurt or *chiqa* (a concentrated form of yogurt) to market, but with urban markets now more integrated, this attitude is no longer so widely held.

4. Innovation and Technical Change

There has been a noticeable increase in tubewell use (see Figure 1) in Char Bolak, which is facilitating an expansion of summer cultivation, especially cotton and melons. Of the 14 households who planted summer crops, five expanded summer cultivation and none decreased. Tubewells, including drilling costs which range from 30,000-50,000 Afs (USD\$517-862) for a small bore well to 100,000-120,000 Afs (USD\$1,724-2,069) for a larger bore one, are often shared among three or four households. Larger generators to drive the pumps are shared, out of necessity, while smaller ones are purchased by individual households. Diesel to run the generators is provided by individual households. The fall in the price of diesel from 65 Afs (USD\$1.1) per litre to 41 Afs (USD\$.7) has also encouraged tubewell use and improved returns. For example, for a typical household, the lower diesel price reduced the cost of diesel from 9 to 6 percent of the average value of summer output sold.

Despite the increased use of tubewells, however, water remains the most significant constraint to cultivation in the surveyed area, especially during the summer season, when more than 80 percent of the land remains fallow. While only a few households reported availability of canal water to be a problem this winter season, all but one household reported water as a serious constraint during the summer season. A number of households reported that they were unable to cultivate

last summer due to water shortage. There were some complaints about corruption of *mirabs* (traditional water-masters) and *chakbashis* (assistants to the *mirabs*) as well as the government's irrigation department, but there did not appear to be large-scale diversion of water by local *zohrmand* (powerholders).

Another innovation is the use of shallow channels and plastic sheeting for cultivation of melons and watermelons (see Figure 2). The sheeting provides several benefits: it retains moisture and limits the amount lost to evaporation, thereby reducing irrigation costs; it suppresses weeds; and it produces an early harvest, which can lead to premium prices and therefore increased returns. There is limited but increased use of herbicide for weed control, mainly on wheat (see Figure 3). Herbicide use was much more prevalent among Chintal households (12/15) than in Char Bolak (3/15). Most households had started using herbicide in the last two or three years, and none had been using them more than four years. A commercial provider (Baba Dehqan, or "Grandpa Farmer") was the source for virtually all of the chemicals, and had provided extension (marketing) services. Insecticide was used for aphids, melon flies, and worms, mainly on cotton and melon/watermelon, by a higher proportion in Char Bolak (10/15) than in Chintal (6/15). Only one farmer knew the name of the insecticide being used on his crops. Solar panels have also been adopted by

many households (21/30), although primarily for lighting and not for agriculture or other productive uses.

According to an equipment dealer in Mazar, the market for solar panels is far more active in Helmand and in the south.

5. Large Economy

While the area has benefitted from a second year of good agricultural conditions, the larger economy in and around Mazar continues to struggle. This is attributed to a combination of factors, mainly the reduction in international financial flows which has curtailed employment on military bases (according to some estimates, by a total of 7,000 persons from Camp Marmalat at the airport and Camp Shaheen at DehDadi just west of the city) and on construction projects, but also to the pervasive air of uncertainty, specifically blamed on the slowness of formation of the central government. The most common response to questions about the economy was “everything is on hold.” Even at the *woleswali* (district) level, people complained that appointments made by two different leaders didn’t work. As more than one casual labourer in Mazar put it, “two kings for one throne.” One elaborated further, saying “we thought that now that we have two kings, there will be plenty of work, but it is the other way around.”

While there are no formal disaggregated economic statistics, there were clear indicators that construction, investment, and trade were all down. One indicator cited by informed respondents was the price of various construction materials; in the last two years, the prices of baked bricks, steel bar, and gravel had declined by 23 percent, 40 percent, and 35 percent, respectively. One well-placed engineer active in large construction projects estimated that the labour cost of building a square metre of building had decreased by 43 percent.

This economic contraction was borne out by interviews with casual labourers, who reported both less available work and stagnant or lower wages (250-300 Afs [USD\$4.3-5.2] per day, as compared with 300-450 Afs [USD\$6-9] in 2012). This was also supported by World Food Programme/Vulnerability Analysis and Mapping estimates of the average annual terms of trade between labour and wheat in the major cities, which have decreased by 20 percent over the previous year, despite the decrease in the price of wheat. Those who newly arrive on the casual labour market in Mazar are at a disadvantage relative to those who are better known and can better use their networks to find work. A number of casual labourers reported emotional stress from returning home many days with

out income and therefore being unable to support or obtain medical care for their families. *Zarang* drivers also reported lower incomes due simply to there being less economic activity, and therefore fewer goods to move around town.

