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Afghanistan, Factor 19: Foreign Aid

Foreign Aid in Afghanistan

Afghanistan, a country nearly 11,000 kilometers away, is located in central Asia. It is bordered by Iran on the west, by Pakistan on the east and south, by Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan on the north, and China in the northeast. The country is composed of 32.56 million citizens (CIA World Fact Book), and features a vast array of languages spoken and beliefs worshipped. After enduring nearly uninterrupted conflict for the last 35 years, Afghanistan's economy is extremely fragile, and the country's future is reliant on foreign aid. Despite receiving large amounts of foreign aid and assistance in regards to military needs, Afghanistan's agricultural, infrastructural, and educational needs have been left largely neglected. As a result, over 1 in 4 citizens are moderately food insecure and nearly 1 in 20 citizens are severely food insecure (www.wfp.org).

Before assessing Afghanistan's needs for foreign aid, it is important to understand the difficulties that they have faced over history. On December 24th, 1979, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) invaded Afghanistan to re-install the communist government of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan against the growing mutiny. The 40th army was mobilized to regain control. Soviet Tanks, BMP's, helicopters and soldiers poured into the country. Opposing them were the Mujahideen, an alliance created between seven different Sunni parties. The alliance consisted of the political Islamists: Khalis, Hekmatyar, Rabbani, Sayyaf, and the traditionalists: Gailani, Mojaddedi, and Mohammadi. Together, with the help of funding from the west and other sympathizing nations, the Mujahideen fought the Soviets for over 9 long years. On February 15th, 1989, the Soviets accepted defeat and pulled out of Afghanistan. They lost nearly 15,000 soldiers, and almost 54,000 soldiers were wounded. This was microscopic in comparison to what the Afghans lost. An estimated 75,000 to 90,000 Mujahideen were killed and over 75,000 were injured. Also, it was estimated that 850,000 to 1,500,000 Afghan civilians were killed during this 9 year, 1 month, 3 week and 1 day war. Afghanistan's infrastructure was also in shambles. Agricultural irrigation was heavily damaged, roads were unnavigable, and thousands of homes were reduced to rubble (Wikipedia).

As the last Soviet troops left Afghanistan, the armed conflict raged on. Mujahideen fighters pushed on to overthrow President Najibullah's communist regime. The various rebel groups within Afghanistan started to fall out among themselves due to the lack of common goal that previously existed among them, and they started to dispute the leadership and future of Afghanistan. Groups represented different regions of Afghanistan, while other groups represented different religions of Afghanistan. The four main ethnic groups were the Tajiks and Uzbeks, who influence the North and East, and the Pashtuns, who dominate the South and West. In addition, the Hazzari accounted for the majority of the Shiite Muslims, while the Pashtuns, Uzbeks, and Tajiks were mostly Sunni Muslims. In 1992, Najibullah was finally removed from power, and a coalition of rebel forces set up a fragile interim government. In 1996, this regime was toppled when the Taliban captured Kabul. Many former Pashtun leaders in the Mujahideen also joined the Taliban's cause. Their goal was to implement and facilitate law and order in the country. Under this law, women were not permitted to work outdoors or attend school. In 1998, the U.S. launched missile strikes at suspected camps of Osama bin Laden after he was accused of bombing US embassies in Africa. Following the September 11th, 2001 terrorist attack on American soil, Afghanistan was invaded by American and British soldiers, followed by Australian, Canadian, and German forces. These forces, along with many other nations, officially ended combat operations at the end of 2014. (www.historyguy.com)

After analyzing a typical family farm in Afghanistan, it was concluded that they live much more difficult lives than we do in North America. On average, every woman gives birth to approximately 5.33 children (CIA World Fact Book). It is very common for multiple generations of family to live together however, so the average number of people living in an agricultural household is 11.4 people (www.fao.org). With only 38.2% of the population over the age 15 capable of reading and writing, and an average school life expectancy of 11 years (CIA World Fact Book), it is safe to say that the general public is lacking in regards to education received. Also, Afghanistan's healthcare system leaves some to be desired. Since there are only 0.27 physicians and 0.5 hospital beds per 1000 people (CIA World Fact Book), it is often extremely difficult to acquire medical care, and nearly impossible in rural areas. Afghans also don't diversify their diets much. Their three main food staples are Khameerbob, Naan, and Rice. Khameerbob is cooked dough that resembles both pasta and dumplings. Naan is a thin oval/circular shaped piece of bread served with almost every meal. Rice is prepared in many different ways, and is served as a base in many dishes. Other dishes that are often left for special occasions include: ashak, kebab, mantu, pilaf, and qorma. (www.safaritheglobe.com)

