



Between a Rock and a Hard Place

*Counter-narcotics efforts and their effects in Nangarhar
and Helmand in the 2010-11 growing season*

David Mansfield



European Commission



**Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit
Case Study Series**

BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE

**Counter-narcotics efforts and their effects in
Nangarhar and Helmand in the 2010-11 growing
season**

David Mansfield

Funding for this research
was provided by the
European Commission

October 2011

Editing and Layout: Oliver Lough

AREU Publication Code: 1128E

© 2011 Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit. The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of AREU. Some rights reserved. This publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted only for non-commercial purposes and with written credit to AREU and the author. Where this publication is reproduced, stored or transmitted electronically, a link to AREU's website (www.areu.org.af) should be provided. Any use of this publication falling outside of these permissions requires prior written permission of the publisher, the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit. Permission can be sought by emailing areu@areu.org.af or by calling +93 (0) 799 608 548.

About the Author

David Mansfield is an independent consultant who has undertaken fieldwork on the role of opium poppy in rural livelihoods in Afghanistan for 14 consecutive growing seasons. He is currently a Visiting Fellow at the Feinstein International Centre at Tufts University.

About the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit

The Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) is an independent research institute based in Kabul. AREU's mission is to inform and influence policy and practice through conducting high-quality, policy-relevant research and actively disseminating the results, and to promote a culture of research and learning. To achieve its mission AREU engages with policymakers, civil society, researchers and students to promote their use of AREU's research and its library, to strengthen their research capacity, and to create opportunities for analysis, reflection and debate.

AREU was established in 2002 by the assistance community working in Afghanistan and has a board of directors with representation from donors, the United Nations and other multilateral agencies, and non-governmental organisations. AREU receives core funds from the governments of Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland. Specific projects in 2011 have been funded by the European Commission (EC), the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), the Humanitarian Aid Department of the European Commission (ECHO), the UK Department for International Development (DFID), and UN Women.

Acknowledgements

Fieldwork in Nangarhar Province and in the area north of the Boghra Canal in Helmand was funded by the European Commission as part of a wider three-year project on water and natural resource management in the Panj-Amu River Basin. Fieldwork in the canal command area of Helmand was funded by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office of the United Kingdom. Thanks go to the team at the European Commission and Ian Paterson of the UK Embassy for their continued support for longitudinal analytical work on the role of opium poppy in rural livelihood strategies.

Further thanks go to Richard Brittan, William Byrd, Pierre-Arnaud Chouvy, Matt Dupee, Paul Fishstein, Anthony Fitzherbert, Dipali Mukhopdhyay and Ian Paterson for their comments on earlier drafts of the report. The time they put into this task and their insights are greatly appreciated. Any mistakes made are the author's and not theirs. Further thanks go to Jay Lamey and Oliver Lough of AREU for their invaluable editorial support.

Particular thanks go to both the Organisation for Sustainable Development and Research (OSDR) who continue to conduct fieldwork in increasingly difficult circumstances, and the team at Alcis Ltd who have provided geospatial support, mapping and photographic products.

David Mansfield
October 2011

Table of Contents

Acronyms.....	vii
Glossary	Vii
1. Introduction	1
2. Methodology	6
3. Nangarhar: Success Turns to Failure?	8
3.1 The resurgence of opium poppy cultivation in the southern districts....	9
3.2 Increasing resilience in the Kabul River valley.....	16
4. Central Helmand: Failure Turns to Success?	20
4.1 North of the Boghra Canal	20
4.2 The canal command area.....	29
4.3 North and south of the canal: Diverging trends.....	36
5. Conclusion	38
Request for Feedback	41
Recent Publications from AREU	42

List of Figures and Tables

Figure 1: Opium poppy cultivation in the upper Mahmand valley, Achin.....	9
Figure 2: Armed men travelling from Kahi to the disputed area in lower Achin	13
Figure 3: Kahi Bazaar, Achin, April 2011.....	14
Figure 4: Expansion in the area under cultivation north of the Boghra Canal, 1999-2010.....	21
Figure 5: Tubewell, Helmand Province	24
Figure 6: Land under cultivation north of the Boghra Canal	26
Table 1: The 2002 land grab north of the Boghra Canal	23

Acronyms

Afs	Afghanis, the Afghan unit of currency. During the time of research, 47 Afs was roughly equivalent to US\$1
AGE	anti-government element
ANA	Afghan National Army
ANP	Afghan National Police
ANSF	Afghan National Security Forces
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
OSDR	Organisation for Sustainable Development and Research
PR	Pakistani Rupees. During the time of research, 85 PR was roughly equivalent to US\$1
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

Glossary

<i>forma</i>	plot of land within the canal command area of central Helmand
<i>jerib</i>	unit of land measurement equivalent to roughly one-fifth of a hectare
<i>jirga</i>	ad-hoc council convened to resolve a specific dispute
<i>khord</i>	unit of weight equivalent to 112.5 grammes
<i>malik</i>	village representative
<i>man</i>	unit of weight equivalent to roughly 4.5 kilogrammes
<i>mirab</i>	village water master
<i>seer</i>	unit of weight equivalent to roughly seven kilogrammes
<i>ushr</i>	religious taxation in the form of a ten percent agricultural tithe paid on all crops
<i>wakil</i>	village representative
<i>zaranj</i>	three-wheel scooter taxi

1. Introduction

This paper contrasts the socio-economic and political developments that have taken place in the opium growing provinces of Nangarhar and Helmand in the 2010-11 growing season. Both provinces have cultivated significant amounts of opium poppy over the last 15 years but are currently located at quite different points on the trajectory toward being “poppy free.” After being declared poppy free by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in 2008 following successive years of low cultivation, Nangarhar Province is now experiencing a resurgence in cultivation along its southern borders with Pakistan. Meanwhile, in Helmand—where cultivation has been heavily concentrated for well over a decade—there have been some dramatic reductions in cultivation in the province’s central canal command area over the last season. This paper charts the reasons for the different outlook for opium production in these two provinces. Specifically, it explores whether there are lessons to be drawn from the socio-economic and political processes involved that might inform both drug control and stabilisation efforts in the run up to transition in 2014.

Since 2008, Nangarhar Province has often been cited as an example of good practice in the field of drug control.¹ During much of the 1990s and the early 21st century, levels of cultivation would typically average between 15,000 and 20,000 hectares (ha) per annum. However, by the 2007-08 growing season Nangarhar was declared “poppy free” by UNODC. While cultivation increased in the 2008-09 and 2009-10 growing seasons, it was generally located in the most inaccessible parts of the province.

In contrast, Helmand Province has had a poor track record when it comes to reducing levels of opium production. In the eyes of many, the province has become synonymous with opium poppy cultivation and the drugs trade in Afghanistan. During the 1990s, farmers in Helmand consistently cultivated more opium poppy than in any other province. In the 21st century, opium poppy cultivation increased dramatically, rising from an estimated 26,500 ha in the 2004-05 growing season to an unprecedented level of 103,590 ha in 2007-08. It was only in the 2008-09 growing season that opium production fell, attributed primarily to significant increases in wheat cultivation triggered by a dramatic increase in the price of wheat and growing concerns over food security.²

The success of Nangarhar’s drug control efforts has largely been credited to the actions of governor Gul Aga Shirzai.³ During the earlier years of his tenure, he was particularly active in travelling to rural areas throughout the province to announce the government’s ban on opium. This was critical to establishing the credibility of the ban among the rural population, particularly in the more remote and less secure parts of the province. The governor has proven particularly adept at weaving both formal and informal institutions into his efforts. For example, responsibility for the implementation of the ban each year has been delegated to district administrators and security commanders, many of whom are former strongmen and military leaders from political parties such as Hizb-i-Islami. In the past, the governor has been careful to manage his relationship with these individuals as well as the regional political elite, in particular the powerful Arsala family.⁴

1 UNODC/MCN, “Afghanistan Opium Poppy Survey 2008” (Kabul: UNODC/MCN, 2008), 9.

2 David Mansfield, Alcis Ltd and OSDR, “Managing Concurrent and Repeated Risks: Explaining the Reductions in Opium Production in Central Helmand Between 2008 and 2011” (Kabul: AREU, 2011).

3 UNODC/MCN, “Afghanistan Opium Poppy Survey 2008,” 9.

4 D. Mukhopadhyay, “Warlords as Bureaucrats: The Afghan Experience” (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2009); David Mansfield, “Where Have all the Flowers Gone? Assessing the Sustainability of Current Reductions in Opium Production in Afghanistan” (Kabul: AREU, 2010).

The governor has also drawn on tribal networks and the rural elite in an attempt to ensure compliance among the general population. In particular, he has formed close alliances with some of the leadership of the more cohesive and influential tribal groups such as the Shinwari.⁵ He has strengthened the position of key *maliks* (community representatives) that have supported then ban, bolstering their negotiating position with the rural population through his influence over line ministry departments and external development budgets. The population's perception of his close relationship with US military forces has also helped him win compliance with the ban, and led him to threaten military action when faced with recalcitrance.⁶ The province's role as a regional economic hub and conduit for significant amounts of cross border trade has also been important in cushioning the impact of the ban on the population, as well as offering alternative sources of rent extraction for the ruling elite.⁷

Helmand, by contrast, has not been so fortunate in its political economy or its resource endowments. While it is a border province, it sees none of the high-value, official cross-border trade enjoyed by Nangarhar. It is not a regional economic hub: there is no official cross border trade to support the local economy and nonfarm employment is limited. Moreover, growth in its agricultural sector is determined by demand in Kandahar, Kabul and Quetta—all of which can source cheaper produce elsewhere.⁸ The province is made up of a mosaic of competing tribal groups that have fought over land, resources and political power since the 1700s.⁹ The political elite remain divided and their relationship with the population has a coercive and predatory quality. Helmand has had four governors since the fall of the Taliban, the last three of whom have had their authority undermined by their predecessor Sher Mohammed Akhundzada (2001-2006) and what remains of his cabal of former warlords and militia leaders.¹⁰

Although the current governor Gulab Mangal (in office since 2008) is supported by the international community, President Karzai continues to favour Akhundzada, sometimes arguing for his reinstatement as governor.¹¹ Governor Mangal's close relationship with Western donors and the international military has done little to strengthen his position with the rural population and, some might argue, with President Karzai himself. He is unable to travel freely within the province and often requires military support. At the same time, the Taliban have been successful in exploiting political and tribal divisions in the province. They have also used the government's counter-narcotics efforts, specifically eradication, as part of their strategy to win the "hearts and minds" of the population.¹²

5 David Mansfield, "The Ban on Opium Production across Nangarhar - A Risk too Far?" *International Journal of Environmental Studies* 68, No. 3 (2011): 381-95.

6 David Mansfield, "Responding to Risk and Uncertainty: Understanding the Nature of Change in the Rural Livelihoods of Opium Poppy Growing Households in the 2007/08 Growing Season." A Report for the Afghan Drugs Inter Departmental Unit of the UK Government, July 2008, 27; Dipali Mukhopadhyay, "The Neo Khan of Nangarhar" (forthcoming), 21.

7 Jonathan Goodhand and David Mansfield, "Drugs and (Dis)order: A Study of the Opium Economy, Political Settlements and State Building in Afghanistan" (London: London School of Economics Crisis States Research Centre, 2010).

8 Goodhand and Mansfield, "Drugs and (Dis)order," 27.

9 M. Martin, "A Socio-Political History of Helmand" (unpublished paper, 2011).

10 T. Coghlan, "The Taliban in Helmand: An Oral history" in *Decoding the New Taliban: Insights from the Field*, ed. Antonio Giustozzi (London: Hurst and Company, 2009), 122.

11 "US embassy cables: Karzai's attempt to appoint 'known warlord and criminal,'" *The Guardian*, 2 December 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/214273> (accessed 17 October 2011); Goodhand and Mansfield, "Drugs and (Dis)order," 22.

12 Stuart Gordon, "Winning Hearts and Minds? Examining the Relationship between Aid and Security in Afghanistan's Helmand Province" (Medford, MA: Tufts University Feinstein International Center, 2011);

However, in the 2010-11 growing season, the narrative on drug control for these two provinces has reversed—cultivation is set to increase substantially in Nangarhar and fall significantly in the canal command area of Helmand, where the bulk of cultivation has typically taken place. For example, in the south-eastern districts of Nangarhar, opium poppy cultivation has spread from isolated pockets in the mountains and moved further down the valleys of Sherzad, Hisrak and Khogiani in tandem with the growing presence of anti-government elements (AGEs). In Achin District, opium poppy has flourished in the upper valley of Mahmand and can be seen in parts of Alisherkhel. Renewed cultivation in these areas owes much to the cumulative impact of three consecutive years of the opium ban. This has been further exacerbated by the conflation of an ongoing land dispute with a breakdown in the political settlement between the governor and key figures in the province's political elite. UNODC estimates that cultivation in these areas in the 2010-11 growing season is at least 2,700 ha, a rise of 276 percent compared to the previous year.¹³

In Helmand, cultivation has fallen significantly in the canal command area in the 2010-11 growing season.¹⁴ While the levels of cultivation north of the Boghra Canal are likely to increase, farmers in districts that have been responsible for a large proportion of the Helmand crop (such as Nad-i-Ali and Marjah) have reduced production, and in some cases refrained from cultivation altogether. These reductions in cultivation are closely linked with the increase in national and international military forces on the ground. In fact, as in Nangarhar between 2008 and 2010, coercion not to plant has been instrumental in reducing opium production in the province. The increasing concentration of the means of violence in the hands of the state has thus been critical, as has the rural population's growing belief that the provincial government will call on external military forces if farmers fail to comply with the ban.¹⁵

The question of how enduring these reductions will be depends in part on the presence of viable alternatives to opium production, but also on whether the state can maintain its capacity to coerce the population in the canal command area. Recent experience in Nangarhar suggests that these two factors are closely related; in particular, it suggests that government presence is much harder to maintain in areas where the population believes the state has exposed them to greater physical and economic risks. For instance, in the Nangarhar stretch of the Kabul River valley, where both agricultural and non agricultural alternatives to opium production are in place, there is little appetite for a return to opium production and resistance to the state is low. However, in the southern districts of Nangarhar where the cumulative effect of the ban of opium has led to economic distress among a critical mass of the population, there is growing and sometimes violent resistance against state efforts to enforce the ban. In some areas, AGEs are successfully harnessing this resistance for their own political ends. The rural elite—which had previously been able to instruct farmers in these southern districts to abandon opium production—has had to defer to the interests of the rural population or risk its own leadership.

