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Afghanistan's Opportunity: Ending Hunger Through Self-Sustained Economic Cycles

Hunger is more than a cause for charity; it is a desolate human condition that cannot be fixed without large-scale collaboration. Many generously give time and funds to organizations dedicated to ending hunger by feeding the masses. While charitable giving is vital to immediate relief, it is not the complete long-term answer. Inevitably, short-term charities become too small, food runs out, and people fall starving through the cracks. One of the most promising potential solutions to end hunger lies in government itself. Designed to protect and organize its people, state and local governments of all nations must fully exert themselves to provide citizens with the ability to feed themselves. Government has the unique ability to fix and enhance areas of life that charities and humanitarian organizations do not have the manpower or authority to change. In the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, nutritional instability is the result of various factors (including economic instability, crippled business, and unequal human rights), some of which can be alleviated through policy reform and the creation of new programs by the Afghan government. Aided by humanitarian relief, a nation's own government is in the best position to construct and enforce action plans to end hunger today and in the foreseeable future. Afghan food security can be improved by a complex set of solutions throughout different areas of the economy, public life, and political relations. With some assistance, Afghanistan's own government can use a variety of strategies to utilize the country's assets and create a sustainable future.

Crippled by years of war and instability, the hunger crisis in Afghanistan is caused by a plethora of factors. Currently ranked 169 out of 188 countries in terms of human development ("Human Development Reports: Afghanistan."), situations are desperate for thousands of Afghans. Much of the rural population lacks potable water, directly correlating to high rates of malnutrition and diarrhea ("42pc of Afghans Lack Access to Clean Drinking Water."). Hospitals are scarce in large, security-compromised regions which cover up to 30% of Afghanistan's geographic location, and thousands of people are without immediate medical care. (*Country Cooperation Strategy at a Glance: Afghanistan*). Refugees freeze without aide in slums, and their bodies are used as human shields ("Afghans Fleeing War Find Misery in Urban Slums."). It is difficult to comprehend every plight faced by Afghan citizens, and nearly impossible to fix every problem from an external position. Non-government organizations may be well-intended, but often lack the personal understanding of, or the political power to fix, the most vital issues that a nation's own government may have immediate access to. For these reasons a nation's own policies and governance have the most ideal opportunity to take on hunger.

It is easy to understand the exclusive opportunities that government has to address all of these issues and more. Given direct access to thousands of struggling people who understand firsthand issues of hunger and instability, the government has potential to organize task forces and funds into the most desperate situations with a unique perspective; the only factors hindering such developments are the government's own regulation, fiscal limitations, and the general public. Addressing these three issues in order to build up government is much more manageable than tackling every contributing factor to a nation's hunger situation. However, Afghanistan's government and national status has been set back tens of years through warfare. Emerging from such chaotic times, portions of the general public - specifically women - must be brought up to an equal status of men in order to fully maximize any government improvements in the economy and food security.

The dismal status of women's rights in Afghanistan has stunted generations of female leaders, though they continue to comprise a large number of household heads and caretakers. Gender inequality

perpetuates from the Taliban era, hindering millions of women throughout the nation. When the Taliban usurped control in 1996, women's rights deteriorated rapidly, and progress has remained stagnant for years. During the Taliban era, women and girls were denied access to public life, transportation, and certain clothing. In the post-Taliban era, women's conditions have remained desolate, as they constitute the majority of people seeking financial aid (Wali). According to Sima Wali, "Because of the disproportionate death toll in men during the war against the Soviet Union, it is women who are now charged with taking care of the approximately one million orphaned children, the elderly, and the handicapped--though they are, themselves, traumatized, malnourished, and undersupported". Historically and presently, women have comprised a large section of the impoverished. Tragically, many of these female breadwinners are not able to do legitimate, documented work. Many work unofficially in rural sectors, while others are forced to work from home. Female artisans struggle to make a living while manufacturing domestically, though it is often their only choice (USAID). It is vital for women to be able to work outside the home and make a decent income if they so choose. However, female working conditions must first be safe, stable, and socially acceptable. Luckily, women's rights organizations have already gained momentum surrounding women's legal status. Though progress has been difficult, activists must continue to believe in, and fight for, the equal rights that are so necessary for growing economic and nutritional security.

Due to archaic values and practices, reactionary politicians, and a tumultuous national history, any women's rights progress has been an uphill battle. According to activist Palwasha Hassan, "When it comes to women's issues, everything in Afghanistan is political" (Latifi). This could not be more true of the current limbo surrounding a breakthrough gender equality law and policy.

