



Policymaking in Agricultural and Rural Development

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Overview

This briefing paper investigates policymaking in the Agricultural and Rural Development sector (ARD) in Afghanistan by the ministries of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock (MAIL) and Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD). Research took place in 2007 and 2008. Policymaking and policy content in this sector is of particular interest: Most of the country’s poor live in rural Afghanistan and agriculture has been seen to have the potential to be an engine of economic growth.

There are more general reasons to be interested in the way in which policy is made. For many, good policy is that which is technically sound and supported by evidence-based argument. However, good policy must not only be technically sound but must also have political support. This requires deliberative policymaking processes and engagement with competing views. This paper investigates whether these conditions have been met in the ARD sector, and if the ARD policymaking effort has generated policy that is technically robust and is politically supported.

Policy always simplifies. The real world policy addresses is complicated and uncertain, so a key function of policymaking is to reduce uncertainty and to present solutions. This process of simplification leads to the creation of policy stories or narratives. Based on a review of ARD policymaking processes and policy content, three policy narratives that have driven the policymaking agenda are identified. Understanding the formation, content and defence of these narratives is central to understanding the nature of the policy process. All three narratives share a common and generalised story or foundational myth about the state of rural Afghanistan that reflects a lack of critical engagement in understanding rural Afghanistan and the nature of its rural poverty. However, each draws a different conclusion as to what the policy problem is and how it should be solved. All three have technical strengths and weaknesses and differing degrees of political support, underpinned by different visions of what the post-conflict Afghan state should be.

The first narrative is the “productionist” narrative and is found in MAIL. It emphasises the collapse of agricultural production after 1978

and the subsequent need to rebuild it. It draws its understanding from a perception of the place that Afghanistan's agricultural sector occupied in the past and seeks to recreate that and the important role it felt MAIL had played. This narrative also sees a strong position for the state in ARD.

The second narrative is the “developmentalist” narrative, which subscribes, in varying degrees, to the donor consensus on the importance of good governance, private sector-led development, growth and a focus on poverty reduction. The developmentalist narrative sees the problem as a lack of public goods and a conducive environment for the poor to move out of poverty. The solution it proposes is creating an environment that promotes good governance, supports investment in public goods (such as roads, schools and infrastructure) and enables pro-poor investments and programmes to improve the rural poor's well-being. It focuses largely on creating the chances for the poor to act as independent actors and control their own destiny but pays little attention to the realities of informal structures of social inequality and power that constrain opportunities for the poor. This view of development is held by most of the donors working with MAIL and by the MRRD. This narrative sees a moderate role for the state.

The third narrative is the “market driven” narrative, which emphasises the role of the private sector in driving development and allows for only a minimal role for the state. This narrative tackles the perceived lack of a free market and unnecessary government intervention in the economy. Since 2002, subscribers to this narrative appear to have shifted their focus from advocating for strong free markets, generally, to advocating for international agribusiness and the commercialisation of the agricultural sector in Afghanistan.

As noted, MRRD has consistently held a developmentalist position, while in MAIL there has been a divide between those who subscribe to the productionist narrative—mostly national staff, a group of donors and their advisers who are closer to the developmental position—and one donor that has a market-driven agenda and has been particularly entrepreneurial in its advocacy of the market-driven narrative.

The attempt to merge these divergent narratives into a common ARD sector strategy (ARDSS) in the ANDS has largely failed. What the ARD policymaking process reflects is the competition between these positions and the narratives' advocates, rather than an exploration of potential complementarities. The competition has resulted in an adversarial policymaking process where policy narratives and their advocates have been unable to accept competing viewpoints. In the end, there was no opportunity to address the structural weaknesses of each of the policy narratives, explore policy choices or develop a coherent ARD strategy. The ARDSS policy that was created is not technically robust and does not have broad political support.

As well as highlighting the shortcomings of the ARD policymaking process, this study also reveals the limits of the Afghan Government's leadership capability, given its high dependence on aid. Across all donor programmes, donors undermine national leadership of policy by off-budget¹ (outside government budget control) funding of programmes or by selectively funding programmes in specific provinces. These donor behaviours are not conducive to capacity-development and do not meet the requirements for “harmonisation” as envisaged in the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness.

One lesson to learn from the ARD policymaking process is to recognise the importance of, and allow space for, debate on policy choices. Making good policy in Afghanistan is difficult, given the government's lack of policymaking history, conflicting political and policy goals and political uncertainty. One way to make more room for policy debate would be to limit donor influence in decisions about what policy should be. Another possible way to improve opportunities for policy debate is to consider the employment of independent policy analysts, rather than sectoral specialists, who are not tied to specific donor policy positions and who can support ministries and broker policy discussions to build technically robust and politically supported policies. In turn, use of policy analysts could contribute toward a deeper Afghan ownership of policy.

¹ These are programmes that donors fund directly rather than through government mechanisms and are subsequently outside government budget control.

A second lesson that emerges from the study of the ARD policymaking process is the critical role individuals and individual personalities play in the policymaking process. This role can be both constructive and damaging. Individuals seeking influence in the policymaking process have an opportunity to influence debate, but they have

to be strategic and political about how they go about pursuing their agenda. This requires both understanding the specific political interests of their counterparts and seeking ways to build on these interests in order to create more political support for a final policy.

I. Introduction: Why Study the Policymaking Process?

This briefing paper on the policymaking process for Afghanistan's Agriculture and Rural Development sector (ARD) is part of an AREU series on policymaking processes in Afghanistan.² The policymaking processes of the ARD sector are of particular interest. First, most of Afghanistan's poor live in rural areas. Second, the agricultural sector is widely seen to have a key role in driving future economic growth. There are also more general reasons to be interested in how policy is made. Considerable effort has gone into policymaking in Afghanistan because of the belief that creating and implementing good policy is key to progressive development and the overall post-war state-building effort.

But, what is good policy and how is it made? For many, a good policy is technically sound and is supported by a comprehensive and impartial review of the evidence on the ground and good evidence-based argument. While these are necessary conditions for good policymaking, the selection, presentation and interpretation of facts and evidence is always selective and debatable so technical robustness is often open to question. Moreover, in Afghanistan, good policymaking is hampered by incomplete data and contradictory data sources. Further, the problems Afghanistan's policies attempt to address are complex, multiple and interrelated, so there is room for disagreement when defining what the policy problem is when searching for a suitable solution.

Policy simplifies a world that is complicated and uncertain. Indeed, a key function of policy is to reduce uncertainty so solutions can be presented.

² The selection of policy areas covered by AREU's policymaking study series is based on the structure and cross-cutting themes of the Afghan National Development Strategy (ANDS).

Solutions are developed by creating policy narratives.³ These narratives are constructed to explain and justify the solutions they offer.⁴ As will be discussed below, three such narratives were involved in the ARD policymaking process. Policy narratives are often driven by general ideas, concepts, key terms or phrases—also known as “mobilizing metaphors”⁵—that are often abstract and open to multiple interpretations. A good example of a mobilizing metaphor is the “good governance” policy narrative, which is a development concept to which everyone can subscribe without being clear on what the term means. Another is the “free market.”

A key function of these policy narratives is political in that it seeks to build or mobilise the support of many stakeholders. Therefore, the more general and imprecise the narrative, the more likely it is that groups with different views will subscribe to that policy narrative. It has to be recognised therefore that policymaking is fundamentally political. A good policy not only has to be technically strong, but it must also legitimise and mobilise political support from different interests.⁶ This paper, in its study of the ARD policymaking process and the ARD policy narratives, asks whether good policy has been

³ Policy stories or narratives are simplifying accounts that try create order, certainty and coherence under conditions of uncertainty and complexity, see Emery Roe, *Narrative Policy Analysis. Theory and Practice*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1994), 2-4.

⁴ Carol Lee Bacchi, *Women, Policy and Politics: The Construction of the Policy Problem*, London and Delhi: Sage, 1999), Chapter 1.

⁵ David Mosse, “Is Good Policy Unimplementable? Reflections on the Ethnography of Aid Policy and Practice,” *Development and Change* 35, no. 4 (2004): 639-671.