Coghlan, "The Taliban in Helmand."

13 UNODC/Ministry of Counter Narcotics, "Afghanistan Opium Survey 2011 Summary Findings" (Kabul: UNODC/MCN), 3.

14 Fieldwork by OSDR revealed the scale of the reduction in the canal command area in December 2010, the results of which were incorporated into Mansfield et al., "Managing Concurrent and Repeated Risks." UNODC confirmed this reduction in October 2011, reporting: "The central districts of Hilmand witnessed a massive reduction in opium poppy cultivation in 2011...The district of Marjah, which is located south of Nad e Ali had substantial opium poppy cultivation in the past, but only negligible cultivation in 2011." (UNODC/MCN, "Afghanistan Opium Survey 2011," 4).

15 Mansfield et al., "Managing Concurrent and Repeated Risks."

It is clear that in an environment where viable alternatives to opium do not exist, coercion by the state and its proxies is only likely to destabilise areas further. The challenge for policymakers is thus how to move beyond the aggregate statistics on cultivation in each of these provinces and the proclamations of “success” and “failure” that typically accompanies their rise and fall.¹⁶ There are already calls to replicate the “success” of the reduction in the canal command area of Helmand in other provinces such as Badakhshan and Kandahar. However, it is unclear what exactly will be replicated in these provinces with quite different resource endowments and political and security conditions. There has, however, already been talk of the provision of wheat seed and fertiliser—an intervention seen by Helmand’s rural population as “inconsequential and misplaced,”¹⁷ and doubted even by development donors.¹⁸ There is also likely to be mounting pressure for a quick response to counter the potential for further increases in cultivation in Nangarhar (and other former “poppy free” provinces) in the 2011-12 growing season. Given the political appetite in both Kabul and Western capitals for performance indicators to improve (or at least remain stable) in the run up to “transition,” this response may well involve a more aggressive eradication campaign than has been pursued in the 2008-09 and 2009-10 growing seasons.

Unfortunately, what is often missing from the current policy debate on counter-narcotics is the broader context in which both opium production and efforts to reduce it take place, along with how this relates to the wider state-building effort in Afghanistan. Instead, the drive to be *seen* to be reducing the metric of cultivation can still pervade thinking, almost regardless of consequence.

This report attempts to outline the complex interplay between both opium production and counter-narcotics efforts and a wide range of issues considered of strategic importance in the run-up to transition. These include efforts to improve security, the recruitment and retention rates in the Afghan National Army (ANA), the rural population’s perception of the state, and the need to establish the conditions for developing more stable political settlements at the subnational level. In particular, it highlights how the impact of counter-narcotics efforts depends significantly on the political make-up and resource endowments of a given geographic area. As experience in both Nangarhar and Helmand shows, the production and trade of opium influences and shapes complex economic and political processes at the local, regional and national level—as do counter-narcotics efforts. Interventions that fail to take adequate account of the role drugs play in the political economy in a given area will not deliver on their objectives and are likely to prove counterproductive.¹⁹

The paper is divided into three main sections. The first compares the resurgence of cultivation in the southern districts of Nangarhar in the 2010-11 growing season with livelihood diversification in districts along the Kabul River valley. The second contrasts

16 For a more detailed discussion on the problems with assessing counter-narcotics achievements purely in terms of the hectareage of opium poppy grown, see David Mansfield and Adam Pain, “Counter-Narcotics in Afghanistan: The Failure of Success?” (Kabul: AREU, 2008).

17 Mansfield et al., “Managing Concurrent and Repeated Risks,” viii.

18 “The characteristics of wheat—relatively low value, low labour intensity and correspondingly high usage of Afghanistan’s scarce land and water resources—make it a poor and unsustainable alternative to poppy in the Afghan context. Moreover given that in good harvest years the country already comes close to self sufficiency in wheat and there are no export prospects, stimulating substantial increases in wheat production would be counterproductive.” In C. Ward, D. Mansfield, P. Oldham and W. Byrd, “Afghanistan: Economic Incentives and Development Initiatives to Reduce Opium Production” (Washington, DC and London: The World Bank/DFID, 2008), 29.

19 Goodhand and Mansfield, “Drugs and (Dis)order,” 35.

the declines in cultivation in the canal command area in central Helmand with the expansion in opium poppy cultivation north of the Boghra Canal. Finally, the third section compares developments in Nangarhar and Helmand. It concludes that while resistance to government counter-narcotics efforts in Nangarhar has only emerged after three consecutive years of a ban on opium production and a breakdown in relations between the governor and parts of the provincial political elite, the emergence of violent resistance in central Helmand is unlikely to be such a long time coming. As things stand, deep political and tribal divisions, a well-rooted insurgency and the absence of viable alternatives to opium production all threaten to undermine current reductions in opium cultivation in the province.

2. Methodology

This report covers fieldwork undertaken in the provinces of Nangarhar and Helmand during the opium harvest season of 2011, primarily conducted by colleagues from the Organisation of Sustainable Development and Research (OSDR). Fieldwork focused on the experiences of rural households, looking at how their lives and livelihoods had changed over the preceding 12 months. The report builds on a larger body of research conducted during the harvest season in Nangarhar since 2005 and in Helmand since 2008. It also follows on from fieldwork undertaken each winter planting season in both of these provinces dating back to 2002. It is not the purpose of this report to synthesise this large body of accumulated data. Instead, it provides an account of the socio-economic, political and environmental developments households have experienced during the 2010-11 growing season, focusing especially on how these have affected their decision to cultivate opium poppy.

The research approaches opium as a crop within a wider range of activities that households are involved in. This recognises that simply asking households why they do or do not cultivate opium is ineffective since the complex and interconnected factors that inform household decision-making cannot be distilled to a single answer. Interviewers also avoided asking direct questions about opium. This was to reduce the risk of households exaggerating the returns on opium as a way to “negotiate” for greater development assistance in return for giving up the crop. Experience has shown that where opium poppy is cultivated, respondents will typically include it when recounting the different crops that they grow and sell. The fact that interviews were conducted in the field during the planting and harvest season for the winter crops, including opium poppy, allowed fieldworkers to verify—and where necessary challenge—the accuracy of respondents’ answers.

Discussions also focused on the direct experience of respondents and their households rather than of a wider geographic area, where answers become increasingly speculative.²⁰ Individual interviews with farming households were conducted in the field as farmers tended their crop, since holding interviews in the household compound can attract attention from others and become subject to repeated interruption and bias. Group discussions with farmers were avoided as they tend to be dominated by community elites, are inappropriate for discussing sensitive issues and increasingly represent a security threat, particularly in rural Helmand.²¹

The research also recognises the inherent problems with primary data collection when researching an “illegal” or “underground” activity by focusing its inquiry on household livelihood strategies. The pressure to act against opium cultivation and its trade has made the subject of illicit drugs a more sensitive topic for discussion with farmers and other stakeholders than it was in the 1990s and early 2000s. However, the rural household is the most accessible unit of analysis when looking at the opium economy in Afghanistan; it offers a basis for cross-referencing findings both with other work on rural livelihoods in Afghanistan, and other research on the specific role of opium poppy in rural livelihood strategies in Afghanistan and elsewhere.

20 Swedish Committee for Afghanistan, “Farming Systems of Nad Ali District, Helmand Province,” in *Agricultural Survey of Afghanistan, Report 15* (Peshawar: SCA, 1992), 1.

21 I. M. Stevens and K. Tarzi, “Economics of Agricultural Production in Helmand Valley, Afghanistan” (Washington, DC: United States Department of the Interior Bureau of Reclamation, 1965), 1; J. Goodhand, “Research in Zones of Violent Conflict” (Manchester: CPRC, 2001 [unpublished]), 13; and F. Shairzai et al, “1975 Farm Economic Survey of the Helmand Valley” (Kabul: USAID, 1975 [unpublished]), 13.

Interviews were conducted with 78 rural households in Achin, Kama, Khogiani, Shinwar and Surkhrud Districts. Further interviews were also conducted with shopkeepers and daily wage labourers in the provincial centre of Jalalabad, Kahi Bazaar in Achin and Markoh, a town in Shinwar District on the road to the border with Pakistan at Torkham. A further three household interviews were conducted in Jani Khel in Bati Kot District, an area close to the bazaars of Markoh and Ghani Khel that has seen increasing levels of agricultural diversification over the last four years.²² In total, 104 interviews were conducted in Nangarhar in April 2011.

In Helmand, prevailing security conditions limited fieldwork to the central region and the districts of Lashkar Gah, Marjah, Nad-i-Ali, Nahre Seraj and Nawa Barakzai. Overall, interviews with rural households were conducted in 23 research sites, including two north of the Boghra Canal that have been the location for repeated fieldwork since May 2008. Due to the rapid increase in the amount of land under agricultural production in this area and the lack of empirical work on the lives and livelihoods of its growing population, a further five research sites were identified for fieldwork in May 2011. As with the fieldwork in Nangarhar, interviews were also conducted with a number of shopkeepers and with those looking for daily wage labour in the main bazaars. In total, 447 interviews were conducted in central Helmand Province in April and May 2011.

²² The households in Jani Khel were part of a longitudinal data set that dates back to work initially undertaken for AREU's European Commission-funded Water, Opium and Livestock project in April 2006.

3. Nangarhar: Success Turns to Failure?

When it comes to reducing opium poppy cultivation, Nangarhar Province has generally been viewed a success story. While efforts to reduce cultivation from a high of 28,213 ha in 2004 were short-lived and led to a resurgence in cultivation in the 2006-07 growing season, levels of cultivation remained low for three consecutive years under the current governor Gul Aga Shirzai. By the 2009-10 growing season, only an estimated 719 ha of opium poppy were grown, primarily in Sherzad and Khogiani Districts, with residual amounts in Lalpur, Achin, Hesarak and Mohmand Dara.²³

In the 2010-11 growing season, however, cultivation has expanded significantly, moving further down the valleys of Sherzad, as well as expanding in the upper parts of the districts of Khogiani and Achin. Reports also suggest that cultivation has increased in the southern districts of Pachir Wa Agam and Hesarak. Overall, UNODC estimates that a minimum of 2,700 ha of opium were cultivated throughout the province in the 2010-11 growing season.²⁴

Yet currently there are no signs of a resurgence in the lower districts of Nangarhar in the 2010-11 growing season. In fact, the process of crop diversification that has been at work over the last few years in districts adjacent to Jalalabad, such as Surkhrud, Behsud and Kama, is now increasingly visible further afield in districts such as Bati Kot and Shinwar. There is also evidence of growing nonfarm income opportunities in these areas following the expansion of the bazaars in Markoh and Jani Khel and an increase in wage labour opportunities both locally and in Jalalabad.

The divergent trends in opium poppy cultivation in different parts of the province in 2011 suggest that there is a growing divide between the fertile Kabul River valley and the more mountainous districts in the Spinghar foothills. History suggests that were this divide to continue to grow, it would lead to growing instability for the province as a whole, particularly given both an increasingly well-armed population and the presence of AGEs in its southern districts on the Pakistani border.²⁵ Divisions amongst the Shinwari could prove particularly challenging for the government given the size of the tribe, its influence and its geographic spread from the Torkham-Jalalabad road to the Pakistani border.

This section examines why cultivation has returned to the southern districts of Nangarhar in 2011 and what the prospects are for further increases in the 2011-12 growing season. It also looks at the factors that have prevented a return to cultivation in more lowland districts and asks whether they can actually be sustained. In its conclusion, it counters the prevailing narrative that opium poppy cultivation is a function of insecurity, highlighting the role the opium ban itself has played in fuelling conflict and the insurgency when imposed on areas where viable alternatives do not exist.

23 According to UNODC, the estimate for Nangarhar in 2010 should be considered a “minimum estimate” as it may be “affected by the omission of areas with very little cultivation.” See UNODC/MCN, “Afghanistan Opium Survey 2010” (Kabul: UNODC/MCN, 2010), 91.

24 UNODC/MCN, “Afghanistan Opium Survey 2011,” 3.

25 Antonio Giustozzi, “The Eye of the Storm: Cities in the Vortex of Afghanistan’s Civil Wars” (London: London School of Economics Crisis States Research Centre, 2009), 15.

3.1 The resurgence of opium poppy cultivation in the southern districts

According to both fieldwork and aerial photography,²⁶ wide-scale opium poppy cultivation has resumed in parts of upper Achin and Khogiani that saw little evidence of it in the 2009-10 growing season. There are also reports of increasing cultivation in Sherzad, Pachir Wa Agam and in Hisarak Districts in the 2010-11 growing season.

While there are isolated patches of opium poppy cultivation in different parts of Achin and Khogiani Districts, cultivation is typically concentrated in those areas “where the asphalt stops.” In Achin, cultivation begins after Asadkhel in the Mahmand valley; in Khogiani, cultivation is found four to five kilometres after Wazir Bazaar. In the lower parts of these areas, opium poppy occupies only a small amount of land, perhaps 25 percent of the total cultivated area. Farmers in these more accessible areas are taking small steps as they tentatively resume opium poppy cultivation for the first time in three years.



Figure 1: Opium poppy cultivation in the upper Mahmand valley, Achin

In the upper parts of these valleys, opium poppy is cultivated much more densely. These are areas where farmers report cultivating poppy in 2010—although some claim to have lost their crop to eradication that season (see Figure 1). In Margha in the upper Mahmand valley, opium poppy occupied an estimated 80 per cent of agricultural land in April 2011. Cultivation in the Pirakhel valley in upper Khogiani is also dense, occupying an estimated 70 percent of agricultural land in the 2010-11 growing season.