Legal reform is vital to the progression of women's rights; two prominent measures -the Elimination of Violence against Women law (EVAW) and UN Security Resolution 1325- have already been proposed and must be pushed through political opposition to ensure the safety and representation of women throughout Afghanistan. The EVAW has been controversial between Afghanistan's parliament members and activists. Shot down by conservative lawmakers in 2013 for being "un-Islamic", the law includes sections prohibiting child or forced marriage and *baad*, the practice of trading wives or daughters to resolve disagreements. The law would also free rape survivors from charges of adultery and fornication (Associated Press). The law currently stands weakly under directive of former president Hamid Karzai, but proponents are disconcerted. Many activists are concerned about the law's current state. "[One activist is] worried that a presidential decree lacking the 'prestige' of parliamentary approval could be overturned by Karzai's successor in 2014" (Latifi). The law remains largely unenforced, as local officials favor mediation instead of official reporting and prosecution, which women often have no choice but to accept. The majority of gender-based violence remains unreported (*Afghanistan: Events of 2017*). There is, however, an opportunity to increase pressure for equal-rights legal reform through pending Resolution 1325.

UN Security Resolution 1325 provides the perfect segue for increased women's activism, putting Afghanistan's officials in the hot seat for gender reform. Implementation of the Resolution would enable women to be involved in discussions surrounding peace and well-being, while obligating the government to take extraneous measures to ensure safety for women and girls. (This particular inclusion hopefully culminating in a House ratification of EVAW. While delayed indefinitely as of 2017, the Resolution calls for equal participation of women in peacekeeping and safety issues (*Afghanistan: Events of 2017*). Specifically, it "reaffirms the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, peace negotiations, peace-building, peacekeeping, humanitarian response... and stresses the importance of their equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security" (Office of the Special Advisor on Gender). Most importantly, the resolution pushes for all involved nations to take further precautions to protect women and girls from gender-based violence, including sexual assault and armed conflict. If implemented, this particular detail could increase pressure

for Afghanistan's parliament to ratify the EVAW to reduce such violence and remain in ordinance with Resolution 1325. Unfortunately, the policy was indefinitely delayed in 2017, though it has been promised to be adopted (*Afghanistan: Events of 2017*).

The only way to broaden women's rights is for the people of Afghanistan, with help from women's rights organizations, to hold the government accountable for past promises, including the adoption of Resolution 1325. Women's organizations have been actively seeking ways to increase gender equality in Afghanistan. Women for Women International, for instance, provides yearlong training programs for women and girls, and the programs have produced significant improvements. Graduates from this particular organization boast impressive strides in quality of life, including nearly doubled daily income and involvement in domestic financial decisions. Most excitingly, almost 100% of graduates report sharing information about their personal rights with fellow women ("Afghanistan" Women for Women International). Women for Women also provides training programs for Afghan men.

"Women's empowerment requires a widespread social change that involves both men and women. The Women for Women International – Afghanistan team has successfully developed programming to engage men as allies in women's empowerment by improving their knowledge about health, social, and economic issues that can negatively affect women. Over 4,700 male leaders have participated to date" ("Afghanistan" Women for Women International).

As men are trained proponents of gender equality and educated of its benefits, women are given the education and fiscal ability to provide for themselves. As this continues, changing attitudes will spread like wildfire when more people become aware of women's abilities and rights.

Other organizations, such as UN Women, have united to give women much-needed working skills. In areas where women's education is not only restricted but completely banned, teachers and women are speaking out against archaic norms. As these brave young students break free of a system designed to keep them down and pursue higher schooling, more and more families are allowing their girls to follow the example and continue their education ("Unlocking the Potential of Afghan Women"). Numerous graduated women have enrolled in UN Women's training internships to give them the skills and connections to be successful in the workplace. According to female graduate Hassini Saifi, "The biggest problem is the negative perceptions and traditions against women that prevent them from going out, getting an education or work. I know many girls who could not pass these barriers because their fathers, brothers or husbands did not let them," ("Unlocking the Potential of Afghan Women"). Programs such as these are giving women the practical skills and confidence to break stereotypes and change these detrimental perspectives of working women. When women break old norms and emerge with an education they were told was forbidden into the working world, they set the example for a younger generation. With newfound skills and rights, women and men from any programs such as Women for Women or UN Women be able to recognize and fight against gender inequality in every aspect of life, from the work force to the home front. This growing social tide has the capability to change coming generations and stabilize Afghanistan's social and economic landscape in favor of a renewable future.