⁶ Mosse, 639.

created in the ARD sector. If not, why? And, what might be learnt from this example to contribute to better policymaking processes in other sectors?

There are particular reasons to be interested in policymaking processes in Afghanistan and in asking whose policy it is? None of the preconditions for successful national policymaking—political history, stability in goals, low environmental and political uncertainty and institutional memory—exist.⁷ Thus the roles of external actors in the ARD policymaking process have to be considered. The extent to which donors have been engaged in Afghanistan's development has given them a strong influence over policymaking. In general, the policy models used by bilateral and international agencies tend not only to simplify their policy prescriptions but also to universalise them, since policy prescriptions from one context are taken to be relevant in another.⁸ One example is the phrase “international best practice,” which frequently appears in policy documents in Afghanistan. An assumption that policy solutions have universal applicability de-contextualises and de-politicises policy and reinforces a technical attitude toward policymaking. Because of the Afghan Government's dependence on aid, however, the government has had difficulty exercising control and direction over the policymaking process and in deciding how aid is delivered. This paper highlights how there have been severe limits to government control over ARD policymaking, which raises fundamental questions about the Afghan Government's ownership⁹ of policy. Governments that are highly dependent on aid cannot effectively lead, particularly when there are severe limits on a government's capacity to govern, as in Afghanistan.¹⁰ These difficulties are further complicated¹¹ by lack of a lead donor for the large number of donors

⁷ Roe, *Narrative Policy Analysis*, 35

⁸ J. Fergusson, *The Anti-Politics Machine: Development, Depoliticization and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1994).

⁹ A prime example of a mobilising metaphor that is open to multiple interpretations.

¹⁰ Hamish Nixon, “*Aiding the State?*” *International Assistance and the State Building Paradox in Afghanistan*, (Kabul, Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2007).

¹¹ William Byrd, “Responding to Afghanistan's Development Challenge: An assessment of Experience during 2002-2007 and Issues and Priorities for the Future, Report No SASPR-11, South Asia Region, Prem Working Paper Series” (Washington: The World Bank, 2007), 19.

active in Afghanistan and donors' practice of off-budget funding,¹² which includes funding programs outside the government's agenda. (It is estimated that as much as two-thirds of foreign assistance in Afghanistan is disbursed outside of the government's control.)

This paper defines policy as a set of defined intentions and resulting practices that are developed, funded and implemented in the name of the public good. Therefore, the policymaking process is one where policy is conceived, negotiated, expressed and formalised. Policy is not just a formal documentation and it should not be assumed that policy is always written down. Policy is also the practice or implementation. It is often the case that in the investigation of policy implementation and the discovery of the disconnect between what is written in policy documents and what happens in the real world, a deeper understanding of what policy is actually about emerges.

This paper presents an overview of the ARD policy agenda and the underlying interests, policy narratives and practices that drove the creation of ARD policy. Understanding the ARD policymaking process is not an end in itself, but rather, seeks to contribute to further learning, improved practice and change. More generally, the purpose of policy enquiry is “to facilitate rather than supplant informed political choice,”¹³ which links into a wider agenda of building participatory democracy in Afghanistan and providing access to and explanation of data to all parties so that serious public discussion can take place on policy decisions. By focusing on policy narratives, the policymaking process, and the ARD policy agenda, this paper does not assume or necessarily adopt a rationalist position on policy content or policymaking. At the same time, believing policymaking to be simply about power—although power is intrinsic to policymaking—denies the good intentions of those who make policy in order to make a positive difference.

This paper first reviews the policymaking

¹² Funding external to the government budget, managed and controlled by a donor.

¹³ Frank Fischer, *Reframing Public Policy: Discursive Politics and Deliberative Practices*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 15.

history in the two ministries relevant to ARD, then characterises the three policy narratives that have influenced the debate on ARD policy. Understanding these narratives, their content, their assumptions and claims is fundamental to assessing the technical robustness of the ARD policy and assessing the extent to which political support has been built. Next, the paper discusses the ARD policymaking process and then investigates how policies were developed in the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock (MAIL) and the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD). At MAIL, the main policy studied is the MAIL Master Plan, while at MRRD, the paper highlights the National Area Based Development Program (NABDP) and the National Solidarity Program (NSP). The paper

then discusses the development of the Agriculture and Rural Development Sector Strategy (ARDSS) that is included in the Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS), developed by these two ministries. The paper concludes that the ARD policymaking process has been problematic and messy, driven by competition and exclusion rather than by efforts to find and build a common policy story. This has been further complicated by the government and the ministries' behaviour, but more significantly by donor behaviour. The result is policy that is technically weak and is pulled in different directions by three competing policy narratives, each with their flaws with respect to evidence and argument. It has also failed to mobilise and build political support. In this sense, a "good" ARD policy has not been created.

2. The "Rural Sector" and the Making of Two Ministries

The problematic separation of agriculture from rural development under the umbrella of the ARD (as defined by the Afghanistan National Development Strategy [ANDS]), as if they were additive and discrete rather than integral components runs throughout the policymaking process and reflects the organisational history of the two ministries. Historically, MAIL¹⁴ is older, dating back to at least the 1930s and, today, is bigger than the MRRD, with over 10,000 staff. The MRRD, with 2,000 staff, has traditionally been junior to MAIL. First established as the Rural Department Commission under the Ministry of Commerce in 1954,¹⁵ it has had a chequered history of institutional movement, closure and re-establishment. It was only established as an independent ministry in 2002 with a mandate to promote poverty reduction and social protection in rural Afghanistan.

As noted earlier, there are two reasons why

policymaking in this sector is of central importance: a significant proportion of Afghanistan's poor people live in rural areas and agriculture is seen to be the key productive sector for Afghanistan's development. These reasons also identify the need for rural policy to focus on the linkage between poverty reduction and production in rural areas. If the importance of the rural sector is considered in combination with an assessment¹⁶ of the relative performance of the two ministries, then the MRRD is often seen as the more successful of the two. The potential links between the relative "success" of the two ministries and their individual policymaking processes is also of interest.

Success, of course, is always a debatable assessment. One yardstick that has been used is the differences in leadership at the two ministries¹⁷ and the importance of personalities in shaping policy processes emerges in this paper. Another measure is the budget size of the two ministries, and the proportion of their budgets that is core budget and the proportion that is off-budget, or spent within the mandate of the ministry but not under its control. On this basis, MRRD has not

¹⁴ The Ministry of Agriculture has had various names changes in the recent past. For clarity, it will be referred to by its current name and acronym: Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock (MAIL).

¹⁵ Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development, "Do You Know...? History of MRRD," <http://www.mrrd.gov.af/English/History.htm> (accessed September 2008).

¹⁶ Byrd, "Afghanistan's Development Challenge," 12.

¹⁷ Byrd, "Afghanistan's Development Challenge," 12.

only had a larger budget than MAIL (See Table 1), but has also had a higher proportion of its budget (more than 60 percent) under its control, in comparison to MAIL. But these differences are also indicative of the way in which donors have behaved with an implicit policy of selectivity¹⁸ that has had its effects on ministry performance.

started the process of developing its Master Plan,²³ which was released later that year. From 2006, the key policy development was the engagement of MAIL in the ANDS' ARDSS.²⁴

Table 1. Core and external budgets (disbursed in \$M) for MAIL and MRRD.

Year	MAIL			MRRD		
	Core budget	External Budget	Core as % total budget	Core budget	External Budget	Core as % total budget
2005 (1384)	0.55	18.11	3.5	132.65	9.97	92.9
2006 (1385)	16.96	37.96	30.9	274.66	13.79	95.2
2007 (1386)	45.70	446.28	9.3	346.38	181.93	65.5
2008 (1387)	55.895	264.171	17.5	592.397	381.435	60.8

Source: Ministry of Finance database.