Increasing signs of economic distress

Typically, livelihoods in the southern districts of Nangarhar have proved vulnerable to the impact of the ban on opium production, particularly when it has coincided with

²⁶ Helicopter flyovers were conducted by Alcis Ltd in April 2011 in a number of provinces including Nangarhar, Laghman, Helmand and Kandahar.

other shocks and stresses. Many farmers in these areas have been showing signs of economic distress since opium production was effectively banned in 2008. Respondents here often complained about a deterioration in the quantity and quality of food they consume compared to the “poppy years,” reported how they could not afford to treat family members even when they are chronically ill, and commented on the difficulty of obtaining loans or meeting marriage obligations in the absence of opium production:

Last year, a school and a bridge were built by an NGO, but these do not solve my problems—I need income. I worked for 15 days on the bridge; we all have some benefit from that. But I don’t have any agricultural produce to sell. I have no source of income for the repayment of my loan. If the lender pushes me to repay I will mortgage my land; I don’t have any other way.

—Farmer, Asadkhel, upper Achin District

Agricultural alternatives to opium poppy cultivation remain limited in these areas. In the upper parts of Achin and Khogiani Districts, irrigation is relatively reliable, allowing both a winter and summer crop. However, in these areas land holdings are small and transport costs are high. In Khogiani, farmers have typically monocropped wheat in the winter followed by a summer crop of ground nuts and tomatoes. Returns on these summer crops have improved in recent years, but with total landholdings rarely exceeding five *jeribs* (around one ha in total), the on-farm income is insufficient to meet the basic needs of households that can frequently have ten members or more. In upper Achin, maize used to be the primary crop cultivated in the summer but since 2010 there is increasing evidence of a combination of maize and cannabis. In the lower parts of these districts, landholdings are larger, while reduced transport costs and travel time following infrastructure investments have provided greater market opportunities. However, while there is some evidence of increasing crop diversification in these areas, their location downstream leads to low yields and failing summer crops in the all-too-frequent dry years. Although tubewells were installed when opium was produced, they are run infrequently for wheat and horticultural crops due to the high cost of diesel.

Small landholdings, high population densities and high dependency ratios (i.e. a small productive workforce supporting a larger proportion of dependent individuals) militate against those households that do not have access to nonfarm income. Those who have managed to accumulate assets—including via the cultivation of opium poppy—have subsequently invested in local trade opportunities such as retail or transport as a means to maintain their standard of living. In particular, the purchase of a motor vehicle or a *zaranj* (three-wheeled scooter taxi) to transport goods or people to the local bazaar, or to Jalalabad, has been an important source of income in the absence of opium production.

In the absence of opium production and other viable agricultural alternatives, many have felt compelled to enlist their family members in the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), in particular the ANA. Some larger respondent households report having up to three members of their family in the ANA, all joining up since the ban on opium production came into force. This has sometimes involved withdrawing students from school, and even the reported alteration of identity cards to falsify the age of recruits who were less than 17 at the time of enlistment. For many households, enlisting family members in the ANA has been a pragmatic response to the ban on opium production—an economic necessity—and should not be seen as an indicator of political support for the ANSF or backing for the government and its laws. As one respondent remarked, “If my life were good here I would not have sent my brother to the army.” In fact, it was not unusual to find that members of those same households with family members in the ANSF had worked during the opium harvest in Helmand in the 2009-10 growing season,

and planned to do so again in April 2011. It was even easier to find respondents with family members in the ANA who had cultivated cannabis in the summer of 2010 and had resumed opium production in the 2010-11 growing season.

Indeed, a number of respondents from Khogiani indicated that it was family members in the ANA that had encouraged them to return to opium poppy cultivation in the 2010-11 growing season. One candid account from a young soldier on leave there highlights the difficult balancing act that households in economic distress often face:

I joined the ANA five months ago. I am from Wazir in Khogiani. I did my training in Kabul and was then sent to Herat. Up to now I have not received my salary....When the government gives me my five months salary I will leave the army. I will return to Khogiani and I will grow poppy now that others are growing poppy there. The national army is very dangerous. [crying] I joined the ANA because I am very poor. My father is old we don't have land; we live in a landowner's house. When the government banned poppy, we didn't have any way to make money; no one gave us a loan. There were no jobs in the district; the only way for us was to join the ANA...[When I came home on leave] they warned me that the Taliban were in Khogiani and were searching vehicles... [They] told me that if the Talaiban found me in my ANA uniform they would kill me.

The growing insurgency in the south-western districts

The south-western districts of Sherzad, Hisarak, Khogiani and Pachir Wa Agam have seen an increase in violence and the activities of AGEs. Within Khogiani, a number of the valleys south of Wazir, such as Pirakhel and Zawah, have become particularly challenging environments for government forces to operate. Researchers have also found it increasingly difficult to travel freely in these areas, particularly Pirakhel. While it is claimed there are no permanent checkpoints in these valleys, AGEs are known to be present and to patrol the area after dark. It is alleged that government access to these areas, including for eradication forces, has to be negotiated with local elders and AGEs.

The eradication campaign in Sherzad District in April 2010 is seen as a particularly decisive moment for the population in the southern valleys of Khogiani. Conducted late in the growing season when farmers had already made significant investments in their crops, the campaign was viewed with considerable acrimony. It was also associated with protracted and difficult negotiations with the provincial authorities, and the governor is alleged to have insulted and threatened the local elders. The resulting eradication campaign led the population to invite AGEs into Sherzad, and a number of Afghan National Police (ANP) members were killed in the ensuing violence.

The eradication campaign in Sherzad has also compounded a growing sense of disillusionment with the government's failure to deliver on its promise to increase development assistance following the re-imposition of the ban on opium production in the 2007-08 growing season.²⁷ As noted above, the population in these upper areas has become increasingly dependent on nonfarm income in the absence of opium production, especially remittances from family members in the ANSF. The seeming absence of a generation of young men is keenly felt, as is the accompanying decline in the quality of family life. In the upper valleys of Khogiani, Sherzad, Hisarak and Pachir Wa Agam, the

²⁷ The authorities implemented a ban on opium poppy cultivation in the 2004-05 growing season, reducing it from an estimated 2,269 ha in 2003-04 to 117 ha in 2004-05. However, cultivation rose to 750 ha in 2006 and to 3,253 ha in 2007. In the 2007-08 growing season cultivation is estimated to have been zero, rising to 108 ha in 2008-09 and 131 ha in 2009-10. See UNODC/MCN, "Afghanistan Opium Survey 2010."

local population is increasingly interpreting the government's opposition to opium poppy cultivation as a form of oppression against the farmers themselves. Farmers in Khogiani are also quick to point to what they see as an inconsistency in the government's position on opium production: "Karzai is also involved in this opium business—his two brothers produce and process heroin! If I do not cultivate, they will be out of business!"

However, while there are growing signs of disaffection amongst the population in the southern valleys of Khogiani, the population has not severed all links with the government. There are still a large number of households with family members in the ANSF. The schools remain open and are reported to be well attended, including the girls' high school in Wazir.

However, AGEs are aware of the simmering resentment in the area and are actively engaged in a campaign to win the support of the local population. It is claimed that AGE efforts to gain favour have led to them being responsive to the local population's requests to maintain a low profile and not to provoke military action from government and international forces. For example, at the time of fieldwork there were reports that AGEs had agreed not to attract military action that might disturb the opium harvest. This follows the local population's request in January and February of 2011 that "foreign" Taliban leave the area due to the threat of government action in upper Khogiani and the district of Sherzad.²⁸

Furthermore, AGEs in upper Khogiani appear to be responding to the immediate socio-economic priorities of the local population and adopting a more strategic, long-term view. Offering protection for a return to poppy cultivation is one of the most obvious ways for AGEs to demonstrate that they are catering to the economic needs of the local population. Tempering the ideological position they have adopted in other provinces and not intimidating farmers to withdraw their family members in the ANA currently seems to be another.

Given what we know about the relationship between the opium ban and recruitment rates in the Spinghar foothills, it can be assumed that a second year of opium poppy cultivation in these valleys in the 2011-12 growing season could change the situation dramatically. After all, farmers would no longer need their family members to expose themselves to the risks associated with the ANA were they to obtain an opium crop for a second consecutive year. It is also not unreasonable to assume that AGEs will be less tolerant of families who benefit from the "protection" of their opium crop while some of their members are fighting for the government in the South. Given the disproportionate number of Pashtuns from Nangarhar in the ANA²⁹ and the likelihood that many are from the southern districts that have been hardest hit by the opium ban,³⁰ a return to opium poppy cultivation in these areas might well have a significant effect on retention and recruitment rates in the ANA.

28 David Mansfield, "The 2010/11 Opium Poppy Growing Season: An Initial Brief" (London: Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 2011 [unpublished]), 5-8.

29 "[Pashtuns] make up 42 per cent of the population and roughly the same percentage are in the army—the vast majority come from a few north eastern provinces. More than a third come from Nangarhar Province alone." Ray Rivera, "Afghan army attracts few where fear reigns," *The New York Times*, 6 September 2011.

30 "Enlisting in the Afghan National Army (ANA) has become the primary risk mitigation strategy for those in the districts of Shinwar, Achin and Khogiani. For example, in the district of Achin more than half of those interviewed had members of their household in the ANA; in Shinwar it was over a third; and in Khogiani one quarter of respondents had members of their household in the ANA...It is also notable that in the districts of Kama and Surkhrud—areas that are less exposed to risk and where households have largely succeeded in diversifying on-farm and nonfarm income—none of those interviewed in 2010 reported having members of their household in either the ANA or the ANP." David Mansfield, "The Ban on Opium Production across Nangarhar - A Risk Too Far?" *International Journal of Environmental Studies* 68, no. 3 (2011): 381-395.

A breakdown in the political settlement in the south-eastern districts

In contrast to Khogiani, Hisarak and Sherzad, growing opposition to the central government is generally absent in Achin District. Instead, the target of resentment is the governor and the provincial authorities for their perceived role in the ongoing land dispute over the desert that lies between Kahi and Ghani Khel. This feeling is especially bitter among parts of the the Shinwari population, particularly the Mahmandi. Attempts to resolve the dispute date back to February 2010 when the Mahmandi first occupied the land and attempted to build on it. The armed conflict that arose when the Alisherkhel attempted to prevent the construction of houses on what they see as their land has since led to a number of deaths and injuries.



Figure 2: Armed men travelling from Kahi to the disputed area in lower Achin

Numerous efforts have been made to end the conflict but the Alisherkhel reject the Mahmandi's claims over the land and the efforts by different tribal *jirgas* (ad hoc councils convened to resolve specific disputes) to offer alternative parcels of land³¹ as part of the negotiation process. Further attempts at reconciliation by other Shinwari tribes³² in February 2011 achieved little and at the time of fieldwork there was no arbitration or ceasefire agreement in place. The Mahmandi hold the provincial authorities—especially Gul Aga—responsible for the continuing dispute and not enforcing the decisions of the *jirgas*. As one Mahmandi elder in Achin remarked, “The government has lost its authority in this dispute. There is no one in the district centre. No administration, just a few soldiers who sit there. There is no government here.”

31 Including the land they have built on in Gorokho in Torkam.

32 Specifically the Mandozai and Sunkhel.

By April 2011 there were reports of increasing amounts of weapons flowing into the area, some allegedly from Pakistan. Armed men were visible throughout Achin (as well as in upper Shinwar), both within the respective valleys of the rival subtribes and in the desert land under dispute. Each tribe has also established vehicle checkpoints to try and prevent armed opponents travelling into their respective areas.

The two communities involved in the dispute are incurring significant costs as a result of the conflict. For example, Mahmandi respondents reported that every male over the age of 16 is required to spend 20 days guarding the desert land—time that could be spent working elsewhere. Those that cannot undertake this duty for any reason are required to pay someone else to take their place. This will typically cost around 20,000 Pakistani Rupees (US\$235)³³ for the 20-day period. The costs of weapons (60,000-80,000 PR for an AK47) and the bullets are also borne by the household, as are food costs incurred during guard duty. At the time of fieldwork, Kahi Bazaar was closed; situated in a Mahmandi area, Alisherkhel shopkeepers were afraid to work, fearful that they might be injured or held hostage. The high school in the bazaar was also closed and many Alisherkhel women and children had reportedly left the area to avoid being caught up in the armed conflict. It was also alleged that both the Alisherkhel and the Mahmandi were holding a number of individuals from the opposing tribe captive. The Mahmandi also complained that they have to avoid travelling along certain roads for fear of being fired at or “arrested” by the Alisherkhel.



Figure 3: Kahi Bazaar, Achin, April 2011

The dispute is further complicated by the shifting political alliances within the province—Governor Shirzai is now in conflict with key members of the ruling elite who have proven critical to the stability of the province over the last few years.³⁴ Of particular concern is the political conflict with the Arsala family who governed the province prior to Shirzai’s arrival, initially under the late Governor Abdul Qadir (2001-02) and after his

³³ In Nangarhar, Pakistani Rupees are commonly used. At the time of fieldwork US\$1 was the equivalent of 85 PR and 1,000 PR was the equivalent of 530 Afs.

³⁴ See also Fabrizio Foschini “Sherzai Staying or Leaving? A Nangarhar Tug-of-War,” Afghan Analysts Network, 8 March 2011, <http://aan-afghanistan.com/index.asp?id=1541> (accessed 17 October 2011).

death through his brother Haji Din Mohammed (2002-05). The family now has a new generation of political leaders in the form of the parliamentarian Haji Zahir³⁵ and the provincial council members Haji Jamal³⁶ and Nasratullah.³⁷ It is also able to draw on links with powerful figures in Kabul,³⁸ as well as with other influential figures within the province.³⁹ On the surface this dispute seems to concern the governor and his opponents as they compete for control of the formal offices of power in Nangarhar and the opportunities for rent extraction and patronage.⁴⁰ However, this dispute has also drawn in Malik Niaz,⁴¹ a prominent Shinwari elder from Mahmand who had been instrumental in building the political support for the government's efforts to reduce opium production in the province.