Afghanistan's economy is ready for expansion, and, liberated by rule-changing laws and resolutions, countless women will be able to rush to work in the fields, mines, and businesses. Immediately following ratification of both the EVAW and UN Resolution 1325, the economy must be prepared and strong enough to welcome waves of new, able women.

The majority of Afghanistan's population is supported through pastoralism, mining, and agriculture; however, a large opium industry employs a vast number of farmers and drains the Afghan economy of necessary farmland. In order to create a sustainable economy, the illegal drug trade must be shut down to create legal revenue and establish sustainable economic cycles. This proves a difficult situation, as many

farmers choose to produce opium due to the high selling price, simply to meet their families' needs. According to an article published through the Culturegrams database, "For farmers, illicit poppy production is more lucrative than wheat and other food crops. This creates a shortage of locally-produced grain and food crops, which necessitates additional food imports, thus compounding Afghanistan's economic problems" ("Afghanistan: Economy"). Besides the fact that opium is unregulated, illegal, and provides the main source of income for terrorist organizations (UN Security Council), the dangerous crop has increased the market price of food by limiting farmland. If the drug industry is shut down, money must be produced in other areas of the growing economy. New opportunities for reform and expansion occur in both the mining and agricultural industries. For instance, liquidization of extensive lithium deposits and the development of a thriving saffron industry would enable the country's economy to grow despite reduction of its lucrative, while unregulated, drug industry.

Changes or action plans to reduce hunger must be intentional and focused. The complex issue of hunger requires an intricate set of solutions to address a specific country's strengths and weaknesses. It is most effective to view hunger as the product of various hindrances facing citizens and government; not an independent issue that can be solved by simply purchasing food. Government programs to reduce food insecurity in Afghanistan may be designed to work at different levels of the working nation. Three of these most critical issues include economic expansion and growth, legislative action in favor of gender equality, and immediate relief of Afghanistan's most pressing issues through concentrated humanitarian aid.

The creation of self-sustained economic loops through government action provides one of the most promising ways to concentrate efforts to benefit the entire economy. These efforts would focus on cash flow between the free market and Afghan government or other organization, exchanged in the forms of taxes, insurance, or simple revenue and payments. The end goal in these programs is to localize and strengthen both the economy and the government while fixing gaps in the economic cycle. A bolstered government and economy would enable countless individuals to meet their nutritional needs thanks to an increase in jobs and cash flow.

A source of initial revenue must be provided before redesigning and streamlining the economy, and Afghanistan's mining sector may be the answer. After all, it is impossible to circulate money that doesn't exist into the economy. Afghanistan's promising mineral reserves are more than able to provide. Beneath Afghanistan's war-torn surface is nearly one trillion dollars of untouched mineral deposits. Afghanistan sits atop a literal goldmine of lithium, copper, precious and industrial metals - so large, in fact, that it could permanently alter the economy and provide enough jobs to detract from warfare (Risen). The potential is so great that US Pentagon memos have claimed that Afghanistan may someday become the "Saudi Arabia of lithium" (Risen). Funds needed to kickstart the mining industry would be relatively easy to coordinate when sought after by Afghanistan's government. It has already been mentioned that the World Bank has poured billions into the sustainable agriculture ("Afghanistan Overview"), but millions from the International Finance Corporation have also been given to development in the private sector ("IFC Encourages Economic Development in Afghanistan"). All it would take is a few agreements and diplomatic meetings with foreign officials before ground may be broken on a growing mining industry using any of these funds.

Relations with foreign businesses or other countries may also be achieved through sale or shares agreements. In the today's cybergeneration, developers have already expressed interest in Afghanistan's wealth of battery-precious lithium. According to the New York Times, "The potential is so great that officials and executives in the industry believe it could attract heavy investment even before mines are profitable" (Risen). It is clear that the mining industry has enormous potential, and investors will be ready to get their hands on the lithium before turning out a profit. After attracting investors, the Republic of Afghanistan must find a way to divide its overflowing mineral resources in a manner that maximizes

worker conditions, strengthens the economy, and consequently reduces hunger by providing jobs for and protecting workers.

The most effective way to access these minerals and provide optimum economic benefits would be to divide mining area between the Afghan government or domestic businesses, and leasing the rest to foreign mining companies. This would not only create competition and wage regulation between companies, but would also provide immediate revenue for the government via taxes which can be used in other sectors, including agriculture. Business relations with foreign companies would also work to strengthen diplomatic connections with other areas of the world, as well as potentially improving Afghanistan's international reputation. All mining companies would offer jobs to local citizens and increase cash flow into the economy. The relationship between the foreign, domestic, and government companies would create competition and reduce worker exploitation, as all would be monitored by independent organizations to ensure decent conditions and wages. The formation of miners' unions would further check big business from exploiting workers while promoting capitalism.

