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Afghanistan, Factor 20: Farm to Market

Afghanistan: Building the Roads to a Strong and Stable Economy

Introduction

Afghanistan, a bustling country of around 32,000,000 people, has experienced many military conflicts since its establishment in 1747 by Ahmad Shah Durrānī (Encyclopedia Britannica). In regard to the country's current state of affairs, the Russian invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and subsequent American funding of anti-Soviet forces such as the Taliban was the most influential. Once the Soviets left the region in 1989, however, those very organizations once funded by the United States took control of the country. The Taliban, whose main objective was to reestablish order through the implementation Islamic Law, was at the forefront of this scramble for power. Under the rule of the Taliban, Afghanistan witnessed unparalleled reductions of women's rights, as well as opportunities for both genders. "In 2001 no girls attended formal schools and there were only one million boys enrolled" (BBC). Even with the many cases of Taliban militants violating basic human rights, it wasn't until the nations of the West decided that Afghanistan had become a base for terrorist organizations that they decided to intervene. "The Taliban was ousted from power in December 2001 by the U.S. military and Afghani opposition forces in response to the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the U.S." (CBS). Even with these violent shifts of power that have resulted in the impoverishment of millions of Afghans, there are actions that Afghanistan can take to once again provide the hope of prosperity to its people.

Afghanistan Lifestyle

Before delving into the problems facing Afghanistan, it is important to first describe one of the most important institutions in Afghan culture, the family. The Socio-demographic and Economic Survey (SDES) "recorded 49.6 thousand households, an average household size of 7.4 persons, slightly higher than the average at the national level (7.3 persons)" (UNFPA Afghanistan). Along with these findings, the SDES found that many Afghan families are living in very harsh conditions. "Households used animal dung for heating and cooking, and solar power for electricity. Houses in Bamiyan Province were mostly made of wood for the roof (87.8% of households), with almost all floors made of mud (96.1%), and walls constructed with mud/dirt bricks (81.7%)" (UNFPA Afghanistan). Apart from size and living conditions, another important aspect of family life in Afghanistan includes its patriarchal structure. "The male head of the household will, at least nominally, make all major decisions regarding the woman's life: whether she gets to go to school as a girl, whom she marries and even whether or not a pregnant woman is allowed to seek professional medical help" (Norwegian Afghanistan Committee). The influences of patriarchy can be seen in virtually every aspect of Afghanistan's culture, including the education system. According to the CIA World Factbook, while the average school life expectancy of a male student is eleven years, female students only attend school an average of seven years. Additionally, of the five million children deprived of an education, over three million are girls.

Another major aspect of life in Afghanistan includes the average diet. While Afghanistan does boast a variety of traditional dishes, including Qabli Pukau, Mantu, and Lamb Kebab, most people in Afghanistan would find themselves fortunate to have a consistent source of food. "Up to 70 per cent of Afghans are food insecure, according to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, and high food prices have recently pushed millions into high-risk insecurity" (Rural Poverty Portal). Another staggering statistic relating to Afghan food security includes that approximately 50% of children aged five or under suffer from chronic malnutrition. Similarly, statistics pertaining to health care demonstrate how underdeveloped Afghanistan truly is. According to the CIA World Factbook, the physician density in Afghanistan (number of physicians to population) is .19 physicians/1,000 population, and the hospital bed density

(number of beds to population) is .4 beds/1,000 population. By comparison, the United States has a physician density of 2.45 physicians/1,000 population and a hospital bed density of 2.9 beds/1,000 population. While there is no global consensus as to what the hospital bed density should be (as the number of people that are being hospitalized varies greatly between nations), the “World Health Organization estimates that fewer than 2.3 health workers (physicians, nurses, and midwives only) per 1,000 would be insufficient to achieve coverage of primary healthcare needs.” With such poor access to healthcare professionals, it is of no surprise that the Afghanistan’s life expectancy is merely 50.49 years, ranking it 220th in the world.