MAIL's policy development¹⁹ (See Figure 1) can be traced from the 2002 National Development Framework (NDF)²⁰ and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) 2003 study, "Rebuilding Afghanistan's Agriculture Sector."²¹ Both documents contributed to the draft Agriculture Policy Statement of 2003,²² which was subsequently revised and approved as the 2004 Agriculture Policy. In early 2005, MAIL

Figure 1. Post-2001 MAIL policy timeline

- 2002: A Strategy of Agriculture and Livestock Development of Afghanistan (Draft)
- 2003: "Rebuilding Afghanistan's Agriculture Sector" (Asian Development Bank)
- 2004: A Policy & Strategy Framework for the Rehabilitation of Agriculture and Natural Resource Sector of Afghanistan. (Drafted February 2004, Approved June 2004)
- 2005: Master Plan 2005
- 2007: Agricultural Strategy for the ANDS (March 19, 2007)
- 2007: Master Plan & Programmes: Implementation and Investment Plans (2007)
- 2009: National Agriculture Development Framework 2009

¹⁸ Jonathan Goodhand and Mark Sedra, "Bribes or Bargains? Peace Conditionalities and 'Post-Conflict' Reconstruction in Afghanistan," *International Peacekeeping* 14, no. 1 (2007): 41-61.

¹⁹ Due to the timing of the research this paper does not discuss the National Agricultural Development Framework and its constituent programmes (Agricultural Production and Productivity Programme, Economic Regeneration Program, Natural Resource Management Programme and Change Management, Public Sector Development and Programme Support Programme) issued in draft by MAIL in April 2009.

²⁰ Afghanistan Transitional Authority, "National Development Framework: Draft for Consultation," (Kabul: 2002).

²¹ Asian Development Bank, "Rebuilding Afghanistan's Agriculture Sector" (Manila: Asian Development Bank, South Asian Department, Asian Development Bank, 2003).

²² Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Husbandry and Natural Resource Sector of Afghanistan, "Making Agriculture and Productive Management and Sustainable Use of Natural Resources the Engine of Socio-Economic Development in Afghanistan: A Policy and Strategy Framework for the Rehabilitation and Development of Agriculture and Natural Resource Sector of Afghanistan" (Kabul: Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Husbandry and Food [MAAHF], 2003).

²³ On the basis of the 2004 MAIL policy, the then-minister approached donors for support. Six donors—the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, Japanese International Cooperation, European Commission and the U.K. Department for International Development (DfID)—agreed to consider support for the Ministry subject to the preparation of a Master Plan to guide investment.

²⁴ Government of Afghanistan, "Afghanistan National Development Strategy: 2008 Agriculture and Rural Development Strategy 1387 - 1391 (ANDS ARDSS)" (Kabul: GoA, 2008).

A number of points can be noted about policy development in MAIL. First, there has been a heavy external influence, with policy directly written by external consultants (as was the case with the ADB 2003 sector assessment) or by advisers placed within the ministry (as was the case with the Master Plan). These consultants and analysts have led and, in many ways, determined MAIL policy content. There have also been major divisions of opinion between donors involved with the ministry. Related to this, one major donor, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), has operated entirely off-budget and implemented programmes²⁵ independently from the ministry, even though project offices have been located within MAIL. USAID funding has been a significant part of the large off-budget component of the MAIL total budget. Overall, policymaking at MAIL has been drawn out and the shape of an overall MAIL policy has been slow to emerge and is more visible through formal documentation than programme implementation.

The development of the policy agenda in MRRD has followed a rather different route. In part, this reflects the differing mandates of the two ministries, but it is also a reflection of the contrasting programme structures the two

ministries have followed. MRRD may have had an advantage in that it started with a relatively clean slate after 2001 without the historical legacy or weight of staff that MAIL has. In addition, the programmatic content of MRRD's portfolio has lent itself to different and arguably more tangible and focused deliverables. Much of MRRD's portfolio has focused on delivering public goods and visible technical interventions that have addressed structural poverty, such as improving access to roads, water supply, schools and so forth.

What appears to have happened in MRRD is that the Ministry has led and gained control, reflected in its budget, of its programme in a way that did not happen in MAIL. As will be seen from Figure 2, MRRD has drafted only two policy statements, and both are brief documents. Much of the content and focus of policy is revealed more in the discussion and implementation of specific programmes than specific policy documents.

For example, the National Solidarity Programme (NSP) offered a programme structure and style of implementation that was consistent with the views of the MRRD minister that the ministry needed to move out of direct programme implementation.²⁶ Instead, the role of the ministry was seen to

Figure 2. National programmes and policies of MRRD

Acronym	Title
National Programmes	
NABDP	National Area-Based Development Program Phase 1 (2002); Phase 2 (2005)
WatSan	Rural Water Supply & Sanitation Programme, (2002)
NRAP	National Emergency Employment Programme, NEEP (2002) National Rural Access Programme (2005)
NSP	National Solidarity Programme, (2003)
MISFA	Microfinance Investment Support Facility for Afghanistan, (2003)
AREDP	Afghanistan Rural Enterprise Development Program, (2008)
Policy Statements	
MRRD	Strategic Plan 1381 - 1385 (2002)
MRRD	A Strategic Intent. 1386 - 1388 (2007)

²⁵ For example Rebuilding Agricultural Markets Program (RAMP) and Accelerated Sustainable Agriculture Program (ASAP).

²⁶ Informant interview, (Official, MRRD), pers. comm., 15 August 2007. See Adam Pain and Sayed Mohammad Shah, "Policymaking in Agriculture and Rural Development in Afghanistan" (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2009), 10, for a complete listing of informants.

need to focus more on policy quality, programme monitoring and evaluation and contracting out the implementation of programmes to partners, which in the case of the NSP were national and international nongovernmental organisations (NGOs). This mode of ministry operation, reinforced by a reduction of the MRRD ministry staff by a third to 2000 and a focus on quality from the top level down, sowed the seeds of a transformation in ministry practice and culture.²⁷ As one external observer commented,²⁸ it was soon clear that there was a policy development process evolving indigenously within the ministry that began to drive the donors toward working with—and not against or separate from—the MRRD agenda. While initially the management of the National Programmes were contracted out to oversight consultants—for example, the first phase of NSP was managed by a German oversight consultant—as ministry capacity developed, it

gained more control and management of its funding. By the second phases of NSP and National Area-Based Development Program (NABDP), management was with the ministry.

MRRD's gradual gaining of control over the management of its programme and finances indicates its increasing degree of authority over programme content and direction. MRRD appears to have got off to a good start in 2002, gaining political support, and policy emerged through implementation practice while donors flocked to support it. How have the two contrasting organisational histories at MAIL and MRRD, their policy outcomes and the nature of donor engagement been reflected in the process and content of policy generation in ARD? This is explored below through an examination of the emergence of key policy narratives that have been generated in the two ministries.

3. Three Policy Narratives on Agriculture and Rural Development

Three distinct narratives describing the three separate problems underlying agriculture and rural development can be found in the documentation and accounts of the ARD policymaking process. Each represents rather different positions on what is to be done to solve that particular problem and what policy should be implemented for Afghanistan's agricultural and rural development. These were all preformed and established prior to any policy discussion and justified by their appeal to different policy histories although they share a common position on the state of Afghanistan's rural economy in 2001. The three policy narratives can be characterised as the productionist, developmentalist, and market-driven narratives. Each has its own champion. For the productionists, the problem ARD must address is the decline in agricultural production since 1978 and the solution is increasing production. For the developmentalists, the problem is Afghanistan's lack of public goods and community governance structures. The solution is enabling

an environment that supports a transformed rural economy. For proponents of the market-driven narrative, the problem is the lack of an active free market that can respond to world demand. Rural Afghanistan serves as a backdrop from which to establish these positions, for all three narratives share a generalised, even mythical story of how the agricultural and rural sectors were devastated and destroyed by 2001. But, each interprets the implications of this assumed destruction in different ways in order to suit their narrative.

In presenting these narratives as three distinct policy stories, this paper does not mean to suggest there is no overlap between them or that they do not share some common positions. They do, to some extent, stress different dimensions of a potential rural development agenda. The point to emphasise is that each of these narratives represents a reasonably coherent story and each has different indicators of success. Understanding the formation, content and defence of these narratives is central to understanding the nature and content of the policy process debate in agriculture and rural development.

