

Pro-poor Development Policy and Natural Resource Management in Post-Conflict Afghanistan: Changes and Challenge

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After nearly three decades of conflict, military activities; refugee movements; collapse of national, provincial, and local forms of governance; lack of management and institutional capacity; and overexploitation have heavily damaged Afghanistan's natural resource base. Afghanistan is faced with a high level of poverty and a high rate of natural resource degradation. The international community and the Government of Afghanistan are facing a significant challenge to meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that address equitable and sustained pro-poor growth. To tackle the poverty that is deeply embedded in rural areas, national priorities (the Afghanistan National Development Strategy [ANDS]) insist on pro-poor policies and exploring ways of equitable access to natural resources to benefit the poor. On the other hand, degraded natural resources need to be protected from overexploitation by rural dwellers who in most cases are poor and fully dependent on them. The paper argues that the current policy development approaches for natural resource management in Afghanistan, which are based on sectoral, standardized, simplified, top-down, and centralized viewpoints, could not address the current diverse, interrelated, and complex nature of the issue. Some policy recommendations are proposed to improve understanding of the situation which is worsening.

Introduction

The population of Afghanistan was estimated at 23.6 million in 2005 with an annual growth rate of 2.03%, the highest rate in South Asian countries. Seventy-nine percent of the total population lives in villages and the per capita Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is US\$822. Afghanistan is ranked 174 out of 177 countries on the global Human Development Index (HDI) and 53% of the total population lives under the poverty line. Lack of available resources and infrastructure facilities along with weak security and governance are the major issues that the Government faces. In a country where over 80% of the population relies directly on the natural resource base to meet its daily needs, widespread environmental degradation poses an immense threat to livelihoods.

It is generally recognized that countries like Afghanistan, with high rates of poverty, are often faced with high levels of deforestation and natural resource degradation, which confronts policy formulation with a paradox. On the one hand policy-makers insist on pro-poor policies and exploring ways of access to natural resources to benefit the poor. On the other hand, sustaining the degraded resource is essential and it needs to be protected from overexploitation by the poor, who in most cases have desperate need for and dependency on natural resources. The process of policy development and change in such a situation is very difficult, particularly in Afghanistan which is in a postconflict situation and is subject to a very active conflict in the southern part of country.

Poverty and Natural Resource Linkages in Afghanistan

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Poverty and natural resource degradation coexist in many countries including Afghanistan. Over 80% of the Afghan population lives in rural areas practicing agricultural and related rural activities that rely heavily on the use of natural resources. The decades of conflict, ongoing instability, lack of effective governance and service delivery, socio-economic insecurity and overall poverty, susceptibility to droughts and other natural hazards, population increase, and influx of displaced and returning population, have all exacted a heavy toll on the environment and natural resource base of the country. As a result, the country's vulnerability to natural disasters and food shortages has increased. Overall, the natural resource base continues to suffer due to:

- Competing land use (agriculture, human settlements, forests, range land, wetlands, and protected areas)
- Ambiguous legal status of ownership and access to natural resources (land, water, forests, range land, biodiversity, wetlands, and protected areas)
- Lack of an enabling policy, legislative, and regulatory framework for managing natural resources, along with their weak governance and management
- The negative impact of war, increasing population, human settlements, drought, overexploitation, and landmines on natural resources

Of Afghanistan's 655,000 square kilometers of total land area, only 12% (7.9 million hectares) is arable and 4% irrigated. An additional 45% is range land under permanent pastures (FAO 1993), less than 1.5% is under forest cover (FAO 2005),² with the remaining 39% being mountainous. Agriculture, not including poppy cultivation, generates about 40% of the GDP and employs about 70% of the labor force and is the a major source of livelihood in the country (CCA 2004). The degradation of the natural resource base, therefore, directly and severely impacts the livelihoods of the majority of the Afghan population as well as the country's economic development as a whole. Particularly affected are the poor and most vulnerable, such as households headed by women or with physically disabled members, landless households, or those farming on only small rain-fed plots, many of whose rights are thus unfulfilled.