Typical Afghan Farm

Given the fact that 78.6% of Afghanistan’s total labor force is employed in agriculture, it is important to understand how these farmers contribute to the country’s economy. Today, farmers are limited by a law passed in May 1987 to a 45 acre plot of land (a significantly larger plot than was allowed by a law passed in 1978, which limited individual holdings to 15 acres). What is grown by an Afghan farmer on his land largely depends on the area of Afghanistan in which he farms. “The areas around Kandahar, Herat, and the broad Kabul plain yield fruits of many kinds. The northern regions from Takhar...Badghis...Herat and Helmand...produce cotton. Corn is grown extensively in [the] Paktia and Nangarhar provinces, and rice mainly in [the] Kunduz, Baghlan, and Laghman provinces” (Encyclopedia of the Nations). While Afghanistan does produce wheat, barley, corn, rice, potatoes, and cotton, one of the most infamous agricultural products of Afghanistan is opium. “Opium trafficking has been estimated to be one-fifth as large as Afghanistan’s legitimate gross domestic product, making it an \$8 billion-a-year business, based on 2013 figures” (The New York Times). While most farmers understand the dangers and negative consequences that come with the cultivation of opium, one man’s story explains why they are willing to take the risk. “His family grows about 150 pounds and makes about \$9,000 a year, which is four times what they can make from any other crop” (NPR).

While it is important to understand what the farmers of Afghanistan are growing, it is equally important to understand how those farmers are creating their agricultural products. As one might assume when learning of the region’s dire economic, social, and political troubles, farmers rely on fairly rudimentary practices in comparison to what has been developed. “Think back to what your parents and grandparents did before there was refrigeration and when you plowed fields with an animal,” says Nielsen, who helped organize the Wisconsin National Guard unit’s agriculture training program” (Journal Sentinel). Another part of farming in Afghanistan that is important to understand includes the irrigation system, which involves terrace farming. “When it comes to irrigation some farmers have adopted more modern irrigation techniques, but most fields are irrigated with the traditional way here by flooding the entire field....The fields are terraced, so once you flood one field, you dig a hole in the berm surrounding it, then flood the lower field” (Journal Sentinel).

Barriers Facing the Typical Family

Today, Afghanistan faces significant barriers to its development of agricultural productivity, living wages, and nation-wide access to food markets and adequate nutrition. To begin with, one major obstacle that prevents Afghanistan from reaching higher levels of agricultural production as well as developing more sustainable living wages includes the low prices offered on agricultural foodstuffs. As put by one Afghan farmer, “We can’t export [our crops] and get a good price for them. We can’t even sustain our families” (NPR). As previously discussed, this failure to obtain good prices on crops leads many Afghan farmers to produce opium which, while more lucrative, fails to address the issue of food security and production in Afghanistan. Another obstacle that prevents Afghanistan from achieving perhaps its most promising solution to agricultural and economic woes includes an incredibly poor system of infrastructure. “Lack of infrastructure has hobbled Afghan development. Without electricity, businesses could not operate machinery. Households had no running water for drinking, cooking and cleaning, and absence of clean drinking water posed a major-health challenge. Underdeveloped roads hampered

movement of goods to domestic and international markets, and isolated villages from basic government services, even police or military protection” (USAID). Without the infrastructure to provide access to international markets, not only are rural farmers unable to effectively transport their goods, but Afghanistan’s incredible mineral wealth is also being poorly utilized. Take, for example, the region known as Kalu Valley, where “Before mining can actually begin, there is a need for a power plant, a smelter, and a road to bring the ore down the pristine red-rock ravines” (New York Times).