As a regional trading hub, Mazar has been the destination for traders and shopkeepers from Kunduz, Takhar and Badakhshan, who often take goods on a type of revolving credit. This year, however, there were reports that this type of trade was down both because shopkeepers were holding onto their capital and were reluctant to give loans to those coming from other provinces, but also because fighting in Kunduz and Badakhshan had discouraged traders from coming from those areas. A shopkeeper in Char Bolak, interviewed both this year and in 2013, reported that his daily sales this year were 2,000-3,000 Afs (USD\$35-52) with a profit of 300-400 Afs (USD\$5.2-6.9), as compared with 2,000-4,000 (USD\$36-73) and 400-600 (USD\$7.3-11) in 2013. In 2013, he had reported an increase in daily sales from around 1,500-2,000 (USD\$30-40) in 2012.

In 2012 and 2013, respondents had reported a reduction in migration to Iran due to the decreased value of the Iranian currency and a crackdown on undocumented Afghans. This year, however, there were reports of increased migration to Iran and even farther afield, especially from Char Bolak. Four of 30 households surveyed had someone currently in Iran, and two of the four had more than one person. Although there is a long tradition of migration to Iran, many respondents associate migration with the banning of opium poppy in 2007.

In sum, Mazar’s booming urban economy has provided a source of non-farm income for households, but with that in visible decline from around 2013, this may affect resilience in avoiding opium poppy cultivation.

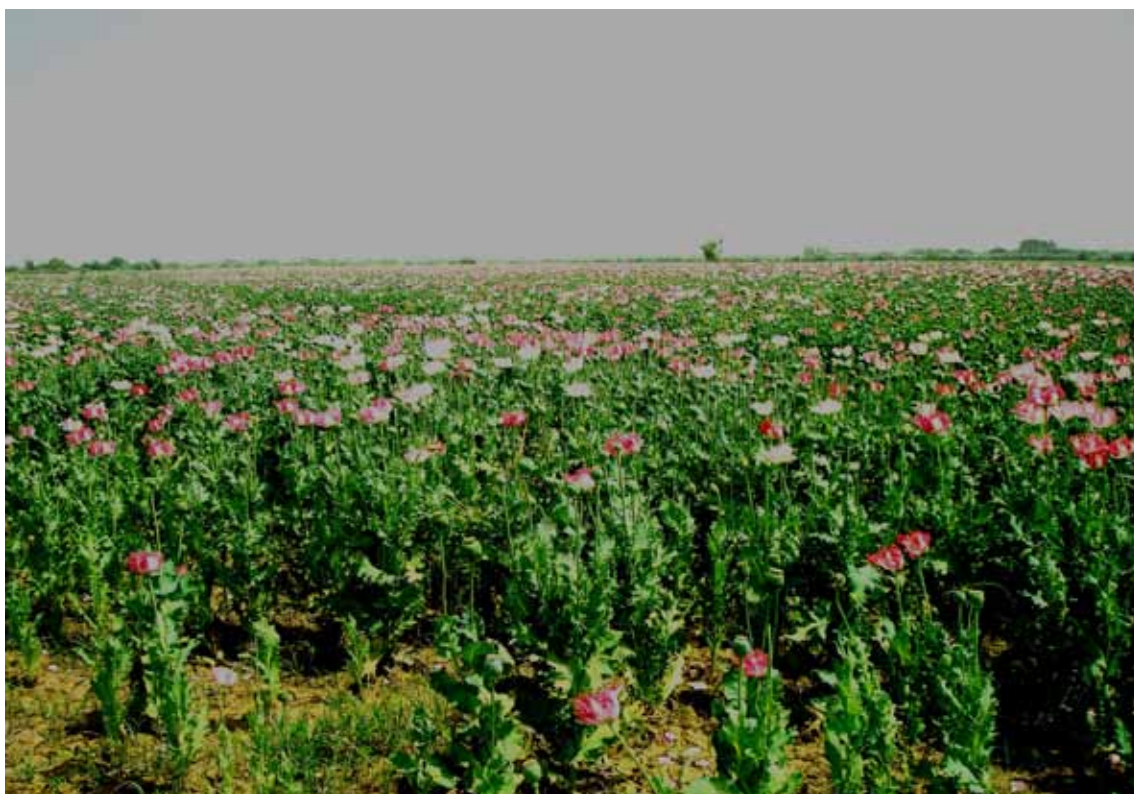


Figure 4: Opium poppy field in Chimtal District

6. Development Assistance

Of the ten villages visited, four reported receiving development assistance in the last year, and six reported none (although in one village there were contradictory responses). Respondents reported that the amount of assistance had tailed off, most likely due to security. Respondents in one village said that a well had been dug and culverts built, along with a *shura* (council) meeting hall. These appear to have been done by the National Solidarity Programme. Respondents in only two villages reported having received wheat seed and fertiliser, and no one reported any other type of assistance in recent years. As is typical, many complained

about the lack of transparency of distributions which had taken place in prior years: *maliks* (local leaders or elders appointed to act as intermediaries between the state and the community) and heads of the *shuras* were said to have diverted aid commodities and either distributed them to their relatives or sold them in the market. Some also complained about the poor quality of wheat seed, saying that it hadn't given good results; accusations were that someplace between the provincial Department of Agriculture, Irrigation, and Livestock and the farmer, inferior seed had been substituted for high-quality, improved seed.