As soon as this first step of economic expansion provides the government with much-needed funds, the drug industry must be tackled. While upfront physical confrontation of the heroine industry sounds simplest and most effective, Afghanistan does not need a war on drugs adding its problems. There is enough military action and violence as is. Instead, more tactful methods may be used, such as the strong control of exports and the rapid increased of the saffron industry.

All regulation, government, and policy changes must be taken with the end goal of eliminating the crutch of drug money to the Afghan economy. In the absence of government authority, the opium industry is thriving and continues to be the main source of funds to both military insurgents and terrorist organizations (UN Security Council). Elimination of the opium trade must be conducted gradually, as the government will have to wean off funds that currently provide 30% of Afghanistan's GDP ("Afghanistan: Economy"). Since opium is such a massive source of wealth for the Afghan economy, there must be another source of income to gradually wean the population off of drug money and into a legal, promising future. But what crop could possibly be sustained in Afghanistan's dusty plains that could rival the selling price of heroine? The economic vacuum in the wake of drug reduction leaves need for a new, legal cash crop, and the answer is saffron.

As mentioned above, a key issue in any opium removal program is the economic vacuum created by reducing Afghanistan's lucrative drug trade. One solution is a new, legal cash crop to replace poppies and prevent an internal economic collapse.

Saffron, the ultra-luxe red spice with soaring global demand, is the perfect opium substitute due to a variety of factors including Afghanistan's climate and spice reputation, consumer demand, and the spice's ability to employ both men and women in harvest efforts. Moreover, a saffron-opium turnover is not a new idea. According to Reuters.com, the high end spice has been used in the past as a growing alternative to illegal poppies. "Saffron is the most expensive spice in the world... and has long been seen as an alternative crop to opium poppies for poor farmers in a country struggling with the legacy of decades of war and lawlessness" (Razayee).

Evidence already reaffirms saffron's future and present role in poppy reduction. As thousands of farmers in Afghanistan's Herat region have produced saffron, United Nations numbers indicate that opium growth is down. (Razayee) This is not a coincidence. Expansion of the spice industry has proven to loosen the opium foothold. Farmers recognize the impact of a sustainable, legal crop to a budding generation. According to Afghan landowner Gul Ahmad, "Saffron is better than poppy because poppy cultivation caused negative impacts on society and the young generation," he said. "Saffron is a legal business and it

produces a good income” (Razayee). A growing number of open-minded and future-oriented farmers such as Ahmad are ready to work with spice sellers and corporations for a brighter economic and social future.

Farmers understand the economic and social impact of this sort of crop change; many are ready and willing to work with spice sellers at the first semblance of permanence and profit. Rumi Spice, a startup formed by US military veterans and Ivy league specialists, claims that farmers were skeptical of dealing with their company at first, but “once they started seeing we could really sell the product, the farmers started knocking on our doors” (McConnon). The company has had tremendous success. Rumi Spice now deals with over 80 growers and employs upwards of 1900 women ("Rumi Spice: About Us"). Its products have risen to the top shelves of luxury food stores and restaurants, and demonstrate the profitable business opportunities for both saffron farmers and spice companies.

Coordinated funds from external organizations would provide the needed boost to kickstart Afghanistan’s saffron industry. Organizations such as the World Bank have contributed billions to the cause of renewable crops. “To date, the World Bank has committed more than \$3.85 billion for development projects. The Bank-administered Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund has raised more than \$10.3 billion” (“Afghanistan Overview”). Industrial production may be drastically increased if these billions of dollars given generously by the World Bank and other organizations are concentrated into specific sectors - such as saffron- with the help of a government action team.

Despite a lucrative future for saffron farmers, natural disasters have caused strife to generations of agriculturalists; while there is no way of preventing or eliminating them, a form of insurance may create a mutually beneficial economic flow between farmers and the central government using funds from the mining and saffron sectors. Due to years of warfare, environmental damage, and harsh landscape by nature, Afghan farmers have been subject to intense, recurring natural disaster. These widespread and recurring afflictions are detrimental to Afghanistan’s agricultural development and food access (“Afghanistan” World Food Program). In order to provide security for farmers against these disasters, government-organized insurance agencies would be established with mining revenue. Local farms would be evaluated by government officials, and farmers would have the option of purchasing insurance through monthly or yearly payments. In the event of natural disaster, the government would buffer farmers’ losses. Both parties would profit: the government through insurance payments, and farmers through insurance coverage. Federally backed insurance would provide much needed support for farmers in the face of intense natural disaster. Yet women, who make up a large number of farm workers and harvesters, have faced even more daunting challenges than hail or storms or fire. Any ability that economic loops have to boost industry and food security can be magnified by empowering Afghanistan’s greatest human asset: its women.