²⁷ Informant interview, (Official, MRRD), pers. comm., 24 January 2008. Note: This informant characterised MRRD's previous bureaucratic culture as one of signing papers and the avoidance of responsibility.

²⁸ Informant interview, (Advisor, International Agency), pers. comm., 31 July 2007.

Defining the policy problem

Each of these narratives subscribes to a common story or foundational myth of how, by 2001, the rural economy had been destroyed by years of war destruction, and drought, although each narrative derives a different problem statement from this shared historical perspective. This reflects the aspects each chooses to emphasise in building the myth and the policy solution they wish to offer. This view of devastation and collapse is a largely accepted and unquestioned truth when considering the state of the agricultural and rural sectors. The final ARDSS²⁹ also includes a history of disaster and decline around statistics on crop area, production, livestock numbers. It points to a long-term decline in cereal production of 3.5 percent between 1978 and 2004, a generalisation that ignores the rise in production from 1992 until the drought in 1998 and the peak in wheat production in 2003. USAID's³⁰ characterisation of the agricultural sector in a 2006 project proposal document is typical of how this foundational myth is described (See Box 1.)

Many of the assumptions included in such characterisations of the history and current state of rural Afghanistan can be challenged. As one long-time observer of Afghanistan's agricultural economy has noted,

*views about agriculture and the agricultural economy in Afghanistan have been perceived through a set of orthodoxies, which are frequently simplistic, outdated or ignorant, or based on a perspective that overvalues the role of the state and aid agencies in agricultural recovery and change.*³¹

This observer goes on to be particularly critical of assumptions about the agricultural sector's destruction and loss of available seed, pointing to

²⁹ See GoA, ANDS ARDSS, 7.

³⁰ USAID, "Request for Proposals RFP-306-06-006APSO: Accelerated Sustainable Agriculture Program (ASAP)" (Bangkok: USAID Afghanistan Procurement Support Office, 2006), 5.

³¹ Anthony Fitzherbert, "Rural Resilience and Diversity Across Afghanistan's Agricultural Landscapes," in *Reconstructing Agriculture in Afghanistan*, ed. Adam Pain and Jackie Sutton, 29-48 (Rugby, UK: Food and Agricultural Organisation and Practical Action, 2006).

the record grain harvest of 2003, for which only four percent of the total seeds sown by farmers were contributed by aid agencies.³² The author goes on to question the assumption that rural Afghanistan is populated by small-scale farms and dependent households³³ that have remained static since the 1970s, pointing out that average yields of irrigated wheat in Afghanistan in the 1990s were higher than those of the 1970s or 1980s.

Box 1. Setting the context for ARD

Agriculture is the most important sector in Afghanistan with about 80 percent of the country's population living in rural areas and earning at least some of their livelihood from agriculture and agriculture-related services. Emerging from more than 20 years of conflict, exacerbated by years of drought, the agricultural economy was devastated. Rural infrastructure, such as irrigation and roads, were in disrepair. There had been an exodus of technical and managerial expertise. Research and extension systems were non-functional. New agricultural technologies had not been adopted for decades. Improved varieties lost their yield potential and succumbed to new diseases. Rural financial systems were non-existent. Afghanistan's food production capacity was damaged and farmers were impoverished. A country which once boasted of an agricultural sector that contributed to more than 80 percent of the national income was now heavily dependent on food aid from international donors.

Equally, the claim that Afghanistan is a country dependent on food aid is well wide of the mark. The evidence shows that there has been a systematic undervaluation of the role of commercial imports of wheat and, despite the long-term drought, and political instability, grain markets have continued to function.³⁴ It is also the case that food aid has played a fairly small role in providing, at best,

³² An assumption that was restated in 2008: See Jonathan Burch, "Seed Shortage Hits Afghan Wheat Farmers," *Reuters*, 6 December 2008, <http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/ISL392352.htm> (accessed December 15, 2008).

³³ For a more extended discussion of the yeoman farmer fallacy, see also Ian Christoplos, "Narratives of rehabilitation in Afghan agricultural interventions," in *Reconstructing Agriculture in Afghanistan*, 165-188.

³⁴ Andrew Pinney and Scott Rochini, "Food Security in Afghanistan," *Reconstructing Agriculture in Afghanistan*, 119-164.

eight percent of food supply between 2000 and 2004.³⁵

Despite the evidence to the contrary, many of the key beliefs surrounding the state of the rural economy—which include the effects of 25 years of destruction, dependence on food aid, food security as food production and 80 to 85 percent of the rural population being dependent on agriculture—are a persistent myth in much of the policy documentation in agriculture since 2001. All three policy narratives equally subscribe to this myth as an unquestionable truth about the state of the agricultural and rural sectors, from which they lay out their policy positions. What this historical context shows is a lack of analytical engagement in understanding rural Afghanistan and its poverty dimensions, with the focus simply on establishing positions to justify policy response. In this sense, policy has been divorced from context. However, the way in which this general story of collapse is interpreted is used in three quite distinct ways to leverage the policy story of what is to be done.

The productionist narrative

In the productionist narrative, which is used exclusively by MAIL, the historical emphasis is placed on the collapse of agricultural production and the fact that 80 to 85 percent of Afghans are dependent on agriculture. For proponents of this narrative, the key issue or problem is the lack of production, and the fact that production is key to food security. The solution for this problem is to recreate what Afghanistan was in the past: a self-sufficient agricultural producer with the rural population engaged in agriculture. This is also a narrative that sees as important the reestablishment of the major role that the Ministry of Agriculture played in the past in agricultural development. Evidence for this position can be found in two sources: the MAIL policy texts and the way in which ministry officials commented on the policy process. With respect to the former, the productionist thread can be traced from the ADB sector strategy of 2003,³⁶ the 2004 Policy

and Strategy Framework,³⁷ through the final 2008 Agricultural and Rural Development Sector Strategy to the ARDS,³⁸ which states: “The strategic objective is to develop support mechanisms for subsistence farmers, enabling them to improve food security through diversification of crops and livestock production and to increase productivity.” Indeed, in the ARDSS assessment of achievements, many of the indicators that are used to measure progress are very much claims of success from the productionist narrative. These include increased production, increased provision of veterinary and health services, production of improved seed and establishment of farmers’ organisations.³⁹

With respect to the comments of the ministry staff, many privately expressed reservations about the overall focus of policy development at MAIL and the direction in which they felt they were being pushed. One⁴⁰ felt there was need for a slower process. A persistent theme was a reference to the past and to the role that the ministry was seen to have fulfilled then. It was the feeling of several⁴¹ that the ministry should have a much more direct role in implementation and that it had a responsibility for ensuring that people were fed. They commented that it was much too early for the private sector driven economy that donors were arguing for⁴² and Afghanistan was not ready for an open economy, which they felt would lead to greater inequality.

be able to resolve medium to longer term food security concerns.” In addition, the paper states that, in the medium term, emphasis should be on achieving self-sufficiency in cereal production “given the legacy of the past 25 years, which has left so many families unable to feed themselves.”

³⁷ An earlier version, the “Policy and Strategy Framework” (Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Husbandry and Food [MAAHF]: 2004), 2, did not find favour with donors on account of its emphasis on domestic grain production and focus on national food self-sufficiency, rather than household food security. Donors were reported to be unsatisfied with its emphasis on service delivery rather than the rural livelihood well-being and lack of attention to market based responses.

³⁸ GoA, ANDS ARDSS, 16.

³⁹ GoA, ANDS ARDSS, 12.

⁴⁰ Informant interview, (Official, MAIL), pers. comm., 7 August 2007.

⁴¹ Informant interview, (Official, MAIL), pers. comm., 6 August 2007; and Informant interview, (Official, MAIL), pers. comm., 24 January 2008.

⁴² Informant interview, (Official, MAIL), pers. comm., 8 August 2007.

³⁵ Pinney and Rochini, “Food Security in Afghanistan,” 138.