The escalation of the land dispute and its conflation with provincial politics has helped establish an environment for an increase in opium poppy cultivation in upper Achin and the Mahmandi valley in particular during the 2010-11 growing season. In part, the act of planting opium poppy appears to have been an act of defiance at the provincial government's failure to resolve the land dispute and deliver on its promises of development assistance. The rural population's growing resentment of their *maliks* and their involvement in the opium ban coupled with the subsequent deterioration in the local economy has also been instrumental in the rural elite's unwillingness to press the population to comply with ban for a further year:

In the past, we accepted the order of the government and the malik. But they promised they would provide a source of income for our families. They did not do anything. This year we will cultivate opium to solve our economic problems.

—Farmer, Achin Kalay, upper Achin District

The rearming of the population—supported initially by the government and the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) as part of the “Shinwari Pact” in order to prevent Taliban incursions⁴² and subsequently a locally-driven initiative in response to the land dispute with the Alisherkhel—has further undermined the state's capacity to enforce the law in the 2010-11 growing season.

In fact, efforts to destroy the standing crop in the Mahmand valley in mid-April were abandoned after the eradication team came under heavy fire near the village Sanzarlay.

35 Haji Zahir was head of the Border Police in Nangarhar between 2004 and 2006. He was then appointed as the head of Border Police in Takhar and Taloqan where he remained until 2007.

36 Son of Haji Qadir and brother of Haji Zahir.

37 Son of Haji Din Mohammed and cousin of Haji Zahir and Haji Jamal.

38 Such as Haji Din Mohammed, former governor of Kabul Province and manager of President Karzai's re-election campaign in 2009.

39 Especially former party members of Hizb-i-Islami (Khaless) such as Hazrat Ali (Pashai commander, former Chief of Police in Nangarhar (2002-2005), and two-time Member of Parliament).

40 It is alleged that the catalyst for the breakdown in the relationship between the governor and his opponents was disagreements over the amount of tribute that they would receive from the border post at Torkham.

41 Malik Niaz is not only a party member of Hizb-i-Islami (Khaless) but a former comrade of Haji Zahir's father Haji Qadir. It is alleged that Malik Niaz accompanied Haji Zahir, Hazrat Ali, Faraidoon Mohmand and other tribal elders to see President Karzai and request for the removal of the governor.

42 Sgt Tracy Smith, “Afghan Border Police Enlist Tribal Elders/Maliks to Protect Eastern Border,” *The Fighting* 48th 1, no. 5 (2010): 13; Alissa Rubin, “Afghan Tribal Rivalries Bedevil a US Plan,” *Associated Press*, 21 March 2010; Colonel Randy George and Dante Paradiso, “The Case for a Wartime Chief Executive Officer: Fixing the Interagency Quagmire in Afghanistan,” *Foreign Affairs*, 21 June, 2011, http://www.foreignaffairs.com/fa_subcontent/67833/67834 (accessed 17 October 2011).

The eradication team allegedly contacted tribal elders in the area and informed them that they would retreat and leave the crop untouched once the firing stopped. Subsequent negotiations between the governor and a prominent local *malik* (Malik Niaz having declined to take part) resulted in an agreement that some eradication could take place in Mahmand valley, but conducted by the local population with a small contingent of unarmed ANP. Respondents report that the governor was warned that an attempt to conduct enforced eradication would result in further fighting and the deaths of the eradication team.

During these discussions, five villages in the lower part of the Mahmand valley were identified for eradication. Farmers who agreed that their fields could be destroyed did so on the basis that they would be compensated by their fellow villagers in cash at a rate of the equivalent of 8.5 *seer* (1.2 kg) per *jerib*. Fieldwork conducted in the area the day after this eradication campaign suggests very little of the crop was destroyed and that the most a single farmer lost was a few square metres of crop.

The abandonment of the eradication campaign and the nature of these negotiations with the governor have only served to further weaken the provincial authorities in the minds of the population, especially among the Mahmandi tribe. When seen in conjunction with the land dispute and the continuing rise in opium prices (approximately \$350 per kilogramme in August 2011), it is difficult to see how the government will be able to prevent more widespread cultivation in Achin and perhaps parts of upper Shinwar in the 2011-12 growing season.

3.2 Increasing resilience in the Kabul River valley

In contrast to the upper valleys of southern Nangarhar, the lower districts in the Kabul River basin are showing increasing evidence of livelihood diversification. Kama and Surkhrud Districts have cultivated only negligible amounts of opium poppy since the 2004-05 growing season when the then governor Haji Din Mohammed implemented a ban. This trend even persisted through 2006-07, when there was a resurgence in cultivation across the province. In the 2010-11 growing season there remains no evidence of opium poppy in these districts despite the high price of opium. Instead, there are increasing signs of crop diversification, not only in Kama and Surkhrud but reaching further down the valley into Bati Kot and Shinwar Districts. There is also evidence of increasing nonfarm income opportunities, not just in the provincial centre of Jalalabad but also in the bazaar of Markoh in Shinwar District.

Continuing crop diversification

Along the Kabul River valley, the greatest levels of agricultural diversity are found in areas closest to Jalalabad such as lower Surkhrud and upper Kama. A few years ago, green bean (32,000-65,000 PR/*jerib*) and sugar cane (45,000 PR/*jerib*) were the primary cash crops cultivated in upper Kama, while in lower Surkhrud it was okra (50,000-100,000 PR/*jerib*) that dominated the landscape during spring. Farmers in these areas now cultivate a much wider variety of winter, spring and summer crops, sell livestock and their by-products and take advantage of their proximity to Jalalabad to find employment. They also appear to be particularly responsive to changing market demand. For example, crops such as taro (90,000-95,000 PR/*jerib*) and potato (80,000-120,000 PR/*jerib*), which were not widely cultivated in the area even two years ago, have expanded significantly in lower Kama over the last 12 months.

Traders are particularly active in these areas, purchasing at the farm gate and absorbing the harvest, packing, transport and transaction costs that would otherwise be incurred by the farmer. Lower Surkhrud also benefits from a vibrant farm gate trade in yoghurt, which sells for 200 PR/*seer*. With two cows a farmer can earn as much as 400 PR/day for six to ten months of the year. Some farmers report that they have well-established agreements in place where if the trader does not collect the yoghurt at the farm gate each day, the farmer is reimbursed for any losses they incur. In Kama District, farmers have moved up the value chain and are making cheese (2,000 PR/*seer*). The demand for fodder for livestock in these areas is such that the amount of land cultivated with clover is increasing, with gross returns between 80,000-100,000 PR/*jerib*.

There are also growing signs of crop diversity in upper Surkhrud and lower Kama as farmers increasingly take advantage of short-season horticultural crops that have a market in Jalalabad. For example, in places where crop diversification was once much more limited, like Fatehabad in upper Surkhrud, crops such as squash, marrow (30,000 PR/*jerib*), pea, aubergine, coriander (20,000 PR/*jerib*) and spinach (20,000-50,000 PR/*jerib*) can now be found. Many farmers in this area have also started cultivating three crops per year on part of their land. For example, a crop of fresh or green onion (64,000-70,000 PR/*jerib*) planted in November is followed by tomato (40,000-55,000 PR/*jerib*) in March and a summer crop of maize or cotton in June⁴³; or pea (28,000-30,000 PR/*jerib*) might be planted in October, harvested and then followed by a crop of turai (ridged gourd) (65,000-80,000 PR/*jerib*) in March. With a harvest in June, turai can also be followed by a summer crop.

While onion (50,000-100,000 PR/*jerib*) remains the primary vegetable crop in upper Surkhrud, it is also possible to see increasing amounts of okra (50,000-100,000 PR/*jerib*) as well as gandana (80,000-100,000 PR/*jerib*)—both offering multiple harvests—as water flows have improved following infrastructure investments. Improvements to the canal system in Kama District have also led to increasing evidence of previously unseen high-value summer crops in upper Kama such as cauliflower (40,000-50,000 PR/*jerib*) and cucumber.

However, the most significant increase in crop diversity in the Kabul River valley over the last few years has been in Shinwar District. In the past, this was a district known for cultivating a large proportion of agricultural land with opium poppy during the winter cropping season. When opium poppy was banned, wheat was all but monocropped for a number of years. Now farmers in Shinwar are cultivating a wide range of cash crops including potato, taro, turai, turnip, garlic (40,000 PR/*jerib*), green bean, and tomato—even in some of the upper parts of the district. One respondent cultivated 12 different crops on his land.

The stimulus for this shift in cultivation appears to be the expansion of the bazaar at Markoh. Respondents now claim this bazaar is a regional market centre for the eastern districts of Nangarhar, including Nazian, Achin, Deh Bala and Lalpur. Where farmers and traders would have travelled to Jalalabad in the past, they can now get everything they need from Markoh. The vegetable bazaar there is extensive and its traders now purchase agricultural produce at the farm gate in both Shinwar and Bati Kot Districts. As the quotes below indicate, there is a sense that these changes have brought with them an improved quality of life:

43 There are also farmers in upper Surkhrud cultivating groundnut during the summer months.

Life is good. I have milk, I have a salary, I have meat and fruit, I can send my son to university.

—Farmer, Zalmabad, lower Surkhrud District

I was a farmer who believed in growing poppy. I was also a trader of opium in the past. I also leased extra land to cultivate poppy. But I was always in debt. I now think I was a foolish man. I always had a loan to pay and I was under pressure. Sometimes I got money and I could repay my loan; sometimes I did not. Now I cultivate vegetables, I am happy.

—Farmer, Wiala 27, lower Shinwar District

The growth in nonfarm income opportunities

In the Kabul River valley, agricultural diversification has been supported by an increase in nonfarm income opportunities and wage labour rates. For example, unskilled labour rates in Jalalabad in April 2011 were 400-450 PR/day compared to 300-350 PR/day at the same time in 2009 and 100-150 PR/day in 2005. Skilled labourers such as masons were paid 900-1,000 PR/day in April 2011 compared to nearer 800-900 PR/day in 2009.⁴⁴ In fact, wage rates and work opportunities in Jalalabad were such that they attracted masons from Pakistan.

Within Surkhrud, Kama and Shinwar Districts, respondents also reported improving employment opportunities and increasing wage rates. In upper Surkhrud, there are growing numbers of households with family members working in the construction of Chemtala camp, a housing area located in the south-west of the district. In Shinwar, there is not only construction work for masons (800 PR/day) but employment in Bati Kot District planting orange trees (150 Afs/day).⁴⁵

Households were also found to exploit the seasonal work opportunities and wage differentials in the labour markets in Kabul and Nangarhar. These differentials are in part due to the currency in which wages are paid. For example, a person working in a brick kiln in Surkhrud is paid 400 PR for every 1,000 bricks they produce. In Kabul that same person received 350 Afs for every 1,000 bricks made—a difference of the equivalent of around \$3.

The mountains and the valley: Diverging trends

This section has highlighted the growing disparity between the population in the more remote upper areas of the southern districts of Nangarhar and those living in the accessible, fertile Kabul River valley. In the lower areas there are no signs of a return to opium poppy cultivation and growing evidence of livelihood diversification.

However, the rise in insecurity in key districts in southern Nangarhar is now closely associated with the cumulative effect of the ban on opium coupled with an absence of alternatives. These areas are typically remote, land-poor and increasingly reliant on remittances—especially from the ANSF—as a source of income in the absence of opium. The insurgency is also finding increasing support, drawing on the population's perception of falling living standards and sense the government has not fulfilled its promises of improving their economic opportunities. For the population, the presence of AGEs offers an opportunity to return to cultivation and reduces the risk of their crop being destroyed.

⁴⁴ Mansfield, "A Risk too Far?"; David Mansfield, "Poppy Free Provinces: A Measure or a Target?" (Kabul: AREU, 2009).

⁴⁵ In this case wages were cited in Afghanis because the employer was a nongovernmental organisation. At the time of fieldwork US\$1 was the equivalent of 47 Afs.

It is anticipated that AGEs will look to consolidate their presence in Khogiani, Sherzad, Hisarak and Pachir Wa Agam Districts in the 2011-12 growing season using their support for opium poppy cultivation as a populist cause. This has the potential to damage ANSF recruitment and retention since many families sending members to join the ANA or ANP have done so as a pragmatic response to the economic effects of the three-year opium cultivation ban and shortage of local employment opportunities.

As of April 2011, AGEs were not pressing the population in these valleys to remove family members from the ANSF and were allowing schools to remain open; as such they would appear to be engaged in a “courtship” with the local population. However, were there to be a second year of extensive opium poppy cultivation, the economic pressure to remain in the ANSF will have dissipated and it is likely that AGEs will start to press the local population to withdraw their support. An ill-considered and implemented eradication campaign in these districts (and others where these conditions apply) would thus only serve to give greater support to the insurgency.

There has also been a breakdown in the political settlement between Gul Aga Shirzai and some of the key political players in the province. This has led to growing uncertainty about the governor’s political future in the province and growing resistance to government interference in the southern districts. There are also few signs that the land dispute that has driven the rift between Malik Niaz and Gul Aga Shirzai will be resolved, leading to the potential for cultivation to spread further in the districts of Loya Shinwar.⁴⁶ If it worsens, this conflict, which has already divided the Mahmandi and the Alisherkhel, has the potential to draw in other elements of the Shinwari tribe and presents an opportunity for AGEs to gain ground in the Shinwari districts as well as facilitate further opium production in the coming seasons. High opium prices and growing signs that the writ of the central government is diminishing in key districts of Nangarhar do not bode well for the 2011-12 growing season in the province.

46 Mansfield, “A Risk too Far?”

4. Central Helmand: Failure Turns to Success?

This section discusses the findings of fieldwork in two distinct areas of Helmand Province. The first part explores the settlement of the area north of the Boghra Canal and south of Highway 1. This is a former desert area that has seen a dramatic increase in the number of migrants and the amount of land under agricultural production over the last decade. It is an area where the population is heavily dependent on opium production for their livelihoods and where the insurgency dominates. It is also an environment where little is known about the origins of its population, the factors driving settlement, the portfolio of livelihood activities pursued there, and the population's sense of its own permanency in what is considered, at least by the state, as "government land."