Like most of Europe and Asia, Afghanistan's farms are microscopic in size when compared to modern North American farms. The average farming household in Afghanistan farms approximately 7.4 hectares. Of this, around 42% is irrigated, while 58% relies on natural rainfall. Of the 7.82 million hectares of farmland, only about two thirds of it gets cultivated every year. Mechanized cultivating occurs on approximately half of the farmland, but no means of mechanized harvesting is in place yet. About 80% of irrigated cereals receive a fertilizer application, and approximately half of all seeds planted are improved varieties. The main crops grown are opium, wheat, fruits and nuts. While only 24% of Afghanistan's GDP is made up by agriculture, the industry employs 78.6% of the work force. (www.fao.org)

In Afghanistan, there are undoubtedly obstacles preventing farmers from achieving their maximum crop productivity. To begin with, their agricultural practices are primitive and obsolete. Because Afghan farmers summer fallow approximately one third of their cropland every year, they are relying on only two thirds of their land to produce the required yields needed to feed, clothe, and support themselves and their families. Roughly 40 years ago, Canadian farmers were practicing similar methods, as they summer fallowed one third to half of their farmland each year. Although this method was relatively successful at controlling weed growth and allowing crops to use nutrients and moisture from more than one crop cycle, it also promoted soil erosion, soil organic matter depletion, and soil salinity. Not to mention, farmers were also not using all of their land to its fullest potential. With the introduction of effective pesticides, fertilizers, and advanced application equipment, farmers were able to move towards a minimum till or zero till platform, while putting next to no land into a summer fallow rotation. If Afghanistan could implement a farming method similar to Canada in regards to fallow land, they could increase their land productivity immensely. (esask.uregina.ca)

Another method to improve food security and income of farmers in Afghanistan is to increase the agricultural land mass. Currently in Afghanistan, only about 12.1% of the country's land mass is being used for agriculture. Over 29 million hectares of rangeland, accounting for 45.2% of the land mass, is essentially unused. Although it sounds like an easy solution to Afghanistan's hunger problem, there are some hefty obstacles to overcome before any of this barren land could be repurposed. First and foremost, Afghanistan is an extremely rugged country, dotted with mountains, valleys, and other rough terrain. It would be very difficult to find allotments of land suitable for agriculture. Another issue is the high prevalence of land mines, mostly from the Soviet-Afghan war, that still remain scattered among the countryside. According to Afghan-Network.net, around 8,000,000 anti-personnel and 2,000,000 anti-tank mines still remain intact and dangerous. It is also very dangerous and expensive to remove mines. Each mine costs approximately 150 to 4500 USD to remove, and 1 person is killed and 2 are injured for every 5000 mines removed. It is also estimated that agricultural production would double in the absence of land

mines. Despite the challenges presented with repurposing barren land, it is a respectable option to combat both current hunger issues and the rapidly growing population. (www.afghan-network.net)

Since the majority of the workforce is currently occupied by only 7.82 million hectares of farmland (and only two thirds of this is cultivated), an increase of land mass would require a heavier reliance on mechanized farming methods. Tillage, seeding, and harvesting equipment would not only make farming 10 million plus hectares possible, but it would also reduce the workload demands on farmers and farm hands. There are a couple issues surrounding the mechanization of farm practices however. Product availability would be largely limited and parts would be very difficult to source. Another issue would also be the logistical nightmare of supplying and attaining the fuel required for the equipment. And lastly, the cost of modern equipment is extremely high, making it unaffordable for most farmers. (www.fao.org)

In Afghanistan, there is a prevalent infrastructural issue. The first infrastructural issue is irrigation. Although Afghanistan has a respectable amount of irrigated land, a lot of the country's infrastructure is in poor condition, making it essentially impossible to use. During the Soviet-Afghan war, a lot of irrigation equipment was destroyed by aerial and artillery bombardment. This combined with the irrigation system's old age means that it is often non-functional. Another infrastructural issue is their poor road system. Because more and more of the population is moving into urban areas, at a rate of 3.96% per year (CIA World Fact Book), more rural food needs to be transported into urban areas. In order to do this, farmers must ship their food via truck to the urban markets. In its current state, Afghanistan's road system leaves some to be desired. The dirt roads are especially unfit to transport large quantities of grain, and even the paved roads are in fairly rough shape. Both of these infrastructure systems are absolutely crucial for economic development.

If applied correctly, foreign aid has the potential to increase agricultural productivity, household income, and food availability in Afghanistan. Firstly, foreign aid support could be put towards educating the farming population. In my opinion, the lack of knowledge on different farming methods is the biggest restricting factor on food production. If established nations could contribute finances towards educating the general population of Afghanistan about agriculture, the land productivity would without doubt increase, thus producing more food, therefore increasing household income. It has the potential to pay off with massive dividends.

Due to the current neglect to agriculture, infrastructure, and education in regards to foreign aid, Afghan farmers are simply not equipped with the things they need to grow enough food for the growing population. They are not equipped with the knowledge of modern farming techniques, so they are unable to employ advanced methods like zero till. They are not equipped with enough farmland to sustain a growing population, so they are unable to grow enough food due to a land mass shortage. Also, the road system is below standard, meaning that farmers and other tradespeople have difficulties transporting their goods to urban markets. Lastly, the irrigation systems required to achieve big yields are undependable and frail. With an adjustment to the distribution of foreign aid, all of these outstanding issues could be rectified, and Afghanistan's food security issues could be dealt with.