³⁶ See: ADB, “Rebuilding Afghanistan’s Agriculture Sector,” 1-2, which states: “If productivity can be restored to levels similar to the rest of the region, then Afghanistan should

In its appeal to the past, the productionist narrative is largely unreceptive to a view that the rural world might have moved on since 1978⁴³ and does not recognise changes in the rural economy. Many in rural Afghanistan draw minimal subsistence from agriculture, a majority of rural households obtain much of their grain from the market and derive significant parts of their income from non-farm sources, and many of the rural poor are effectively landless. Equally, the fact that the market is already playing a significant role in Afghanistan's agrarian economy—witness the role of opium—and considerations that the ministry might not in fact be a very significant player in the rural economy are not readily accommodated by the productionist narrative.

The developmentalist narrative

The second, developmentalist narrative, subscribes to the donor consensus' emphasis on the need for good governance, private sector-led development, growth and a focus on poverty reduction. The policy history this narrative draws on is comparative and not specific to Afghanistan. To combat rural poverty, it suggests creating an enabling environment through good governance, an investment in public goods, pro-poor investments and programmes for the poor to be able to have a greater choice in their life decisions and therefore improve their well-being. It focuses largely on creating the chances for the poor to act as agents of their own destiny, with less concern for the structures of inequality that create poverty in the first place. This narrative is subscribed to by all but one of the donors working within MAIL, by some MAIL staff, and appears to be a position held throughout MRRD.

The developmentalist narrative seeks to bring about a positive transformation of rural society within a short period of time.⁴⁴ A reading of MRRD's 2007 policy position⁴⁵ confirms that it has this

⁴³ This is consistent with general trends of rural life becoming divorced from farming. See Jonathan Rigg, "Land, Farming Livelihoods and Poverty: Rethinking the Links in the Rural South," *World Development* 34, no. 1 (2006): 180-202.

⁴⁴ Adapted from Verena Fritz and Alina Rocha Menocal, "Developmental States in the New Millennium: Concepts and Challenges for a New Aid Agenda" *Development Policy Review*, 25 no. 5 (2007): 531-552.

⁴⁵ Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development, "A

view itself in its wish to improve the rural poor's well-being through the provision of basic public goods, by supporting self-help initiatives, by being pro-poor and promoting local governance. It has established a broad programme agenda, built ministry capacity, successfully attracted funding and effective management, and established a record of delivery.

The MRRD's National Solidarity Programme (NSP) exemplifies many of these claims for success. The NSP was rolled out across the country in phases and by the time of its mid-term review in 2006,⁴⁶ NSP had covered 193 districts in all 34 provinces and a total of \$166.1 million in block grants had been disbursed with a further \$214.6 million committed for disbursement through MRRD. The scale of the programme and the level of community funding has led to an improvement in village-level access to public goods where the NSP has been operational. The delivery of such investments has increased the government's visibility at the village level and led to an appreciation of a government that could deliver public services to villages,⁴⁷ an experience that many villages had not encountered before in their history. The NSP has been widely represented as a success.

However, less clear is the transformational role MRRD has hoped its NSP Community Development Councils (CDCs) would achieve. In practice in the field, the implementation of the CDC project departed significantly from the NSP operational manual⁴⁸ and old social structures were often reintroduced in the CDCs, with the old elite and power-holders winning elected posts on the new CDCs. Thus, the degree of social transformation and durability of the CDCs⁴⁹ are open to question.

Strategic Intent," (Kabul: MRRD, 2007).

⁴⁶ Post-War Reconstruction and Development Unit, "May 2006 Mid-Term Evaluation Report of the National Solidarity Programme (NSP) Afghanistan" (York: Post-War Reconstruction and Development Unit (PRDU), University of York, 2006).

⁴⁷ PRDU, "May 2006 Mid-Term Evaluation Report of the National Solidarity Programme (NSP)," vii.

⁴⁸ Adam Pain, "Rural recovery and Rehabilitation Programme for Faryab Province, Phase II, Final Evaluation: A Report to Christian Aid" (Herat: Christian Aid, 2007).

⁴⁹ Adam Pain and Mohammad Shah, "Policymaking in Agriculture and Rural Development in Afghanistan: A Case Study" (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2009).

A critical reading of MRRD policy and policy practice—such as the implementation of the NSP program and its actual effects—raises questions and debate as to whether this policy story is leading to quite the outcomes it claims. There are, as with the productionist narrative, policy assumptions that are not validated, reflecting gaps in the story line. There has been a reluctance to draw on evidence and question assumptions that would challenge the policy narrative.⁵⁰ In this sense, there is a wider debate that the developmental narrative has not engaged in. Part of MRRD's success as a ministry could arguably be attributed to the synergy between MRRD's view of what should be done and the donor consensus on what is required to reduce poverty: good governance, social development and growth.⁵¹ Thus, in this way, MRRD's policy is essentially reflective of donor policy, thereby contributing to the success of the developmentalist narrative. It shares a somewhat managerial approach to rural development, emphasises the capacity of the poor to act but gives limited attention to the social structures of inequality and power that give rise to poverty in the first place. In summary, it cannot be assumed that what policymakers think they are achieving is actually happening in practice. There is much more disorder and disjuncture between policy ideas, policy practices and the outcomes that are achieved⁵² than the developmentalist narrative allows.

The market-driven narrative

The third narrative is primarily subscribed to by USAID and its position can be characterised more as market-driven, with an almost exclusive support of the private sector in its ability to drive development. Its appeal to policy history is directly drawn from the American liberal market model. Over time, it has shifted its position from a strong free-market advocacy to more focused support for international agribusiness and commercialisation. The establishment of

this position can be traced from its emergence in the MAIL Master Plan, its parallel pursuit in the independent implementation of USAID projects and in USAID's interventions in the ANDSARDSS. The final version of the MAIL Master Plan introduction lays out the market-led focus that sees the key role of the agricultural sector as increasing farm incomes, thereby driving the non-farm sector and creating rural employment opportunities:

*The sum of the various components of the Master Plan is designed to provide a 6 percent overall growth rate in the agricultural sector. Those will double farm incomes in 12 years. The pattern of growth provided is normally associated with no change or slight improvement in the distribution of rural income, because of the strong income and employment multipliers to the rural non-farm sector. Thus total rural income will also double...the result will be an agriculture able to compete on domestic and international markets with the current leaders in the field.*⁵³

This market-driven perspective is also evident in USAID's programmes, all of which are off-budget. For example, the Rebuilding Agricultural Markets Project (RAMP)⁵⁴ had an overall objective of generating a \$250 million increase in the marketable value of five agricultural commodities in order to show how impact was to be measured. Indeed, USAID claims in its self-evaluation that it exceeded this goal by a factor of seven, generating marketable output of more than \$1.7 billion following a market-driven value chain approach.⁵⁵

There has been a consistency in the USAID market-driven position, in the design and implementation of its Accelerated Sustainable Agriculture Program (ASAP), which focuses on private sector development⁵⁶ in the agricultural sector, emphasising continuity both with RAMP and

⁵⁰ See for example the discussion on the lack of credit in the rural economy and the role for microcredit in: Floortje Klijn and Adam Pain, "Finding the Money: Informal Credit Practices in Rural Afghanistan" (Kabul, Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2007).

⁵¹ John Weiss, "The Aid Paradigm for Poverty Reduction. Does it Make Sense?" *Development Policy Review* 26, no. 4 (2008): 407-426.

⁵² Mosse, "Is Good Policy Unimplementable?," 666.

⁵³ MAAHF, Agricultural Master Plan, 2005, 1.

⁵⁴ USAID, "Rebuilding Agricultural Markets. RAMP Final Report." (Prepared by Chemonics International Inc., 2006). RAMP ran from 2003-2006 with a budget of \$145 million

⁵⁵ USAID, "Rebuilding Agricultural Markets," 10. A value chain approach is a means of understanding the economic efficiency of markets

⁵⁶ USAID, "Rebuilding Agricultural Markets," 5.

the Master Plan in its commitment to economic growth through the promotion of market-led, dynamic agricultural systems. Key objectives of ASAP were stated to be:

*...To contribute to Afghanistan's economic growth by stimulating the private sector [and] demand-driven agricultural growth within open and competitive markets... [This would] raise labour productivity in the rural economy, pull up wages and gradually eliminates the worst dimensions of absolute poverty.*⁵⁷

The linkage between agricultural growth and poverty reduction is seen to be achieved through gradual trickle down effects, according to the market-driven narrative.