The second part discusses developments in the canal command area in central Helmand between 2010 and 2011. The canal command area is considered the most resource-rich part of the province: It is an area where landholdings are relatively large; where due to access to irrigation, most farmers can cultivate crops throughout the year; and where for more than a decade a significant proportion of the country's opium production has been concentrated. It is also an area where there have been substantial reductions in opium poppy cultivation over the past three years, as well as a significant increases in the number of national and international military forces on the ground along with the distribution of development assistance.

The section concludes with a comparison of these areas over the last 12 months. It highlights the potentially destabilising effect of efforts to reduce opium production quickly in areas that have only recently been cleared of insurgent forces, and where the population is still subject to high levels of violence and intimidation from both pro- and anti-government forces. It argues that the destabilising effects of efforts to reduce opium production are all the more pronounced when much of the population is experiencing increasing economic distress in the absence of opium poppy. It warns of the destabilising effect of pushing counter-narcotics efforts north of the Boghra Canal and suggests far greater emphasis should be given to livelihood diversification in the canal command area.

4.1 North of the Boghra Canal

The area north of the Boghra Canal and south of Highway 1 has seen a dramatic increase in the amount of land under agricultural production over the last decade, increasing from 834 ha of land in 1999 to 26,631 ha in 2010 (see Figure 5). Over this period, settlement in this former desert area has been driven by the pattern of circumstances that have affected Helmand Province as a whole in recent years: ongoing conflict, growing population pressures, intermittent drought, weak government institutions, the dominance of armed rural elites, local patronage systems and of course the economic opportunities that opium poppy cultivation can offer. This last factor is particularly important in an area that is not a regional economic hub and lacks both significant cross-border trade and nonfarm income opportunities.

Population movement into this area is significant and is likely to continue as long as there is land that can be settled and brought under cultivation. Evidence from other former desert areas of the province settled over the last decade suggests that as long as there are tubewells available to extract water and opium poppy cultivation to finance both their installation and recurrent costs (such as fuel), there is little to prevent the expansion of agricultural production into this area. In addition, the Taliban who currently dominate the area have scant motivation to limit the flow of new migrants.

Area 1

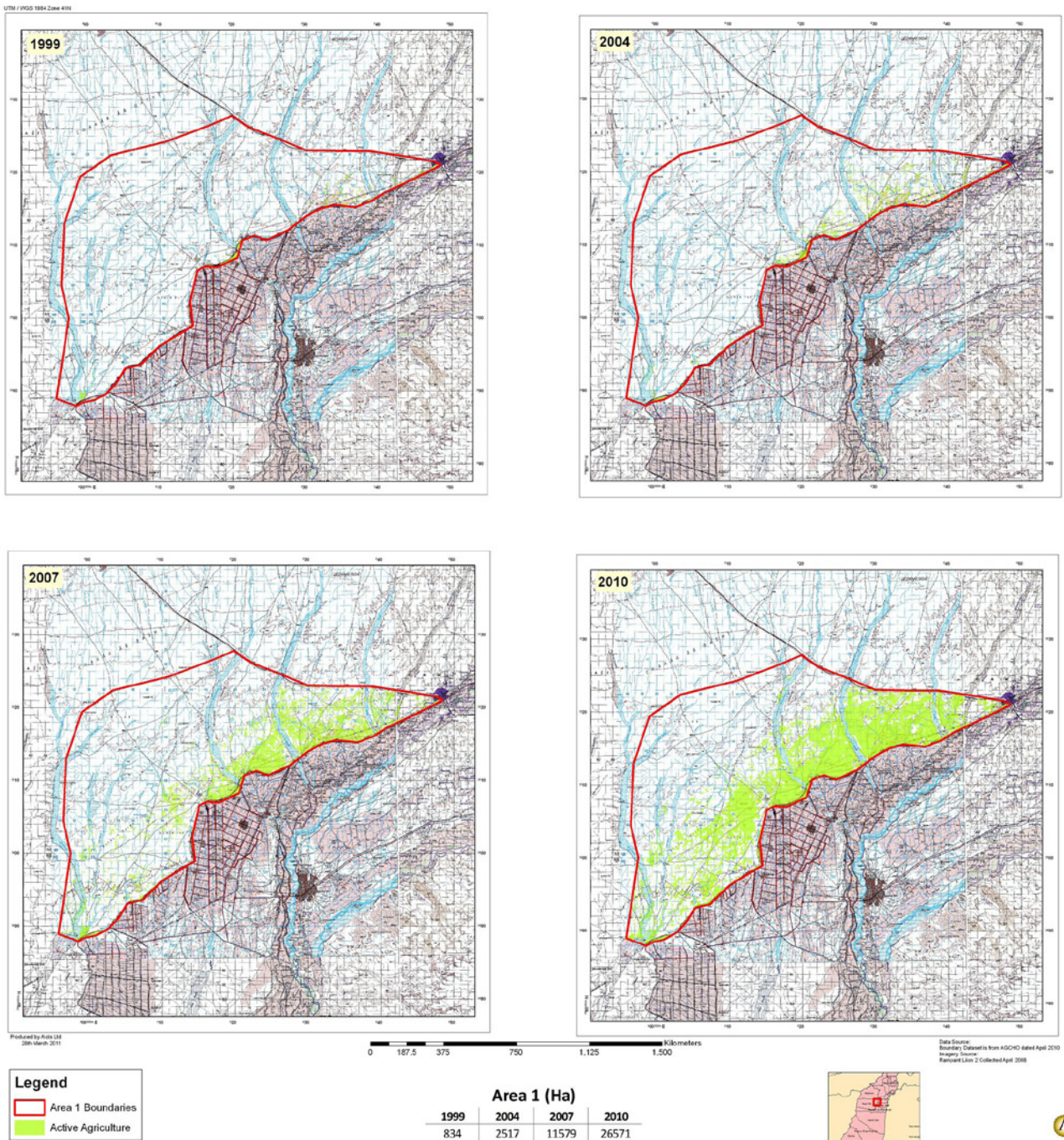


Figure 4: Expansion in the area under production north of the Boghra Canal, 1999-2010

The only real constraint on further settlement is the potential for agricultural production to become economically unviable. There are two factors that might lead to this. The first is the potential for the water table to fall significantly due to over-exploitation, which would make irrigation by tubewell unsustainably expensive. However, the continued inflow of people into the area suggests this point has not yet been reached, while the dramatic increase in opium prices between 2010 and 2011 will mean that the water table will need to fall a long way before agricultural production becomes unprofitable.

The second factor would be an effective ban on opium production. Opium has become the lynchpin of the economy in this area. It has provided the resources to purchase land, build houses and—most importantly—bring land under agricultural production. It cross-subsidises the production of food crops for both family members and livestock. Without opium, the population would be compelled to abandon their land, homes and communities and return to the canal command area with its increasingly scarce and insecure sharecropping arrangements. This, combined with a more general sense of disillusion with behaviour of district and provincial authorities, means the population in this area increasingly perceives the Taliban as a movement that represents their economic interests, and the government as a threat to their economic and physical security.

The history of settlement

Over the last decade, there appear to have been three waves of migration into the area. The first took place in the late 1990s during the Taliban regime and seems to have been rather limited in scale. It largely consisted of farmers from Washir and Nowzad Districts who were looking for better irrigated land that would prove more productive during what was a prolonged period of drought. The second wave of migration into the area began in 2002 after the fall of the Taliban and was largely led by local commanders residing just south of the canal. It is claimed that these commanders typically justified their land-grab on the basis that they and their men had “defended it against the Soviet occupation” or that they had some traditional claim over it.

In reality, many of these commanders had links to the provincial administration of the then-governor Sher Mohammed Akundzada, and even had jobs in the local security services. For example, one portion of land was allegedly taken by Abdul Tahir Noorzai, a former “security commander” in Nad-i-Ali District, while another fell to Haji Kabir Khan, the former head of the traffic police in Lashkar Gah.⁴⁷ After this initial land-grab, commanders reportedly then gifted land to their subordinates and extended families.

In many areas, the local authorities through either fear or favour simply failed to act against local elites as they moved north. In others, local police commanders are accused of extracting bribes from those who seized land without the patronage of a single powerful commander and migrated north in a more unstructured and opportunistic manner. Other areas were claimed by Kuchi tribes (Pashtun nomadic pastoralists) who had a long history of pasturing their livestock in the area and feared they would lose the land to others if they did not occupy it as sedentary agriculturalists. Although large amounts of land north of the Boghra Canal were acquired during this particular wave of migration, little of it was actually brought under extensive agricultural production.

The third and final wave of migration to the area involved the commoditisation and sale of the land there by those that had initially grabbed it or been gifted it by others. This wave appears to have begun in 2004 and continues into the current growing season. During this period, significant amounts of land have been brought under agricultural production with a dramatic increase between 2007 and 2010 from 11,579 ha to 26,631 ha.⁴⁸ Further increases are expected during the 2010-11 and 2011-12 growing seasons, particularly if efforts to reduce opium poppy cultivation in the canal command area are continued or enhanced.

47 Coghlan, “The Taliban in Helmand,” 137.

48 Mansfield et al., “Managing Concurrent and Repeated Risks,” 57.

Table 1: The 2002 land grab north of the Boghra Canal

Area	Person responsible for initial land grab in 2002	Background and political network	Tribes currently present
Shen Ghazai	Abdul Khaliq	Alkozai; Hizb-i-Islami with links to former Commander Moallem Mirwali and Member of Parliament. ¹	Alkozai
Shna Jama	Abdul Tahir	Noorzai; former security commander for Nad-i-Ali	Noorzai, Kharoti, Alkozai, Baloch, Suleimankhel
Dashte Loy Manda	Abdul Haq (Barakzai)	Barakzai; Hizb-i-Islami; killed in 2008	
Dashte Ab Pashak	Haji Abdul Qadoos	Barakzai; brother controls checkpoints between and Ab Pashak and Gereshk	Barakzai, Ishaqzai, Alkozai
Naquilabad	Haji Kabir Khan	Noorzai; previously from Washir; former head of traffic police in Lashkar Gah; killed in 2008	
Abdul Aziz Kalay	No single commander; opportunistic settlement by different tribes; police commanders from checkpoint at Shawal are alleged to have taken bribes from settlers		Barakzai, Noorzai, Ishaqzai, Baloch
Nawabad e Shawal	No single commander; opportunistic settlement by different tribes; police commanders from checkpoint at Shawal are alleged to have taken bribes from settlers		Suleimankhel, Alkozai, Khairoti, Noorzai, Ishaqzai
Dashte Shin Kalay	No single commander; settled by Kuchi in 2003 who claim the land as traditional pasture land		Ishaqzai, Noorzai, Baloch, Kakar
Shurawak	No single commander; initially inhabited by Noorzai from Washir and Nawzad		Noorzai, Alizai, Alkozai, Baloch, Ishaqzai

By 2010, rough estimates of the population north of the Boghra Canal ranged between 72,000 and 135,000.⁴⁹ This influx of people has been accompanied by a rise in land prices. While prices do vary according to the quality and location of the land,⁵⁰ a typical *jerib* had increased in value from 5,000 Afs in 2004 to 25-30,000 Afs in the 2009-10 growing season. By the 2010-11 growing season, land prices were reportedly as high as 50,000 Afs

⁴⁹ This is based on 2010 remote sensing data that estimates that around 27,000 ha of land were under cultivation. The typical landholding among the 150 household interviews conducted in the area in November 2010 and in April-May 2011 was between 10-15 *jeribs* (2-3 ha); the number of household members was between 8 and 10.

⁵⁰ With those areas nearer the bazaars on the Boghra Canal such as Shawal being deemed more desirable.

per *jerib*. However, it should be noted that this is still significantly less than in the canal command area, where prices can be as much as 330,000 Afs per *jerib*.

Bringing land under agricultural production

The process of migration for those purchasing land north of the Boghra Canal appears to follow a fairly common pattern. The vast majority of those interviewed (95 percent) had previously lived south of the canal, typically working under a sharecropping arrangement on someone else's land. Most were drawn to the area by the opportunity to own land and build a house—seen as unaffordable in the canal command area. A number of respondents also complained that increasing insecurity south of the canal—particularly during the 2008 and 2009 military operations in Nad-i-Ali District—had also led them to relocate northward. Complaints of corruption and intimidation by government officials and a failure to deliver development assistance were also cited as push factors leading to migration.



Figure 5: Tubewell, Helmand Province

Those who relocated to the area typically relied on pre-existing contacts there. This would often be a friend or family member who could help them find land to purchase and provide support during the initial years of their resettlement. New migrants reported that help with access to water was particularly critical in the first year following migration, but also cited needing assistance with loans to build a house, purchase a motorbike for transportation, buy the land in the first place or install a tubewell.

Water is viewed as a particularly valuable commodity in the area as it can only be obtained through the installation of a tubewell. Respondents claimed that even close family members were unwilling to provide water from their tubewell to their relatives

on more than a temporary basis,⁵¹ and that new migrants prioritised installing their own within the first season of relocating.⁵² The proliferation of tubewells and the generators required to run them has led to the area being referred to locally as “dieselabad.” In Dashte Ab Pashak, respondents reported digging to at least 60 metres—at a cost of 500 PR per metre—before they reached water. With generators costing around 50,000 PR each, the installation costs for a tubewell can run to as much as 100,000 to 150,000 PR (see Figure 6).

In fact, respondents reported that they incurred considerable costs during their initial years of settlement in the area. In addition to investing in a tubewell to bring land under agricultural production, they needed to level the land, clear it of stones and improve the fertility of the soil. This required the rent of a tractor (at 1,800 PR/hour) as well as the purchase of both animal manure and chemical fertilisers. The costs of chemical fertiliser were reportedly as much as twice what they were in the canal command area, and with the high costs of manure (at around 3,000 to 4,000 PR per trailer, with each *jerib* requiring more than one trailer) farmers reported that they only applied as much as they could afford. New migrants also needed a house, which could cost from 45,000 PR for a simple, self-built room to more than 600,000 PR for the kind of multi-roomed compound found in the canal command area.