As Mudasser Hussain Siddiqui stated, Manager of Policy Advocacy & Research Action Aid Afghanistan, "the key issue here is that we are in this vicious cycle of drought and food insecurity every year. This can be attributed to lack of investment in agriculture and rural employment or livelihoods in Afghanistan" (www.eurasianet.org). The present status of this factor is dire, with millions of citizens lacking food security. Because of the frequent droughts that plague Afghanistan, the situation is quite severe. Although there is limited data on the subject, I believe that the environment is not being harmed any more than it would be with foreign aid. Because it provides their livelihood and they work in such close proximity to it, I believe that farmers appreciate the environment and treat it with respect as a result. Although women

are heavily disadvantaged in Afghanistan, both politically and socially, they are not disadvantaged in regards to foreign aid compared to men.

Although 80% of the population is dependent on agriculture, it is one of the most underfunded sectors in the country. Receiving only 500 million of the 15 billion allotted for non-security related reconstruction (as of 2009), Afghanistan's agriculture industry remains relatively unchanged. The biggest donor to the region, the U.S., has donated less than 5% of their total Afghanistan aid budget to agriculture from 2002 to 2009. Spending money on agriculture is much less appealing than spending it on projects that seek to make rapid material goals, such as roads and schools. Redirecting foreign aid towards agriculture can not only prevent the need for humanitarian aid, but it can also encourage sustainable poverty reduction, local ownership, and longer term capacity building. The problem with spending money on agriculture is that it requires long-term diligent commitment at the ground level. Because there is very little money directed at this issue, the situation is staying the same or slightly improving. (www.eurasianet.org)

By re-distributing foreign aid towards the agricultural sector and resolving this factor, farmers would produce more food, generate more income, reduce poverty, and still only affect the environment to a small degree. If the money and equipment was available to clear mines and convert barren land into farmland, farmers could grow enough food to feed their families, and even grow some cash crops to purchase other necessities. Afghan farmers could also be educated about modern farming techniques and technologies, helping them grow more bushels and generate more revenue. Money could also be put towards infrastructure, such as irrigation and roadways, which would encourage economic growth and development. Afghan farmers' standard of living could also be improved with foreign aid by assisting them with purchasing mechanized farming equipment. Women could also be empowered by educating the general population on their equal role in society. These changes would benefit smallholder farms, urban dwellers, and women alike.

Like many other farmers around the world, Afghan farmers are exposed to many issues capable of hurting crop yields drastically. Climate volatility and water scarcity can have an unprecedented influence on the outcome of a growing season. It can provide a breeding ground for crop failures, which has the ability to cripple families and communities in regards to income and food availability. This factor will be able to help counter the growing population and urbanization. The increased land mass and advanced farming methods would help grow the extra bushels needed to feed the expanding population, and generate more revenue for farming families and communities. The upgrading of the road system would also allow farmers to transport their goods to urban areas with ease to help feed the growing urban dwellers. Although this factor would put more stress on the environment, the increase of pollution would be minimal.

After analyzing current conditions in Afghanistan, I have devised recommendations on how to solve issues surrounding food security. Providing humanitarian relief is only a short term solution to Afghanistan's hunger problem. If we want to truly give Afghanistan the opportunity to be self-sufficient, we must first give them the means to. Firstly, I would recommend redirecting foreign aid money towards educating the farming population on better farming techniques. In addition, money should also be directed towards clearing mines to make more farmland. Also, irrigation and road infrastructure should be prioritized for upgrade. Lastly, foreign aid should be used to help purchase mechanized farming means to reduce manpower requirements for agriculture. It is absolutely crucial to note that this is an issue that cannot be resolved in a single year, and will require diligent efforts for many years to fully implement. One local project in Afghanistan that should be scaled up is the Mine Action Program, which is a program designed to remove the dangerous landmines scattered around Afghanistan. (www.acdi-cida.gc.ca)

Communities, corporations, the national government, and other organizations should all consider donating money to this cause. The government could help by recognizing corporations who donate large sums of money by advertising them and the cause. The government should also train individuals to go and educate Afghan farmers at ground level. Farmers could be key players because they deal with agriculture every day, and could educate the general public on the issues. In order for this to be successful, Afghan farmers should accept the education and aid, keep an open mind, and apply the techniques learned.

In conclusion, Afghanistan's concerning food insecurity issues can be dealt with by redirecting foreign aid money toward the agriculture industry. Afghanistan is truly a country that we can change for the better if we spend foreign aid money correctly. If this issue is not addressed in the foreseeable future, Afghanistan's food security will most likely worsen. If done correctly, we can improve their economy, enhance their current food situation, and empower their people. There is still hope that we can do the right thing for Afghanistan, the world, and humanity.

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