As mentioned, over time, there has been a shift in the market-driven narrative from a focus only on free markets in Afghanistan to a larger focus on agribusiness by USAID and its involvement in the development of the ANDS ARDSS. During discussions on drafts of the ARDS, and apparently at the behest of USAID, a consultant drafted an additional paper⁵⁸ on the notion of a Comprehensive Agricultural Rural Development (CARD) programme. This paper makes explicit the position that large-scale commercial agribusiness is the route for rural economic development:

*Given that the consensus within the Government of Afghanistan (GoA) and the International Community (IC) is for "commercial agriculture," what does this look like? Assuming that the Multinational Dole Corporation moves forward with its large investment in Northern Afghanistan, how would we adapt this model to be replicated by way of a model of the so-called 'Baby Doles' or regional agribusiness centres throughout Afghanistan? How would international agribusiness investments provide viable alternative livelihoods for opium poppy and subsistence farmers.*⁵⁹

⁵⁷ USAID, "Request for Proposals Overview of the Agricultural Sector", (USAID: 2006), 5.

⁵⁸ Anon, "Proposal Paper for Program for Comprehensive Agricultural Rural Development (CARD) or an Agricultural Revolution (AAR)," (unpublished, 2007).

⁵⁹ Anon, "Proposal Paper for Program for CARD," 2.

Quite what consensus this paper is speaking about is not clear, although it evidently reflects a strand of opinion on what should be done to promote agribusiness as a tool for development. But this quotation captures well the "commercial model" of agricultural development and the "Dole model" that started to circulate in 2007 and was championed by USAID, although the investment in northern Afghanistan did not come about.

The market-driven narrative is not an argument for pro-poor growth⁶⁰, nor does it pay attention to the circumstances under which the poor benefit from growth. In addition, although arguments can be made as to why agricultural growth can be expected to reduce poverty at the farm, rural and national levels, both directly and indirectly, and in the short and long term, such benefits are not guaranteed. There are critical assumptions that have to be met⁶¹ if there are to be linkages between changes in agricultural productivity and effects on poverty. Many of the positive effects of agricultural growth depend on small farms playing a major role in agricultural growth and this cannot be guaranteed. These are not considerations that the market-driven narrative considers.

In summary, three policy narratives have been identified that characterise the positions of the principal actors in agricultural and rural policy development. They differ in terms of their problem statements and the policy solutions that they draw from their different policy histories. All were predetermined before the policy discussions took place, formed from prior convictions and beliefs, and are most certainly not grounded in a robust analysis of the Afghan rural context. They all have weaknesses with respect to evidence and argument. Related to this, each of the narratives is underpinned by a different position regarding the role of the Afghan state, which links into a wider discussion on the shape and role of a post-conflict state. The state's role is seen to be greatest in the productionist narrative, medium-

⁶⁰ Defined within the ANDS (Government of Afghanistan, "Afghanistan National Development Strategy 1387-1391 (2008-2013): A Strategy for Security, Governance, Economic Growth and Poverty Reduction" (Kabul: GoA, 2008) in terms of "where the income and livelihoods of the poorest rise faster than the average growth of the economy," 5

⁶¹ For example the extent to which agricultural growth is labour absorbing.

sized in the developmentalist narrative and small in the market-driven narrative.

Within the MRRD, there has been a fairly consistent developmentalist position subscribed to by the ministry as whole, which focuses on rational design, management and social engineering. Within MAIL, there has been a clash between national staff who subscribe to the productionist narrative and the market-driven agenda espoused by USAID in its approach to agricultural development. Caught in the middle

at MAIL is a group of advisers that are perhaps closer to the developmentalist position who have been working in various ways to lead the ministry in that direction. Next, this paper asks how these narratives and their constituencies of support (individuals and organisations) have engaged in ARD policymaking.

What is evident from the policymaking process is that there has been rather little engagement and deliberative process in seeking to find a common narrative out of the three policy narratives.

4. Contending Policy Narratives: Policymaking Processes and Practice

Instead, what characterises the policymaking process in this field is competition between the narratives and opportunistic behaviour by organisations and individuals who sought to push one particular policy story, thereby short-circuiting opportunities for debate. This is particularly true in the creation of the final MAIL Master Plan and the ANDS ARDSS. It is not as true of the policymaking process at MRRD, which for various reasons appears to have built a common constituency of support within the ministry.

The development of the MAIL Master Plan

From 2003, the British Department for International Development (DfID) funded a programme called “Support to Strategic Planning for Sustainable Rural Livelihoods” both at MAIL and MRRD. As part of this program, from 2005, two international advisers were present within MAIL and played a key role in the process of developing the Master Plan, focusing on building Ministry capacity through the development of the plan. MAIL national staff recognised that DfID’s involvement in the Master Plan’s development led to an increased understanding of strategic planning processes and contributed to some Afghan-led ownership in the content, even if some staff members had reservations as to the direction in which the process was taking the ministry.

Along the way, there were divisions of opinion at MAIL between those who were attached to the productionist narrative and those who were

convinced by the developmentalist narrative. There were also divisions of opinion between USAID-supported advisers, working within RAMP, who became engaged at the latter stage of the Master Plan development and other advisers supported by the remaining donors who were more linked to a developmentalist perspective. There were certainly ministry officials who were pleased with the outcome of the Master Plan, but nevertheless felt it was the donors who were in the driving seat over content, since they were the ones providing the money for MAIL activities and would decide how that money was spent. One of the senior ministry staff members⁶² said it was the external expatriates who were really shaping the policy.

During the finalisation of the Master Plan preparation, a major division emerged between the developmentalist narrative and the market-driven narrative and their advocates. A ministry official contrasted the divide as one between the commercial approach of the USAID RAMP based advisers,⁶³ who argued private sector-led development was the best route to poverty reduction, and the more social concerns over agricultural development reflected by the other donors, DfID in particular. This staff member felt the USAID position was better argued, with “strong, well-presented arguments that were more technical” and that the ministry did not

⁶² Informant interview, (Official, MAIL), pers. comm., Interview, 14 August 2007.

⁶³ Rebuilding Agricultural Markets Program (RAMP) funded by USAID from 2003 - 2005.

have time to follow the “social route” to poverty-reduction.

For advisers supporting the developmentalist narrative, USAID’s influence over the development of the Master Plan was less a question of the merits of USAID’s market-driven argument than it was USAID’s ability to influence the minister. Indeed, it appears there never was a serious and open debate between the advocates of the two narratives. In the view of one donor funded adviser,⁶⁴ the ministry at that time was guided more by whomever was closest to the minister and, toward the end of the Master Plan’s development, USAID staff members had much better access to the minister. In this adviser’s view, USAID’s relationship with the minister took the policymaking process off-track and led to a lack of engagement between the policy stories.

The differences in policy story reflected a USAID position that called for a market-driven approach to development and would result in trickle-down effects for poverty reduction, versus other advisers who argued more for a focus on poverty reduction, farming systems and rural livelihoods. Also, USAID, through RAMP, was seen to have intervened in a process of policy development that was also concerned with ministerial capacity development and mentoring, and hijacked the agenda from the top. Other advisers and donors working with MAIL particularly objected to the way in which the almost-final version of the Master Plan was taken away by USAID and redrafted—without consultation—to reflect, as they saw it, USAID’s view of what should be included in the MAIL policy.⁶⁵

The Agriculture and Rural Development Sector Strategy (ARDSS) of the ANDS

The development of the ANDS ARDSS made more visible the various interests and divisions

⁶⁴ Informant interview, (Advisor, MAIL), pers. comm., Interview, 5 August 2007.