Respondents reported that it took two years of heavy investment in their land before agricultural yields improved, but even then the recurrent costs of farming remained high due to fertiliser inputs and the number of irrigations required. For example, farmers reported that a *jerib* of opium poppy needed as many as 12 irrigations—each requiring 4-6 litres of diesel to run the tubewell—for the soil to have sufficient moisture for planting. Respondents reported that the recurrent costs were further increased by the low quality of the generators installed, which would typically fail after only two years of use and need replacing.

Livelihood strategies

Landholdings north of the Boghra Canal were found to vary in size from a typical plot of 10-15 *jeribs* to smaller areas of five *jeribs* or less. Crop diversity was limited, largely consisting of opium poppy and wheat in the winter season, with some maize in the summer.

Farmers with larger landholdings determined how much land they cultivated with wheat according to whether they had been self-sufficient in it during the previous year. Even in the 2010-11 growing season, with opium prices as high as 100,000 to 120,000 PR per *man* (4.5 kilogrammes) during the planting season, farmers were still found to be increasing wheat cultivation at the expense of poppy so that they did not have to purchase wheat flour at the bazaar.⁵³ Generally, this group cultivated between four and seven *jeribs* of wheat in the 2010-11 growing season depending on family size. Yields ranged from between 40 and 80 *seer/jerib* (one *seer* equivalent to around seven kilogrammes)

51 One respondent reported that after moving to the area his brother told him: “This year I will give you water one to three times but next year you are responsible and you need to install a tubewell.”

52 Even the renting of tubewells, where a farmer will pay the owner of the tubewell a premium hourly rate so that they can irrigate their land, is relatively rare compared to other areas that have deep wells such as in parts of the southern districts of Nangarhar.

53 “The price at the time of planting in Helmand was reported to be 70,000 to 80,000 PR per man for low quality opium from the canal area (compared to 12,000 to 14,000 PR last year) and as much as 110,000 to 120,000 PR per man for the highest quality opium (which was only 16,000 to 18,000 PR per man in November 2009).” See Mansfield, “The 2010/11 Opium Poppy Growing Season,” 20.

depending on the quality of soil and the availability of water, compared to 100-130 *seer/jerib* in the canal command area. Once sufficient land had been allocated to wheat to meet household food requirements, the remainder was cultivated with opium poppy and perhaps one *jerib* of alfalfa in the case of households that owned livestock. For the average farmer with ten to 15 *jeribs* of land, opium poppy therefore typically occupied between 50 and 60 percent of land cultivated during the winter season.

Crop diversity was even more limited for the minority of farmers with five *jeribs* of agricultural land or less. This group cultivated no wheat, and devoted their entire land to opium poppy. With such small landholdings, these households could not achieve self-sufficiency in food and had to rely on the sale of their opium crop to buy wheat from the bazaar along with other goods and services. Aerial photography suggests that some of these smaller landholders had prepared further land for production but had not yet brought it under cultivation (see Figure 7).



Figure 6: Land under cultivation north of the Boghra Canal

In all farms, the amount of land cultivated in summer was considerably less than during winter. Many reported planting no summer crop at all, unwilling to pay to run their tubewells for what they considered to be low-return crops. Others cultivated only one or two *jeribs*, typically growing some maize with a small amount of land set aside for vegetable production for household consumption. Most respondents in this area also did not own livestock; while some animals were kept for domestic consumption, few were sold commercially.

Opium sales were by far the most significant source of income for those interviewed north of the Boghra Canal. Respondents reported that they generally sold their opium at the farm gate but that it could also be sold at a number of the bazaars straddling the Boghra Canal such as in Naray Manda and Loy Manda. Prices were high; most respondents had managed to secure between 70,000 to 120,000 PR per *man* of opium over the last 12 months.

Permanent settlement

Despite the costs and difficulties of initially settling in the area, along with the input-intensive nature of farming the former desert land, there were very few respondents who anticipated leaving the area in the future. In fact, the vast majority felt that they had improved their quality of life by moving to the area: they had experienced an increase in the quantity and quality of food they consumed; they could afford healthcare, including in Pakistan; and they had acquired land, a home and perhaps other assets. Only the small number of respondents that had relocated there on a more temporary basis believed they might leave. These individuals had generally fled existing landholdings south of the canal in the face of conflict or the opium ban to work as sharecroppers, and intended to return there once conditions improved.

As the vast majority of respondents had been landless prior to their arrival in the area, they viewed a return to farming in the canal command area as a deeply retrograde step since doing so would not only shut off the economic opportunities they had acquired since their move, but expose them once more to government officials they viewed with contempt and derision. As sharecroppers working in the canal command area, these farmers were the least likely to have received development assistance and often referred to the unfulfilled promises made by the government:

The government is very weak, they cannot keep themselves secure; how will they help the people?

—Farmer, Dashte Ab Pashak

This is a government of kafirs [infidels]. We do not have interest in this.

—Farmer, Dashte Ab Pashak

There are no good people in the government. I do not like them; no one believes their statements, no one accepts their orders.

—Farmer, Abdul Aziz Kalay

The government should be strong, I like a strong government. This is a weak government, it is under the control of foreigners.

—Farmer, Shna Jama

The prospect of government and international forces moving into the area north of the Boghra Canal was perhaps viewed with even greater alarm than a return to farming in the canal command area. For most people, this represented a risk of increased violence and the threat of conflict with the Taliban forces that dominated in the area. An even greater concern among respondents was that government incursion would be a threat to their livelihood, given that provincial authorities are increasingly associated with the ban on opium production in the areas under their control in the canal command area. Given the high recurrent costs of farming north of the Boghra Canal and the limited agricultural potential of the land there, a ban on opium production was seen as a real threat to the farming population's way of life and one that they would resist. Support for the Taliban among respondents in this area was unequivocal. This was largely attributed to the fact that they offered protection against the provincial government's counter-narcotics efforts, and had even reportedly encouraged poppy cultivation via statements at local mosques and during the weekly markets along the canal.

There is no representative of the government in the area. There is no interest in the government. We don't like the government. If the government comes here, they will destroy our crop.

—Farmer, Dashte Ab Pashak

We are happy with the Taliban; as long as the Taliban are here we will continue to grow poppy. There is no eradication in the area. The Taliban will not allow this; they will fight [the government].

–Farmer, Shen Ghazai

Life is better because of the presence of the Taliban. If the Taliban were not here, the government would come and destroy our crop and search the houses. They would seize our opium and loot our valuables.

–Farmer, Shna Jama

If we compare the Taliban with the government or foreigners they are better as they do not kill the people or threaten the people.

–Shen Ghazai

Information on local governance structures in these recently-established communities is largely absent and more research is required. Respondents report that there are no formal *maliks* in the area but that households typically group around a common mosque, with a number of elders taking on an informal representative role. The interface between Taliban commanders and soldiers and these communities is less clear. Armed Taliban soldiers were visible during fieldwork in some areas north of the Boghra, but were more discreet in those communities located near the checkpoints along the canal. Farmers report that local disputes are mediated by Taliban commanders.⁵⁴

Some of those interviewed referred to paying tribute to the Taliban at a rate of 2 to 3 *khord* (one *khord* being equal to 112.5 grammes) per *jerib* of opium and 200 PR/*jerib* of wheat. Respondents did not report paying *ushr* (religious taxation in the form of a ten percent agricultural tithe paid on all crops) to the Taliban, claiming that this was a payment made to the mullah for his services to the community over the course of a year. Contrary to more mainstream narratives, in this area the threat of violence and predation is associated more with government forces than the Taliban, fuelling further support for the insurgency

Support for the Taliban in this area was all the more pronounced given the economic benefits the population was reaping from the high price of opium, especially in the context of shrinking cultivation south of the canal. In contrast to inhabitants of the canal command area, respondents north of the Boghra reported that they had not only cultivated the crop extensively, but had obtained a good harvest.⁵⁵ An additional advantage is the fact that opium from north of the Boghra, known as *Dashte Teriyak*, is considered of higher quality and has obtained higher prices than opium from the canal command area (95,000-105,000 PR/*man* compared to 80,000 to 90,000 PR/*man*).

There was an overwhelming consensus amongst those interviewed in this area that their quality of life was improving. Respondents reported that they consumed fruit and meat regularly, could afford to kill sheep for dried meat for the winter, and could either fulfil existing family marital commitments or intended to arrange the marriage of family members in the coming year, often involving bride prices of 700,000-800,000 PR. A number of respondents had purchased motorbikes during the 2011 harvest season and demand had reportedly driven the price of a motorbike from 48,000 PR to 54,000 PR following the opium harvest. A smaller number of respondents reported purchasing

54 Respondents reported that a number of villagers and Taliban were killed by an aerial bombardment in November 2010 as they met to resolve a local dispute.

55 Respondents reported that as opposed to the 2010 harvest their crop had not be affected by blight and they had lanced the crop four to six times in 2011 compared to only once or twice a year ago.

motor vehicles (350,000-400,000 PR) or “an old tractor” (200,000 PR) following the 2011 harvest. In the words of one farmer from Shen Ghazai:

The price of opium has gone up and this is the main reason for the improvement in my life. This change is because of the Taliban as the government cannot come here and we can grow poppy.

4.2 The canal command area

The canal command area is relatively resource-rich compared to the land north of the Boghra. Much of the farmland there receives year-round irrigation through a network of canals fed from the Kajaki Dam and the Helmand River. In this area, only those farmers that have settled illegally on “government land” during the conflict require tubewells and water pumps for cultivation and are limited to cropping for a single season. Landholdings are also relatively large compared to other parts of Afghanistan, despite the fragmentation of the *forma* (plots of land)⁵⁶ allocated to the original settlers. Most households own livestock for consumption and sale.⁵⁷ The history of opium poppy cultivation in the area has provided many with a means to secure a stable source of income and in some cases accumulate assets.

However, those in the canal command area have been exposed to chronic insecurity in recent years. Many of those interviewed have personally experienced acts of violence since fieldwork in the area began three years ago, with psychological and financial implications for themselves and their families. Areas such as Aqajan Kalay, Doh Bandi, Shin Kalay and both research sites in Marjah experienced a significant Taliban military presence in late 2009 and in some cases into mid-2010. Even in areas like Bolan and Qala Bost, both close to Lashkar Gah City, respondents remain at risk of violence when travelling on the roads.

In the last 18 months, there have been major military operations in the canal command area aimed at driving the insurgency out of central Helmand. The influx of significant numbers of both Afghan and international military forces has been accompanied by efforts to re-establish district-level civilian institutions in the area. The governor in particular has seen counter-narcotics as an integral part of his efforts to extend the writ of the state into rural areas. According to data from the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), the penetration of the state into these areas—especially Marjah and Nad-i-Ali—led to increasing levels of violence in the run up to the 2010-11 growing season.⁵⁸ However, it also resulted in increasing pressure on farmers to stop planting the crop in late 2010, and ultimately a renewed eradication effort in the spring of 2011.

Significant reductions in cultivation

The canal command area has seen a significant reduction in opium poppy cultivation in the 2010-11 growing season. Early reports of this reduction emerged from research conducted in November 2010⁵⁹ and were subsequently confirmed by fieldwork during the

56 The term “*forma*” is allegedly derived from the form on which the land title deed was written. See Swedish Committee for Afghanistan, “Farming Systems of Nad Ali District, Helmand Province,” 11.

57 In Nad-i-Ali, many settlers were originally allocated a plot of land or *forma* of 30 *jeribs* (Ghulam Farouq, “Socio-economic aspects of land settlement in Helmand valley, Afghanistan,” thesis submitted to the American University of Beirut, June 1975, 71). These plots have subsequently been divided over the generations.

58 Mansfield et al., “Managing Concurrent and Repeated Risks,” 30-31.

59 Mansfield et al., “Managing Concurrent and Repeated Risks.”

harvest season. The most significant reductions appear to have occurred in the research sites in Marjah District, but also in parts of Nad-i-Ali, particularly in those areas adjacent to Marjah, such as Keshal Kalay, as well as some of the sites along the Boghra Canal including Shin Kalay and Aqajan Kalay. Low levels of cultivation persist in the research sites in Nawa Barakzai and in Lashkar Gah Districts.

Respondents indicate that the primary reason for these reductions is the counter-narcotics messaging of the provincial administration supported by what is seen as a significant inflow of national and international military forces. Accompanying the troops themselves is a significant increase in security infrastructure, including more checkpoints on the main roads and military bases in the rural areas. Many of those who had reduced cultivation between the 2009-10 and 2010-11 growing seasons cited the proximity a checkpoint or military base as a reason for doing so. They associated the physical presence of this infrastructure with the government's capacity to coerce the population and enforce its counter-narcotics policy.

According to respondents, while opium poppy does persist in the 2010-11 growing season, this is largely a function of location and patronage. The more insecure or remote the area, the greater the likelihood of poppy cultivation. For example, more respondents in areas such as Khwaja Baidar, Dashte Basharan, Shersherak and Aqajan Kalay reported planting opium poppy in the 2010-11 growing season (although a number had subsequently lost their crop during the eradication campaign).

Farmers who continued to cultivate opium poppy at levels similar to the 2009-10 growing season typically had links to the local authorities, often in what they referred to as the "local police."⁶⁰ These respondents indicated that they had little to fear from the state's counter-narcotics efforts and did not have their crop destroyed during the 2011 eradication campaign. As one of them put it, "My crop is safe as I am a soldier of the local police commander."

In Nad-i-Ali District, there were also reports of local officials being complicit in sparing the crops of those with close ties with the Taliban for fear that this might prompt attacks against the police. Reports of farmers making payments to the local authorities to prevent crop destruction were far fewer in 2011 than in previous years but persisted nonetheless. In Chanjir Dashte, complaints against the "local police" were common due to allegations that they demanded payments of between 4,000 and 6,000 PR per *jerib* to deter eradication.