Farm to Market: Infrastructure

As described earlier, one of Afghanistan prime issues relates to the nation’s lack of proper infrastructure. One very apparent restriction that has come about as the result of inadequate infrastructure can be seen in the country’s emerald mining business. “The Afghan emerald is renowned as the best in terms of quality. The Afghan stone is one of the most crystalline, one of the purest. The problem is extraction. It leads to this: stones that are completely smashed up” (Journeyman Pictures). This method that is described involves the use of home-made bombs, which are not only dangerous to those working the mines, but also threaten the quality of the emeralds. “Using this method of extraction, accidents are frequent, and the nearest clinic is more than four hours away on foot. The explosives also damage the stones. An estimated 75% of the emerald’s value is lost in the blast” (Journeyman Pictures). While the introduction of proper infrastructure could provide Afghanistan with billions of dollars in profits, the lack of such infrastructure greatly limits the potential profits. In the end, the main victims of this system are the miners, who have devoted themselves to creating for their family a better life. “In order to improve our quality of life, we have to work in very harsh conditions for a pitiful wage. But if we find emeralds, we could change our lives completely. These stones are so valuable that we accept these working conditions. Once we earn some money, we will finally be able to send our children to school in order to educate them. And if we earn lots of money, we can start up a business. For this reason, it’s very difficult to give up the work in the mountains” (Journeyman Pictures). For farmers, the situation is quite similar. Many farmers find the value of their crops decrease significantly as a result of spoilage over long routes to markets. While efforts have been taken to improve this situation, there still remains much to be done. “Rehabilitated Roads decrease farm-to-market travel times resulting in less produce spoiled en route. Irrigation projects provide rural communities with more farmable land. And both programs provide thousands of Afghans with jobs and income” (USAID). Returning once again to the issue of opium production, a farmer faced with spoilage and poverty will find that producing this illegal substance is not only more lucrative, but more sensible a risk, for “Unlike most crops, opium does not spoil. If it is properly encased in plastic, it will last for years” (Afghanistan: The Perfect Failure). As it would logically follow, a country of farmers increasingly unwilling or unable to produce foodstuffs will only delay the introduction of sustainability to the region.

How Other Issues Relate to Infrastructure

After having discussed the ways that opium and infrastructure will each play a role in the development of Afghanistan’s economy (thus greatly impacting the issue of food security), it is important to understand how the two issues relate. As established earlier, the mass production of opium has largely come about as a result of the prevailing poverty found throughout the nation. With few options provided to them, farmers often turn to growing opium as a way to provide a better life for their families. “We understand that opium is bad....All drugs are bad. But, it’s difficult for us seeing a neighbor with a new car when we are riding bicycles. So, we have to do this to have a better life” (NPR). As one might recall, a man working in the mines shared a similar story of the desire to make for himself and his family a better life so as to “improve our quality of life” (Journeyman Pictures). Indeed, both opium farmers and emerald miners seem to share the common belief that no matter how difficult or dangerous the path to success appears to be, the idea of improving one’s life is well worth the risk.

Apart from being related in terms of those who are involved in their development, issues tied to infrastructure and opium development are related because they both depend on the economic situation of

the country. For example, while infrastructure will develop with a growing economy and decay in declining economy, opium growth will increase as fewer opportunities are offered to farmers and decrease as more reasonable prices are offered for various foodstuffs.