⁶⁵ According to informant (Advisor, MAIL) and confirmed by other informants, the document was taken away for three weeks and redrafted to reflect the USAID position. Informant interview, (Advisor, MAIL), pers. comm., Interview 21 January 2008, reported a later incident when a key text was redrafted and substituted for the minister’s signature and it was only her intervention that led to it being replaced with the original version that had been agreed.

of the position in relation to the content and direction of ARD policy. It also reveals how deeply entrenched these policy positions were and how limited the debate was on reconciling these different narratives. There were divides between the two ministries and tussles over the content and priorities within the ARD sector strategy. In part, this reflected differing visions of what was to be done but there was also the question of ministry mandates and territory. There was also the relationship between the ANDS secretariat and the two ministries, with the former trying to build a common ARD sector perspective for the two ministries.

The ANDS secretariat was not neutral in its policy preferences for the development of the ARDSS and the chair of the ANDS secretariat, Professor Nadiri,⁶⁶ developed a very specific view on what the policy agenda for the agricultural and rural sectors should be. In this, he found a common ally in USAID, which was not restrained in pushing its agenda with the ANDS secretariat and using its influence, which partly derived from its financial contribution to the ANDS’ development.

It is difficult to fully disentangle the precise sequence of events in the development of the ANDS ARDSS. What is clear is that, from 2006, the two ministries started parallel work on their respective sections or visions of what the ARDSS should be, but there was little engagement between them in thinking through what an integrated rural development strategy should be. This would have had to start with a shared understanding of rural poverty and its causes in Afghanistan. This debate did not happen and, as is evident from the final ARDSS,⁶⁷ poverty remained largely a descriptive backdrop and marginal to a debate, which was more of a struggle between different policy narratives and programme strategies than an effort to actually debate the objectives of the ARDSS.

Within MAIL, the Master Plan was largely seen to set out the ministry’s contribution to the ARDSS.

⁶⁶ Professor Nadiri was Chair of the ANDS secretariat and the President’s chief economic adviser

⁶⁷ Pain and Shah, “Policymaking in Agriculture and Rural Development,” 43.

Early drafts of combined contributions from MAIL and MRRD have not been seen by this author, but it is evident that by June or July 2007, the drafts of the ARDSS reaching the ANDS secretariat amounted to a packaging of three separate policy stories into one document, with the divisions between all three included.

This draft was not accepted by the ANDS secretariat or Professor Nadiri, since the draft did not fit with his view on what the ARDSS should be.⁶⁸ One informant⁶⁹ said the ANDS secretariat saw itself as in control of the policymaking process and a willing listener to those who could sell big ideas to it. Whether the notion of a commercially driven “agricultural revolution” came from within the ANDS or was a “big idea” that was sold it from outside is not known. What is very clear is that there came a strong push from the ANDS for a strong market-driven approach to agricultural development in the ARDSS. The existence of the separate agricultural revolution paper points to parallel processes of policymaking and policy directing that were at play in the development of the ARDSS that are visible in the final product. One participant in the ARDSS development process⁷⁰ said that, at the same time the two ministries were under pressure to come to a joint strategy, the ANDS secretariat was commissioning USAID to write a strategy paper on how to integrate the agricultural and rural sectors without consultation with the ministries.

The ARDSS within the final ANDS document represents a selective distillation, undertaken by external consultants employed through USAID funding to the ANDS secretariat, of the ARD policy narratives and brings into focus some of the inconsistencies that emerged in the final ARDSS. For example, the statement, “A central focus is supporting the poorest and most vulnerable segments of rural society and promoting the development of medium and large scale

commercial agricultural activities.”⁷¹ One might wonder, what is the central focus: the poor or commercial agriculture, or are both to be focused on? What is the relation between supporting Afghanistan’s rural poor and the development of commercial agriculture? By the time the executive summary of the ANDS was written, commercial agriculture led the ARDSS⁷² as the first strategic objective:

...To attract private sector investment to transform agriculture to a high-value commercial agriculture sector as a source of growth and expansive means of livelihood. The Government will implement a coordinated agricultural and rural development programme targeting two goals: (i) poverty reduction and (ii) the provision of alternative livelihoods. The CARD Sector strategy articulates a road map for the way forward in which poverty reduction through economic regeneration is the central objective. The overall focus is to support the poorest and most vulnerable segments of rural society.

What emerges from this discussion of the development of the ARDSS for the ANDS is evidence of a failed policymaking process that was messy and problematic. The causes of this failure are several. In part, the failure can be attributed to the fact that the development of a new ARD sector policy drew on two different ministries with different perspectives, mandates, and understandings on the rural economy. The way the ANDS secretariat pushed for an integrated sector policy was not constructive. This relates to the way in which policy development was driven by the ANDS secretariat, which had a top-down management style, its own agenda in relation to the ARDSS, and was heavily influenced by one donor, USAID.

The missing policy debate

Agriculture matters with respect to the role it can play directly in poverty reduction as well as generating growth. The three ARD policy narratives largely failed to engage in a discussion of the dual role of agriculture, thereby failing to build useful linkages and to address the structural weaknesses of each narrative. It is therefore important to

⁶⁸ Informant interview, (Advisor, MAIL) pers. comm., 5 August 2007, was of the view that Professor Nadiri had his own understanding of what agriculture and rural development required, although he had little background in the field.

⁶⁹ Informant interview, (Advisor, MAIL), pers. comm., 7 August 2007.

⁷⁰ Informant interview, (Advisor, MAIL), pers. comm., 5 August 2007.

⁷¹ GoA, ANDS, 87.

⁷² GoA, ANDS, 11.

note what was not included in the policy debate. This is partly a technical discussion, but it is also political in the sense that choices have to be made explicit and discussed.

There key choices to be made in the rural development agenda and the tradeoffs that need to be explored are between policy objectives of poverty reduction, output growth and inter-regional balance within Afghanistan. These are political choices. Different policy interventions are required for accomplishing each objective, but how to develop and balance these policy interventions requires specific discussion and the examination of tradeoffs and priorities. Ironically, many of the elements to meet the objectives discussed above can be found within the individual narratives, all of which have merits, but together, the three policy narratives that comprise the ARDSS have failed to address these issues.

To succeed, the ARD policymaking effort needed to have a clearer understanding of Afghanistan's changing rural economy, taking account of its diversity and the dynamics of change. This would move beyond the myth of destruction, drought and collapse. Not only would a better understanding of the rural economy include the agricultural innovation that took place during the 1990s and the rise in wheat yields,⁷³ but it would also address the rise and fall of the poppy economy and the way in which it spread raising specific questions about rural employment that the rural development agenda has to meet. It would also force a recognition, sadly missing in the ARD policy debate thus far, that there is much more to the rural sector than the policy narratives allow, such as technical change and access to informal credit, which have developed almost despite the government.

But moving from a discussion of crops to people and their rural livelihoods, the evidence is clear that most rural households do not produce sufficient grain to meet their needs and depend on market access for food security.⁷⁴ Many are functionally landless and their income increasingly comes from off-farm and non-farm sources.⁷⁵

⁷³ Fitzherbert, "Rural Resilience and Diversity," 32.

⁷⁴ Jo Grace and Adam Pain, *Rethinking Rural Livelihoods in Afghanistan* (Kabul, AREU, 2004).

⁷⁵ See for example in 2006 the critical role of migration

Communication, both through improved roads and telecommunications, has improved the rural economy's connectedness and will encourage even further diversification out of agriculture, particularly by those with limited land holdings. Eventually, disparities will grow between well-connected areas, which are more commercialised and have higher production capacity, and poorly connected areas. There is little discussion of these issues in the policy documents.

Agriculture can be the engine of growth⁷⁶ and can contribute to poverty reduction at the farm, rural sector, and national levels. But there are a number of necessary conditions and qualifications that question the universality of this assumption and much depends on the quality of that growth and the degree to which it is labour-absorbing. As the MAIL Master Plan notes from one farm survey, 58 percent of farms were less than two hectares and are not able to gain even half of their employment or income from that land. So, an agricultural growth strategy would benefit, at best, the 40 percent with land holdings of more than two hectares. For smaller farmers, there are many reasons⁷⁷ (for example a focus on wheat for self-sufficiency, cash or seasonal labour scarcity etc) that limit their engagement in commercial agriculture.