A shift in the balance of coercion

The government's capacity to enforce its will in the canal command area is closely associated with the influx of military forces and their operations to "clear" the Taliban from the area. There was certainly a real sense amongst respondents in the canal command area that the Taliban is not the fighting force that it was a year ago. Respondents in Nad-i-Ali and Marjah in particular referred to the fact that the Taliban is no longer in a position to directly confront the ANSF and ISAF and are now more reliant on the use of improvised explosive devices. Those interviewed in Zarghun Kalay even reported an improvement in the security situation since November 2010 and the return of some of those who had fled to Lashkar Gah to escape the fighting.

⁶⁰ The Afghan Local Police are recruited from the local area. They are uniformed, paid and armed, and officially report to the Ministry of Interior through their district authorities.

Despite reports of a reduction in the number of Taliban soldiers living in the research sites themselves, it is clear that insurgents still maintain a pervasive influence over the rural population. Most respondents believed that they could be arrested, fined or punished by the Taliban were they to openly side with the government. They felt particularly vulnerable at night, when the Taliban are allegedly free to travel through the area. There were numerous reports of people being intimidated for receiving assistance from the provincial authorities, as well as stories of local commanders imposing punishments and fines on the local population. Respondents cited the shutdown of the mobile telephone network each evening as evidence of the Taliban's continued influence in the province, and refer to businessmen in Lashkar Gah receiving threatening telephone calls as an illustration of their reach into government controlled territory.

Others cite the taxes imposed by the Taliban—including in 2011—as evidence of the insurgents' continued reach within the canal command area. They reported paying taxes on both land and crops to the Taliban, while only paying “bribes” to the government. This tax is typically calculated each year after the harvest of the winter crops and collected through *wakils* (village heads) or *mirabs* (water masters) tasked by the local Taliban commander. There apparently is little choice for farmers but to pay. As one explained: “If someone does not pay the tax, he doesn't have water.” Reports suggest that the level of payment is responsive to the economic situation of the local population and in particular the amount of opium poppy cultivated in the area. For example, in 2008, when opium poppy was grown extensively, the land tax was set at 12,000 PR/*forma*,⁶¹ compared to 8,000 PR in 2009, 6,000 PR in 2010 and only 2,000 PR in 2011.

The Taliban also allegedly continue to impose tax on agricultural crops in the canal command area with rates that vary by location. As in the areas north of the Boghra Canal, this did not (as is often reported) take the form of *ushr*, but rather a lower rate of tax—around two *khord* per *jerib* of opium in much of Nad-i-Ali and 3.5 *khord* around Gereshk. In Kopak in Nad-i-Ali District, farmers also reported paying a tax on wheat of 200 PR per *jerib* for several seasons. In Loy Bagh, however, taxation of the wheat crop appears to be a relatively recent addition to the Taliban's source of revenue.

Respondents contrasted the withdrawal of the overt military presence of the Taliban and their enduring influence over the rural population with their experience of an increased state presence. For many, direct contact with the state was limited to the ANSF and their perceived proxies the Afghan Local Police—widely resented due to their predatory behaviour and abuse of the local population.⁶²

Contact with civilian agencies was typically limited and mediated through the village elite. However, members of the community acting as interlocutors with the government, typically *wakils* or *maliks*, were often the targets of derision. These actors typically stood accused of appropriating development assistance for themselves, their families and their contacts, and not distributing it to the wider community.⁶³ They were often blamed for the poppy ban, and were alleged to have played a role in disseminating counter-narcotics messages during the 2010-11 growing season, as well as reporting farmers that

61 In this part of Nad-i-Ali, one *forma* is the equivalent of 30 *jeribs*. Over the years, this land has typically been fragmented and split between brothers or perhaps part of it may have been sold. In this case, farmers will pay a proportion of land tax according to the amount of land they own.

62 Human Rights Watch, “Just Don't Call it a Militia: Impunity, Militias and the Afghan Local Police” (New York: HRW, 2011), <http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/afghanistan0911webwcover.pdf> (accessed 17 October 2011).

63 For a detailed account of the distribution of agricultural inputs and their use in central Helmand, see Mansfield et al., “Managing Concurrent and Repeated Risks.”

ignored the ban to the local authorities. As one farmer put it, “they are the spies of the government.” In Marjah and parts of Nad-i-Ali, accusations persist that communities’ supposed representatives actually reside in Lashkar Gah due to security concerns.

Corruption among government officials was viewed as both chronic and endemic. Respondents in Marjah reported officials charging 50 percent of the assistance that was given to returnees in the form of cash payments in exchange for their signature of authorisation. The distribution of agricultural inputs was typically alleged to favour the district authorities, provincial ministry officials and local security forces, together with their contacts in rural areas. Reports of officials appropriating development assistance and selling it in the bazaar were commonplace and widely believed by the rural population.⁶⁴ It was a commonly held view that obtaining development assistance is impossible without a contact in the local authorities, and that Taliban intimidation has forced people to either conceal their receipt of government-provided agricultural inputs or find some accommodation with local commanders.

Shifting cropping patterns, falling income

Despite the Taliban’s prevailing influence, they have not been able to significantly hamper the government’s efforts to reduce opium poppy cultivation. Some might argue that this could serve to the strategic advantage of the Taliban in the absence of viable alternatives as it would fuel the population’s resentment towards the government.

When opium poppy was cultivated more extensively, a typical cropping system would combine the production of wheat and opium poppy with a small amount of alfalfa in the winter, while leaving a proportion of the land fallow (perhaps as much as 25 percent) for a spring crop of cotton, melon or watermelon. Land cultivated with alfalfa, cotton, melon and watermelon would then continue under these crops during the summer months, while land that had been planted with wheat and opium poppy would generally be replanted with maize and mung bean.

In response to the pressure to reduce opium poppy cultivation in the 2010-11 growing season, the vast majority of farmers in the canal command area appear to have reduced the amount of land under opium cultivation, maintained their alfalfa, increased the area under wheat and subsequently left more land fallow for the cultivation of spring crops. During fieldwork in May 2011, respondents in the canal command area reported that much of this fallow land was cultivated with cotton, melon or watermelon. Again, farmers anticipate planting maize and mung bean to replace wheat and opium in the summer months.

The result of this shift in cultivation has been a significant fall in household income in 2011 compared to the previous year. Returns on wheat are generally low at around 10,500-14,650 Afs/*jerib*, meaning that many farmers avoid cultivating a surplus unless pressed to reduce opium poppy cultivation. Returns on cotton are better, with prices of around 200-240 Afs/*seer* in 2010 and yields of between 90 and 130 *seer/jerib* for a spring crop, but are still not viewed as sufficient to meet family needs. Moreover, there were continued complaints about the delay in the payments made by the government cotton mill in Lashkar Gah.

There are ten people in my family. I have five jeribs of land on which I produce 500 seer of wheat. How is it possible that 500 seer of wheat is enough for a family of ten; to meet the cost of food from the market; for medicine; for clothes?

—Farmer, Zarghun Kalay, Nad-i-Ali District

64 Mansfield et al., “Managing Concurrent and Repeated Risks.”

Last year in November [2010], I sold my cotton crop to the government company in Lashkar Gah. Up to now [May 2011] I have still not received my money. I have spent 1,000 PR going to the company to request my money. Is this the right way to ban poppy?

– Farmer, Loy Bagh, Nad-i-Ali District

While watermelon and melon do come at a premium in Nad-i-Ali, the returns will still not be sufficient for households that have been compelled to abandon opium poppy altogether. For example, a farmer may get between two and four “trailers” of melon from a *jerib* of land. In 2010, each trailer would have earned 7,000 Afs, giving a gross return of between 14,000 and 28,000 Afs/*jerib*. A wholesale shift to melon and water melon within the canal command area also risks driving down prices unless there is sufficient demand from other provinces.

The sale of livestock also offers some reprieve for those that have animals. Farmers report the sale of cattle (12,000-20,000 Afs each), sheep (5,500-8,000 Afs each), goats (4,000-7,000 Afs) and dairy cows (30,000-40,000 Afs each) and indicate a growing number of sales in 2011 due to the reductions in opium poppy cultivation. However, there are clear concerns among households over the sustainability of this strategy.

Growing signs of economic distress

There are obvious signs of economic distress in the canal command area, with many farmers reporting a reduction in the quantity and quality of food they are consuming as well as delaying expenditure on healthcare. Some even reported an inability to pay for treatment leading to deaths in the family, especially during pregnancy.

Respondents also reported a growing incidence of cash loans, unpaid debts and the failure to meet payments for marriage obligations. The sale of long-term productive assets such as dairy cows and land, as well as motor vehicles and motorbikes was also far more common than during previous rounds of fieldwork in Helmand Province. Wealthier community members, some of whom have housed their sons in Lashkar Gah (at a cost of 3,000 Afs per month) so that they can receive an education, also reported withdrawing them from school and sending them in search of work.

The result is there are growing signs of resentment amongst the population, particularly in Marjah and Nad-i-Ali Districts. Much of the language used against the government was abusive, and some threatened acts of violence against government officials. Most questioned both the Islamic credentials of the government and its independence from international forces, while its ban on opium poppy production attracted particular ire:

This is not a government that can make the people's life better, it can only make them poor. The government has cut people's source of income by banning poppy. I do not support them.

–Farmer, Khwaja Baidar, Lashkar Gah District

Fuck the government. They destroyed my crop.

–Farmer, Khwaja Baidar, Lashkar Gah District

The government has taken the bread from the people. My food is much worse. I have sold my only cow as I needed the money for food. Now we don't have any milk.

– Farmer, Shersharak, Nawa Barakzai District

When we had poppy we had money for dried meat, but this is impossible now. I can no longer afford meat from the bazaar. Because of the ban on poppy, I have lost my interest in the government.

–Farmer, Shersherak, Nawa Barakzai District

If the government continues with the ban and the eradication of poppy, the government will also be eradicated.

–Farmer, Luy Bagh, Nad-i-Ali District

Who would like a government that comes to your house and takes your food from you?

– Farmer, Aynak, Nawa Barakzai District

Those most affected by the reductions in opium production are those who have settled illegally in former desert land within the command area, as is the case in Dashte Aynak, Dashte Chanjir and Dashte Basharan. Like those north of the Boghra Canal, these farmers require water pumps or tubewells to irrigate their land; without opium to finance their recurrent costs, they have been compelled to reduce the amount of land they cultivate with wheat and other crops. Some of the most pronounced signs of economic distress and the most severe criticisms of the government came from respondents in these areas:

Dont ask me about the government; don't use their name! We don't like them. They banned poppy. Maybe they will be destroyed.

–Farmer, Dashte Basharan, Lashkar Gah District

All the donkeys have come together in this government. They are bastards. Why should they care about the lives of the people?

–Farmer, Dashte Khalaj, Nawa Barakzai District

I have no interest in the government. If the government allowed people to cultivate poppy, the people would support the government, but now they oppose them.

–Farmer, Dashte Aynak, Nawa Barakzai District

With the banning of poppy a lot of people will join the Taliban and fight against the government.

–Farmer, Dashte Khalaj, Nawa Barakzai District

Resentment in the canal command area is further fuelled by the continuation of opium poppy cultivation north of the canal. Some respondents referred to the inconsistency in the government's position, while others reflected on the division and weakness within their own community they saw as allowing the government to dominate. More still referred to the support offered by the Taliban to communities north of the Boghra in general, and to farmers growing opium poppy in particular. Respondents in Nawa Barakzai District also highlighted the increase in violent incidents during the eradication campaign in 2011 and the language local Taliban commanders were using in presenting the eradication campaign in the villages. One such example is quoted here by an interviewee in Aynak:

The government is just trying to destroy the crop, threaten the people and destroy your economy. We [the Taliban] want to support the economy of the people and keep your crop safe.

Maintaining welfare

The growing anger directed at the government for its ban on opium production appears to be a common feature across the canal command area and not associated with a particular tribe or ethnic group. Those less inclined to criticise tend to be either beneficiaries of its largess, or who have maintained their living standards in the absence of opium poppy by drawing on other income sources.

People living near the urban centres of Lashkar Gah and Gereshk in areas such as Bolan, Qala Bost, Mohejerin or Sra Qala are among the least likely to have been affected by the reduction in opium production. Many of those interviewed in these areas have not grown opium since the 2007-08 growing season, moving instead into the production of high value horticulture. These areas benefit from the increased demand for fresh vegetables that has accompanied population growth in Lashkar Gah and Gereshk. The population in these areas have also seen an increase in both wage labour and trading opportunities following both an increase in the flow of development assistance and growing demand from ANSF and international forces as they have expanded their presence in the province.

Our government is very good but the Taliban do not allow them to work and improve the lives of the people.

—Farmer, Bolan, Lashkar Gah District

I am happy about my life. I can buy rice, fruit and clothes for my family.

—Farmer, Bolan, Lashkar Gah District

Without poppy my life is also good.

—Farmer, Qala Bost, Lashkar Gah District

Beyond the environs of the urban centres, the only respondents not to report a deterioration in their living standards were those with access to off-farm or nonfarm income or who had opium stored from previous years—a small minority of the total sample. A typical income source for this group was from tractor rental (8,000-10,000 Afs/month) or from a shop (400 Afs/day). However, compared to previous rounds of fieldwork an increasing number of respondents reported purchasing a *zaranj*—either to rent out for transporting agricultural goods to market (200 Afs/day), or to exploit price differentials on their own agricultural products between the farm gate and Lashkar Gah.

Ironically, for those looking to invest in other, licit income streams, further counter-narcotics efforts will likely be seen as a threat, since individuals often use the proceeds from the sale of their opium as capital for investment. For example, one respondent reported that he intended to use the money he earned from the sale of his opium to purchase an ice cream store. Were this opium to be seized, as many respondents increasingly fear, these farmers would be bereft of both on-farm and nonfarm income.

Similarly, further reductions in opium poppy cultivation will reduce sources of off-farm income available to those looking to cushion the economic impact of the opium ban in their area by working elsewhere as itinerant harvesters. In 2011, those harvesting opium north of the canal received between 9,000 and 13,000 Afs for fifteen day's work.