Solution

With an understanding of some of the most important issues surrounding Afghanistan's economic problems, it becomes possible to create a plan of action that will enable the country's people to realize the continuously elusive dream of food security. To begin this process, Afghanistan will need to develop its weak infrastructural system so that it will be able to support the economic changes which will be required to develop. Apart from stimulating industries, increased infrastructure investment will create immediate jobs in construction. The USAID program in Afghanistan has already seen "Over 230,000 labor days utilized for road construction and irrigation projects-\$2.2 million in wages paid to local labor" (USAID). Along with that impressive statistic, USAID also boasts such accomplishments as repairing "110 kilometers of rural farm-to-market roads...210 irrigation structures and 300 kilometers of canals," training "275 Afghans...in canal maintenance," and investing "more than \$2 billion on the construction and rehabilitation of more than 2,000 kilometers (km) of roads, including Afghanistan's Ring Road, which connects the country's five major cities: Herat, Kabul, Kandahar City, Jalalabad, and Mazar-e-Sharif" (USAID). If this program was to be scaled up successfully, only more infrastructural repair, construction, and employment would come about, not to mention the untold economic benefits that would arise from the full realization of the country's mineral wealth and agricultural productivity. Should the project need to reference another which has taken place in a different region with similar problems, the Market Infrastructure Development Project in Charland Regions (MIDPCR), which "has been working since 2006 to improve the livelihoods of women, men and children living in one of the most remote and poor areas of Bangladesh," would be an excellent source (IRAD). "Over the implementation period of 7 years, 432 km of road and 66 markets were constructed under MIDPCR" (IFAD). Not only did these projects create "employment opportunities [for] construction workers," but as a result of their efforts "87% answered that access to markets [had] strongly improved" (IFAD). An organization that could assist USAID in emulating the success of MIDPCR includes USGS, which "has had decades of experience in developing country-scale geographic information systems (GIS) databases and in performing major geological mapping and resource assessment programs with the Middle East, Eurasia, Asia and South America" (USGS Projects in Afghanistan). If these two organizations were to act in unison, the USGS program could discover lucrative and accessible mineral resource locations while the USAID program could work to ensure the infrastructure built to connect those sites to international markets is inexpensive and sustainable. Given this, it is very important that the Afghan government not be given full power over the development of the region's infrastructure. The reason for this is due to the widespread corruption that has seen billions of foreign aid dollars wasted. A "report said that more than a decade of work financed with American tax dollars is at stake if bribery and theft are left unabated in Afghanistan" (Aljazeera). Though many Americans quote the United States' ever rising national debt as a reason for relinquishing control of such overseas operations, not only would the billions of dollars previously provided to the Afghan government be proven wasteful, but the primary issues that we had been wishing to address would continue to plague the people of Afghanistan. Even if one were to look at how a funds withdrawal would impact the most direct United States interests, that individual would find that with less economic stability, more people are likely to turn to terrorism as a means to provide for themselves and their families. "The reality is that terrorists and insurgencies cannot function without the support of the communities in which they operate. Studies show that they earn this support by providing social services for their often impoverished constituency. But the services provided by these organizations come at a great cost to the community-including economic oppression and coercion into violent activities-which perpetuates the cycle of extreme poverty" (The New York Times). In other words, the brave sacrifices of those who have fallen during Operation Enduring Freedom, and those who continue to serve, will have been in vain as the county reverts back to a nearly hopeless poverty. If, however, we were able to stabilize the economy of Afghanistan (to the extent by which one nation can stabilize another), we

would find fewer and fewer individuals making the fateful choice to sacrifice their futures by joining terrorist organizations such as Al Qaeda, which threaten the lives of those soldiers still working to bring stability to the region. While the United States would retain primary power over the developments, the Afghan government should be continually seeking out corruption, thus earning the government more credibility and improving its eventual ability to provide for its people (an ability which it currently lacks). Finally, the way that a typical family can become involved in the implementation of my recommendations is by being open to change as well as being open to employment in construction or an industry (such as the work which was being performed by the earlier described emerald miners). For farmers, this change may include resisting the temptation to grow opium as opposed to more sustainable agricultural products. Through their cooperation and close monitoring of government corruption, Afghans will have more money for the purchasing of food, thus bringing food security to Afghanistan.

In conclusion, the program that has been proposed focuses primarily on the development of Afghanistan so that the economy can provide the jobs necessary for the sustaining of a healthy lifestyle. As put by Eleni Gabre-Madhin, one of the key founders of the Ethiopian Commodity Exchange, “hunger is not so much about producing food yourself, because I don’t produce any food...but we eat it and that’s because we have entitlement, we have the ability to purchase food and feed our families” (PBS). If we are able to connect the various regions of Afghanistan so that business and farms flourish, more people will be able to claim that entitlement which is so key to the subject of food security.

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