But a key question that has to be considered with respect to the agricultural growth model is that of price and profitability. Although there were recent rises in commodity prices, the long-term trend has been a decline in agricultural commodity prices. The World Bank has hopes for a new agricultural revolution around high-value crops,⁷⁸ which, while strongly argued and not too far from the USAID commercial agriculture position, ignores this fundamental problem of price instability in free agricultural markets. The effects of this in combination with declining

outside Afghanistan to ensure household survival in response to the combined effects of the decline in opium and the rural economy.

⁷⁶ Xavier Lin, Lin Lin, Colin Thirtle and Steve Wiggins, "Agricultural Productivity Growth and Poverty Alleviation," *Development Policy Review* 19, no. 4 (2001): 499-466.

⁷⁷ Caroline Ashley and Simon Maxwell, "Rethinking Rural Development," *Development Policy Review* 19, vol. 4 (2001): 395-421.

⁷⁸ World Bank, "Agriculture for Development, World Development Report 2008" (Washington, World Bank, 2008).

farm sizes in Afghanistan and natural resource constraints means that commercial agriculture for those with resources and skills might be a route to prosperity, but not for those in more marginal areas.

What is totally missing from the Afghanistan rural development agenda is support for smallholder agriculture in more marginal areas. Lessons from earlier green revolutions show that active state intervention in support of the agricultural market at critical stages of development can be a defining feature in such transformations.⁷⁹ These interventions included greater government assistance in output markets, input delivery and seasonal finance to address some of the high transaction costs of smallholder agriculture. This implicitly requires greater governmental market regulation and more investment in public goods for the agricultural sector, so as to reduce costs

and increase efficiency. This could include social welfare transfers designed to boost production, such as fertiliser subsidies, and support for the rural poor so they can overcome the many barriers to entry in the rural non-farm economy. Such support would improve their access to more remunerative or productive activities by removing the general constraints to growth, investing in public goods, facilitating urban and rural links and supporting enterprise growth.⁸⁰

In summary, there is another policy narrative waiting to be constructed for ARD that could draw on aspects of all three existing policy positions in order to respond to these issues. But this would require a more deliberative approach to policymaking.

5. Where Can We Go?

This paper has argued that policymaking in the ARD sector can be characterised by three narratives that have competed for space but under unequal terms. What is clear is that the policy narratives have been driven more by interests than evidence. Further, much of the policy engagement has been concerned with a defence of those interests rather than seeking to build new policy perspectives or be open to debating policy substance. The consequence has been that issues that fall between the three narratives have largely been neglected. Why have the proponents for each policy narrative been so firmly tied to their views? In part, it has been because each position is underpinned by fundamentally different views on the nature of the post-conflict Afghan state.

The productionist position, based more on an appeal to history, is understandable in terms of its interests in re-establishing a powerful ministry and the threat that a reform agenda implies for

MAIL. It has been a defensive position. In the case of the developmentalist narrative, MRRD proponents have been in tune with much of the donor agenda in its allowance for a moderate state presence, therefore finding ready support among the donor community for its position. But “good policy” drawn from a generalised donor consensus has acute weaknesses in terms of the forces that drive the policy, as well as its limited understanding and attention to specificity of context and culture.⁸¹ The “market-driven” narrative also reflects a very particular cultural view of the role of the private sector and allows the state a minimal role in ARD. This is a narrative that has also been aggressively marketed. The attempt to merge these divergent narratives into a coherent ARD sector strategy and to address the structural weaknesses of each narrative has largely failed. As a result, the opportunity to explore policy choices and to develop good policy in its fullest sense has been lost.

⁷⁹ Jonathan Dorward, Jonathan Kydd, Jamie Morrison and Ian Urey, “A Policy Agenda for Pro-Poor Agricultural Growth,” *World Development* 32, no. 1 (2004): 73-89.

⁸⁰ Daniel Start, “The Rise and Fall of the Rural Non-farm Economy: Poverty Impacts and Policy Options,” *Development Policy Review* 19, no. 4 (2001): 491-506.

⁸¹ Ha-Joon Chang, *Kicking Away the Ladder: Development Strategy in Historical Perspective*, (London: Anthem Press, 2002).

Effective government leadership is clearly incompatible with a high dependence on aid, making Afghan “ownership” of an ARD policy a label without substance. Across all programmes, donors’ funding of off-budget programs or of programs in select provinces⁸² means that the international development goals of donor cooperation and governmental capacity-development, as envisaged in the Paris declaration, have not been met. While there have been some efforts at aligning donor programs, this paper shows that there is still a striking lack of alignment between donors and their government counterparts in Afghanistan. Because of the conflicting interests among different donors and different government agencies and their difficulties managing these interests, the capacity for good policymaking in Afghanistan is rather limited. Until there is more coordination, it is difficult to imagine greater Afghan ownership of the policy agenda.

The differences between MAIL and MRRD also raise questions about the extent to which a dependency on aid weakens government ownership, and what is the cause and effect of this dependency. MAIL’s relative neglect by donors, in contrast with MRRD, could be interpreted in a number of different ways. A strong MRRD has attracted funds—strength leading to funding—in contrast to a ministry that has been seen to be less successful and therefore not attracting funding. On the other hand, MAIL has been the target of one donor’s agenda, which may or may not have reinforced MAIL’s isolation. It appears to work both ways. But then, one has to take account of the way in which a partly government-driven policymaking process, the development of the ANDS, played out and how the ANDS secretariat interacted with ministries and donors in ways that were not transparent or deliberative. Should one be surprised? The answer is no, since the ANDS’ involvement in the ARDSS development reveals the deeply political process of policymaking and it is this that requires more specific recognition and response.

Three specific recommendations are made, given the evidence provided and the arguments presented in this paper.

1) First, there is much more that should have

⁸² Pain and Shah, “Policymaking in Agriculture and Rural Development,” 33.

been brought to the policy discussion on agricultural and rural development. There could and should have been more space created to foster wider debate and bring more evidence and arguments to the table, rather than relying on the particular policy solutions appealed to by the three narratives. More recognition needs to be given to building policy that commands wider support and not just bringing established prescriptions of what should be done. The failure to create deliberative space can be attributed to both donor behaviour—in particular, being prescriptive about what policy should be—and an unwillingness to accept the political nature of policymaking. This failure also identifies scope for action. The purpose of policy enquiry is to open up deliberative practices so that serious discussions can take place on policy choices. Policy analysts who are not tied to specific donor policy positions could play a role, in this respect, supporting ministries, brokering policy discussions, and analysing arguments to build technical robustness and political support for policy. This could, in turn, contribute toward a deeper ownership of policy by Afghan ministries.

- 2) Policymaking does not just involve institutions. One theme that emerges from this paper’s discussion is the role individuals and personalities play in the policymaking process, championing specific policy choices. This aspect of policymaking can be both constructive and damaging. If one is seeking to influence the policymaking process, one could promote one’s own agenda by working with the key actors in the policymaking process. To create policy, however, individuals must recognise the need to be strategic and to consider political interests. This requires understanding other stakeholders’ specific political interests that underlie their particular policy positions and seeking ways that these interests can be built upon, in order to build more plural support.
- 3) Third, a good deal more humility is required from donors, and they should acknowledge and address their ignorance of Afghanistan. A key part of creating a more deliberative policymaking process requires that there is more critical engagement in, understanding

of and debate about the context of rural Afghanistan and what the policy problem is. This means that donors have to move away from universal generic “good” policy and invest in developing a context-specific understanding of Afghanistan’s rural economy. The recent British commissioning of research and analysis on “Understanding Afghanistan”⁸³

is a good example of one donor’s investment in building better context specific understanding and is to be used for developing DfID’s new Country Assistance Plan. The “Understanding Afghanistan” undertaking is a step in the right direction, though it could have come earlier and certainly needs to be continued into the future.

⁸³ Dfid, “Project Deliverables: Understanding Afghanistan,” DfID, <http://www.cowiprojects.com/fcdc/projects.html> (accessed March 11, 2009).

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