A more indirect but perhaps more significant risk from counter-narcotics efforts lies with the multiplier effect of further significant reductions in opium production, which is after all still the mainstay of the Helmand economy. For instance, shopkeepers in Lashkar Gah and Gereshk report that the primary customers for meat and vegetables are the farmers that continue to cultivate opium. Those trading in cloth, vegetables, wheat flour and

other food products in Gereshk are selling much of it at a premium to fellow traders in the bazaars of northern Helmand where opium poppy cultivation persists. There is thus a risk that a significant reduction in opium in these areas may also result in a contraction in the legal economy and the benefits it offers.

4.3 North and south of the canal: Diverging trends

Across much of the canal command area, the pace of the reduction in opium poppy cultivation is out of synch with efforts aimed at securing the territory and strengthening licit livelihoods. It is currently unclear whether the problem lies with an overly ambitious counter-narcotics effort, or whether assumptions about the impact of a significant and rapid increase in both military presence and aid disbursement were too optimistic. Either way, the government currently faces growing resentment in the canal command area that is only likely to increase in the run-up to the next opium poppy growing season.

The continued cultivation of opium poppy in the area north of the Boghra Canal only makes the operational and policy environment in central Helmand more challenging. The two areas present a stark contrast. In one, the population is experiencing both increasing levels of violence and falling levels of income despite the government and its international backers gaining the upper hand militarily. In the other, the insurgency dominates and the population is exposed to lower levels of violence and increasing levels of income. This is a comparison that will not be lost on many—particularly among the rural communities of central Helmand.

In the area north of the Boghra Canal, the insurgency is seen by the farming population to offer a secure environment in which they can cultivate opium poppy. These are largely atomised communities that have only settled the area in the last decade, the bulk of them in the last three to four years. Most of their members appear to have sharecropped land in the canal command area, their move north of the Boghra a response to chronic poverty and in some cases the violence associated with the military campaign in central Helmand in 2008 and 2009. Opium production has provided these households with capital to purchase land, install a tubewell and bring the desert under cultivation. Over time they have built houses, perhaps expanded their agricultural land, and accumulated assets such as motorbikes or tractors. These communities see the government as a threat to their way of life.

With high opium prices continuing into the third quarter of 2011, there is considerable pressure to return to opium cultivation in the canal command area in the 2011-12 growing season. The population there are already showing signs of economic distress, including deterioration in the quantity and quality of food consumed, postponement of health-related expenditure, withdrawal of children from school, inability to repay loans and meet marital obligations, and the sale of long-term productive assets. These responses are all increasingly common, indicating just how acute the situation has become for many farmers in the area.

The corruption and patronage perceived as characterising the delivery of security and the provision of development assistance in rural areas is further fuelling resentment toward the government and its proxies. The prospect of a second, or for some a third, consecutive season of a government-enforced opium ban in the absence of a viable source of cash income will create an increasingly fertile environment for the Taliban to exploit. While those with sufficient amounts of opium stored may be able to meet their living costs for a further season, perhaps longer, their stock is at constant risk of being seized as long as ANSF and ISAF maintain their presence in the area.

Farmers in the canal area currently have a choice of “fight” or “flight.” Undoubtedly some may decide that flight is the best option, obtain land north of the Boghra Canal and resume cultivating opium poppy. However, judging by the levels of anger felt toward the government expressed by respondents during the course of this fieldwork, it is possible that others will choose to fight, helping the Taliban re-establish itself in their communities in the run up to the next planting season in November-December 2011.

5. Conclusion

Helmand and Nangarhar present two very different pictures when it comes to the trajectories of drug production in the 2010-11 growing season. Nangarhar has seen a 265 percent increase in the level of cultivation over the past year, while in the canal command area of Helmand there have been significant reductions in the levels of cultivation, particularly in Marjah and Nad-i-Ali.

In Nangarhar, there has been a breakdown in the informal political arrangements that have both kept the province relatively secure and played a key role in reducing opium poppy cultivation. Governor Gul Aga Shirzai is now locked in dispute with key members of the ruling elite who have proven critical to the stability of the province over the last few years, a rift which is manifesting in different ways in different parts of the province. For example, in the south-western districts of Khogiani, Sherzad, Pachir Wa Agam and Hisarak, where the insurgency has maintained a foothold through manipulating deep-seated tribal divisions, there are growing signs of a more permanent AGE presence in the upper valleys. This has in turn been accompanied by increasing evidence of local opposition to both the provincial and central administration.

The situation in the southern districts bordering Pakistan is also becoming increasingly hostile to the provincial authorities in Jalalabad. In the area south of Zawa in Khogiani District, the insurgency has gained ground, consolidating its position in the Pirakhel and Zawah valleys. Government employees find it increasingly difficult to work in these areas, as well as to the south in Sherzad and Pachir Wa Agam Districts. While there are reports of infiltration by Pakistani insurgents, these are matched by claims of growing support for the insurgency among the local population. In these areas, the impact of three consecutive years of the ban on opium production has been a strong driver of support for AGEs.

While there has also been resurgence in opium poppy in the south-eastern districts of Nangarhar, it has not occurred under the protection of the insurgency. To the contrary, the resurgence of opium poppy cultivation in Achin District in the 2010-11 growing season has occurred under the protection of a rural elite supported by a group of increasingly influential provincial powerbrokers opposed to the current governor's rule.

The escalation of the land dispute in Achin and its conflation with provincial politics has helped establish conditions favourable to an increase in opium poppy cultivation in upper Achin and particular in the Mahmandi valley in the 2010-11 growing season. The planting of this year's poppy crop appears to have been partly an act of defiance by the rural elite as it looks to bolster its negotiating position with Kabul and the provincial authorities. There was certainly little evidence of any attempts by the rural elite to dissuade the population from cultivating opium poppy prior to and during the planting season in late 2010.

However, it would be wrong to present the return to opium poppy among the Mahmandi from the perspective of the rural elite alone, since such figures depend substantially on the support of the principal groups within the population. Competing *maliks* will exploit any weaknesses in the leadership of their rivals, and the perception that the incumbent is not delivering sufficient benefits to influential constituencies can shift the balance of power. There are also external forces—including the provincial government and other patrons in Kabul—that can intervene to strengthen the position of a leader they favour. Indeed, it is a commonly held view that the decision to arm Malik Niaz as part of the “Shinwari Pact” is one of the roots of the current conflict between the Alisherkhel and the Mahmandi.

Amid a land dispute that is already exacting a significant toll in lives and resources on the population, pressing farmers not to cultivate opium for a third successive year would have been an unpopular move on the part of the local elite. The flow of weapons into the area and rearming of the population also suggests that they could not have done much to slow the return of opium, even had they wished to. The sustained attack on the eradication team in the Mahmandi valley is indicative of the strength of feeling amongst the local population. The rural elite tasked with negotiating with the governor following this event did so knowing that their actions were being judged by a constituency increasingly hostile to their role in enforcing the opium ban. The eventual abandonment of the eradication in Achin despite Governor Shirzai's personal intervention highlights his increasing marginalisation in the district's politics.

The canal command area in Helmand presents a contrasting picture in terms of the trajectory of cultivation but does not offer a much brighter prognosis in terms of stability. The most obvious difference is that in central Helmand, the state has been bolstered by a significant influx of international military forces into key poppy growing areas. This has given the state enough power to coerce the population away from planting in key areas such as Marjah and Nad-i-Ali. Historic tribal and political divisions within the canal command area have further weakened the population's capacity to resist the counter-narcotics efforts of the government and its proxies.

Tactically, the insurgency was not well placed to challenge the government's counter-narcotics efforts in the face of such overwhelming force, since a full-on assault would cost too many lives. Minor skirmishes may have helped deter some eradication, but have largely been for presentational purposes in an attempt to demonstrate their concern for the interests of the rural population. Judging by the hostile responses to the government during this fieldwork, the Taliban might well have cause to celebrate the successes of this year's counter-narcotics campaign. The coping strategies that are being adopted in response to the ban are indicative of growing economic distress among the rural population, which the Taliban may be able to capitalise on as they have done in south-western Nangarhar. This loss of welfare was compounded by increasing levels of violence and insecurity in Nad-i-Ali and Marjah Districts in the run-up to the 2010-11 growing season. The insurgency has further gained this year by the persistence of cultivation north of the Boghra Canal, an area which is seen to have prospered under the Taliban's command.

This leaves the difficult question of how proceed with counter-narcotics efforts, both in the coming season and in the run-up to transition in 2014. At a time when performance indicators are becoming increasingly important, accepting a rise in the number of hectares cultivated and fewer "poppy free" provinces will be hard to absorb. No doubt there will be those who argue for more repressive measures targeted at those areas where opium poppy and the insurgency coincide. In particular, there will be calls for an aggressive eradication campaign in the area north of the Boghra Canal. After all, those that have settled in this former desert area are farming on "government land" through the installation of tubewells that are in danger of lowering the water table. Moreover, these farmers are financing this expansion of agricultural land by cultivating an "illegal" crop under the protection of an insurgent group.

However, government policy is clear—eradication should only take place where farmers have a viable alternative.⁶⁵ The decision to ignore this provision in the national drug

⁶⁵ "Eradication—the physical destruction of established poppy cultivation in the field—is a controversial and frequently misunderstood element of the Government's CN policies. In updating the National Drug Control Strategy it is important to clarify that the Government of Afghanistan's drugs control policy is not

control strategy has already proven to be a mistake in areas like Sherzad District in Nangarhar, resulting in both growing antipathy to the government and higher levels of opium poppy cultivation in the south-western districts of the province. Aggressive eradication in areas where viable alternatives are not in place— particularly in the Spinghar foothills—will only play into the hands of those who wish to create further instability. Policymakers and those on the ground would do well to learn from the lessons from the divergent areas of both Helmand and Nangarhar in the 2010-11 growing season. The focus should be on measures that will build the foundations for livelihood diversification and resilience and that strengthen the social contract between the government and the population in the medium- to long-term. Interventions focusing aggressively on eradication in the pursuit of short-term performance indicators, on the other hand, will likely strengthen the position of the insurgency in the run up to 2014.

eradication-led. However, where there are legal livelihoods, a credible threat of eradication is needed in order to incentivise the shift away from poppy cultivation.” Ministry of Counter Narcotics, “National Drug Control Strategy: An Updated Five-Year Strategy for Tackling the Illicit Drug Problem” (Kabul: MCN, 2006), 21.

Request for Feedback

AREU is very interested to hear from its research users. Whether you are a regular reader of our publications, have attended an AREU lecture or workshop, use the library, or have only just become familiar with the organisation, your opinions and feedback are valuable. They can help us deliver on our mandate as best we can by informing our approach to research and the way we communicate results.

The easiest way to provide feedback is to email areu@areu.org.af. Alternatively, you can call +93 (0)799 608 548. You are free to tell us what you like, but some potentially useful information is:

- How you engage with AREU (i.e., through publications, meetings, etc.)
- What you use AREU research for
- How you receive AREU publications
- Whether you use hard or soft copy versions
- How publications could better present information to you
- Your thoughts on our research processes or results
- Suggested areas of research
- Your favourite AREU publications or events
- What you believe we could do better
- Your field of interest, employment or study, as well as location

Recent Publications from AREU

All publications are available for download at www.areu.org.af, and many in hardcopy for free from the AREU office in Kabul.

- Oct 2011 Rethinking Rural Poverty in Afghanistan, by Paula Kantor and Adam Pain
- Oct 2011 Legacies of Conflict: Healing Complexes and Moving Forwards in Ghazni Province, by Emily Winterbotham
- Oct 2011 Legacies of Conflict: Healing Complexes and Moving Forwards in Bamiyan Province, by Emily Winterbotham
- Oct 2011 Legacies of Conflict: Healing Complexes and Moving Forwards in Kabul Province, by Emily Winterbotham
- Oct 2011 Legacies of Conflict: Healing Complexes and Moving Forwards in Ghazni Province, by Emily Winterbotham
- Oct 2011 Wartime Suffering: Patterns of Violations in Afghanistan, by Emily Winterbotham
- August 2011 Managing Concurrent and Repeated Risks: Explaining the Reductions in Opium Production in Central Helmand between 2008 and 2011, by David Mansfield, ALCIS and OSDR
- August 2011 Governance and Representation in the Afghan Urban Transition, by Tommaso Giovacchini
- July 2011 The Impact of Microfinance Programmes on Women's Lives: A Case Study in Kabul Province, by Sogol Zand
- July 2011 Afghanistan Research Newsletter 30
- July 2011 District Councils: The Missing Middle of Local Governance, notes on a roundtable with Douglas Saltmarshe and Abhilash Medhi
- July 2011 #Local Governance for Local Needs: Key Findings and Policy Options for Afghanistan, by Douglas Saltmarshe and Abhilash Medhi
- July 2011 Opium Poppy Strikes Back: The 2011 Return of Opium to Balkh and Badakhshan Provinces, by Adam Pain
- June 2011 Podcast: Local Government is Failing to Meet Local Needs
- June 2011 Local Governance in Afghanistan: A View from the Ground, by Douglas Saltmarshe and Abhilash Medhi
- June 2011 Proceedings of an AREU Roundtable Discussion on Planning New Afghan Cities, by Tommaso Giovacchini
- May 2011 Practicing Democracy in Afghanistan: Key Findings on Perceptions, Parliament and Elections, by Oliver Lough

Indicates that the publication or a summary is or will be available in Dari and/or Pashto.

The Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) is an independent research institute based in Kabul. AREU's mission is to inform and influence policy and practice through conducting high-quality, policy-relevant research and actively disseminating the results, and to promote a culture of research and learning. To achieve its mission AREU engages with policymakers, civil society, researchers and students to promote their use of AREU's research and its library, to strengthen their research capacity, and to create opportunities for analysis, reflection and debate.

All AREU publications are available for download at www.areu.org.af and many in hardcopy from the AREU office:

Flower Street (corner of Street 2), Shahr-i-Naw, Kabul
phone: +93 (0)799 608 548 website: www.areu.org.af email: publications@areu.org.af