7. Opium Poppy and Counter-Narcotics

Farmers are well-informed about the government's policy on opium poppy cultivation. All respondents said that they heard the message on the radio and that it was the same as in previous years. The role of the *malik*, however, seems to vary from place to place and from previous years. The overwhelming sense is that the *maliks* are simply going through the motions of telling people not to grow - at most. Some said that they hadn't heard anything from the *maliks*, others said that the *maliks* had informed them of government

policy but said that "it's up to the people and that if there is eradication, it's your responsibility." Others said that because there hadn't been cultivation in the area in many years, the *maliks* hadn't said anything.

By the time of fieldwork, there had been no substantive eradication, and it appears that there will be no meaningful eradication campaign this year. Farmers attributed this to the lack of widespread opium poppy cultivation in the area since 2007, but it is clear that

opium poppy is being grown in the less secure areas farther to the west and away from government-controlled space. These included the Koh-e Alburz, Jar Qalah (where fieldwork was done, see Figure 4), and Nowshera, as well as in neighbouring Sar-e Pul due to insecurity, especially in those parts bordering Alburz. Jar Qalah has less water, saltier land, and is farther from a main bazaar area (especially when seasonal rains make the road impassable), and therefore grows less vegetables than elsewhere in Chimtāl, making it more vulnerable to resuming opium poppy cultivation. All in all, there appears to be more area cultivated this year than last. There were credible reports that an eradication verification team had gone to Sar-e Pul and Faryab for preliminary discussion, but had returned convinced that political and security conditions were not conducive to an eradication campaign which would likely lead to violence and instability. The reported price for *chars* was low (3,000-4,000 Afs [USD\$52-69] per kg for first quality, less than half the price reported during fieldwork in 2013), which meant there was not much cultivation due to the relatively large amount of work required.

Informed observers attributed the lack of an eradication campaign to provincial and national politics: there was a leadership vacuum and the government was preoccupied with its own internal matters (i.e., appointing ministers and governors to replace the acting ones left over from the Karzai administration); in this view, not surprisingly, Acting Governor Atta had no interest in provoking fights in rural areas mostly on behalf of the international community, given the fluid political situation and when past initiatives had not brought much benefit beyond short-term plaudits of “model governor,” although on the other hand, there was surprisingly little noise when Balkh lost its “poppy-free” status in 2012/2013. Acting Governor Atta was said to be uninterested in repeating the type of aggressive campaign conducted at the end of 2013, using ALP muscle, which followed the loss of official “poppy-free” status after six years. Some attributed part of his lack of motivation to the recent Human Rights Watch paper which named him as a major drug trafficker. Certainly, many of his recent speeches have been very aggressive and critical of the international community. In the current political climate (including conspiracy theories which are wild even by Afghan standards), the lack of interest in counter-narcotics is consistent with the increasing disdain for an international community which is seen to have reneged on its promises and was leaving Afghanistan in the lurch. There have also been rumours of a rapprochement between him and Dostum. There has been much speculation on Governor Atta’s motivation in suppressing

opium poppy. In the absence of material benefits, was it to build his reputation, or was it in order to limit resource flows which might help his rivals to challenge his control?⁴ Regardless, he seems less interested than previously in a “zero-tolerance” approach.

At any rate, farmers may now be kicking themselves for not growing opium poppy. As one farmer put it, “the people who cultivated this year are happy, because there has been no campaign.” Those who took the gamble seem to have been rewarded. Whether or not it was solely the threat of eradication which discouraged cultivation, those who abstained clearly feared being eradicated. This would also suggest that there is likely to be much greater cultivation this coming fall, especially if the national political and security conditions do not radically shift in the direction of stability and order, and if the larger economy remains weak.

There is said to be an increase in local opiate consumption in Mazar city from 2 kg to 7 kg per day, although while the notion of an increase is plausible, the precise numbers should be regarded with great caution, considering the sources. The three treatment centres in Mazar are said to be overwhelmed and ineffective.

4 See David Mansfield, “Our Friends in the North: Contrasting Images of Power and Poppy in the Provinces of Balkh and Badakhshan,” 8 April 2014.

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