As conditions improve for women across the country (thanks to momentum gained by activists and women’s organizations) the workforce will grow, expanding the base for a positive economic loop. The preceding action plan and report on women’s rights plan are designed to slowly strengthen the economy through expanded industry and workforce potential, while reducing the drug trade in order to produce more food domestically and close holes in the economic cycle. These are long-term plans for economic growth reducing food insecurity, mainly focused on internal reform designed to create a self-sufficient government. This is extremely beneficial to the economy and state of poverty in years ahead, but industries take time to get started. Human rights and de facto prejudices take time to improve. A sustainable economy needs time to get on its feet, and action must be taken to provide immediate relief to citizens before and during industrial expansion.

A new association for organization of international humanitarian efforts must be created in order for immediate relief to be effective and focused, maximizing improvements through government coordination. Past humanitarian efforts have been less effective than hoped due to lack of coordination

among organizations and topic, as admitted by the UN Security Council in a 2008 press release in which the global efforts in Afghanistan were described as "...a complex regional environment... national interests in Afghanistan sometimes pursued at the expense of an effort to support stability in a coordinated manner. The international community, while committed and generous, had too often been insufficiently united on key policy issues. The United Nations bore its own share of responsibility for deficiencies in international coordination." (challenges in Afghanistan). There is no lack of organizations offering immediate relief to third-world countries, but coordination among these organizations can be difficult to accomplish. External organizations may often be side tracked because of personal agendas. In order to maximize humanitarian efforts, there must be focus on specific issues in which Afghanistan needs the most assistance. A panel of Afghan citizens may be critical to fixing this problem. This last reform consists of a diversely-represented team of government influentials dedicated to organization of international efforts.

This type of government team would be able to highlight Afghanistan's most dire people groups and coordinate funds, organizations, and individuals accordingly. Such a group of people must be established independently of other government branches, without direct influence on the political or economic landscape of Afghanistan. This exclusivity would work to reduce corruption in a government organization dedicated to immediate humanitarian relief and focus. Officials would be appointed from universities and communities throughout the country by an electoral college, allowing anyone who wished to run for a position the right to do so. Diversity quotas must be met in order to create a vast canvass of ideas and knowledge of issues affecting minorities and women. Ethnicity remains a sensitive and influential issue in Afghanistan. In an interview conducted through ProQuest and Brigham Young University, Afghan woman Farah testified to the importance of ethnic associations to in her nation. "Ethnic identity is an important part of every Afghan's life. It determines numerous advantages and disadvantages one has in life in Afghanistan" (Farah). It is imperative to represent all creeds and colors, as well as gender. Women's socioeconomic stance would provide an invaluable view on many issued. Once established, this organization would have the power to independently coordinate humanitarian efforts, appeal to other areas of government on behalf of non-government philanthropic organizations, and provide poverty reports based on observations. This gives a face and voice to the needy across all demographics. The team would work with newly-established community action teams throughout the country, quickly providing aid to local communities and bypassing political tape.

Any government has the duty to ensure food security to all its citizens- provided that they are willing to work. This lack of work ethic and incentive is no problem in Afghanistan. Countless people labor tirelessly every day to provide for themselves and their children in the fields, in the mines, and in their meagre homes. Steps have already been taken on a long road to economic recovery for the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, but there is much work ahead. One thing is for certain, however. The grit of the Afghan people will be completely necessary in coming days. Survivors of numerous political revolts, a communist regime, civil war, and Taliban control and terrorism, citizens of Afghanistan have proven to be tough. Reforms in their own government will bring about more economic stability and equality, providing easier access to money and food. However, these people are still left with a great task: to keep working through day-to-day life in a fragile and recovering nation, never to be content with their circumstances, to continually raise their voice and call for reformation. Nevertheless they are not alone, for it is one of the great endeavours of the modern era that those of us in first-world countries should share our wealth and prosperity with the rest of the world. It is a responsibility of the human race that no one in any corner of the earth should be unable to work and meet their basic physical needs. We can help all nations rise and join the prosperity of the modern democratic world. Together.

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