To be sustainable, economic growth cannot be achieved at the cost of environmental and natural resource degradation. Establishing clear environment–poverty linkage in the context of Afghan development, improving natural resource management with due consideration for the vulnerable population, preventing further degradation of the environment, and improving and maintaining the integrity of ecosystem services, is therefore the key to lasting recovery, human security, and the sustainable development of Afghanistan.

Natural Resources in Afghanistan

Afghanistan is situated in arid and semi-arid areas of Asia so natural resources and forest area are limited—forest occupies only 2% of the total area. Most of the country's valuable forests have been degraded during the last 25 years of war and social unrest. It is estimated that between 1978 and 2002 the area under conifer forests in the eastern part of the country was reduced by 50% (UNEP 2003, p. 11).

Today, most of the country appears to be subject to some degree of land degradation. Much of the land surface is used as range land for grazing livestock. The potential for regenerating vegetation is likely to be seriously affected by heavy fuelwood collection or timber harvesting

² The data in this assessment show gradual decline of forested areas from 2% (1990), 1.6% (2000), and 1.3% (2005).

that far outstrips woodland regeneration, and by browsing and grazing domestic livestock. Soil erosion is also a serious problem due to the loss of protective vegetation cover. Assessing the incomplete evidence available in the late 1970s, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) concluded that most of north, central, and eastern Afghanistan was wooded until early in the nineteenth century. Large areas of range lands (approximately 45% of the total territory) are considered barren or waste land, and are also used for grazing, particularly in winter. No comprehensive assessment of the current status of the range lands and the (reversible or irreversible) effects of drought on range land has been carried out; even though a number of documents claim that there is extensive overgrazing in Afghanistan, there is no systematic evidence to corroborate this. Increasingly, pastures have come under rain-fed agricultural production, with devastating consequences.

The most important and growing concern confronting natural resources in Afghanistan is quality degradation which is reported to be much worse than it was before. The main causes for shrinkage of forest area could be:

- Severe drought from 1997 to 2001 and again in 2005 to 2006
- Overharvesting of fuelwood, timber, and nonwood forest products (NWFPs) by local people as their main source of energy and income
- Disintegration of the indigenous system of natural resource management and its institutions during the last five decades
- Collapse of the formal and governmental regulatory institutions for protecting forests over the last two decades
- Bombardment of the forest during the Russian occupation
- Recent access to forests for road and regional markets especially for massive export of timber to Pakistan—the source of cash for warlords during the civil war and the Taliban regime

To date, within the field of natural resource management, the initial focus of intervention has tended to be more on forestry rehabilitation and management, while there has been little progress in range land management, despite its well-recognized significance in preserving the country's natural resource base.

Figure 1 illustrates mean annual precipitation while Figure 2 describes the natural vegetation in Afghanistan with forest occurring mostly in the east and north of the country. With low and unpredictable rainfall in much of Afghanistan, and large areas qualifying as desert or semidesert, rivers, streams, and wetlands are crucial for human needs such as drinking water and irrigation and for maintaining populations of wild plants and animals, many of which have economic potential. Although broad calculations suggest that, during normal conditions, Afghanistan as a whole uses less than one third of its potential 75,000 million m³ of water resources, regional differences in supply, inefficient use, and wastage mean that a major part of the country experiences water scarcity. For instance, poor, uncoordinated management and excessive extraction of water for agricultural purposes, combined with long years of drought, have led to drastic declines in water flow in the Helmand River and 99% desiccation of its downstream Sistan wetlands, which are an important source of agricultural production and a source of fish and waterfowl for food (UNEP 2003). The recent years of conflict have made it difficult to make improvements to infrastructure or to integrate uncoordinated local schemes into a coherent national strategy for water use. However, improved water resource management will, in many regions, be an essential first step in rebuilding rural communities.

Figure 1: Mean Annual Rainfall of Afghanistan

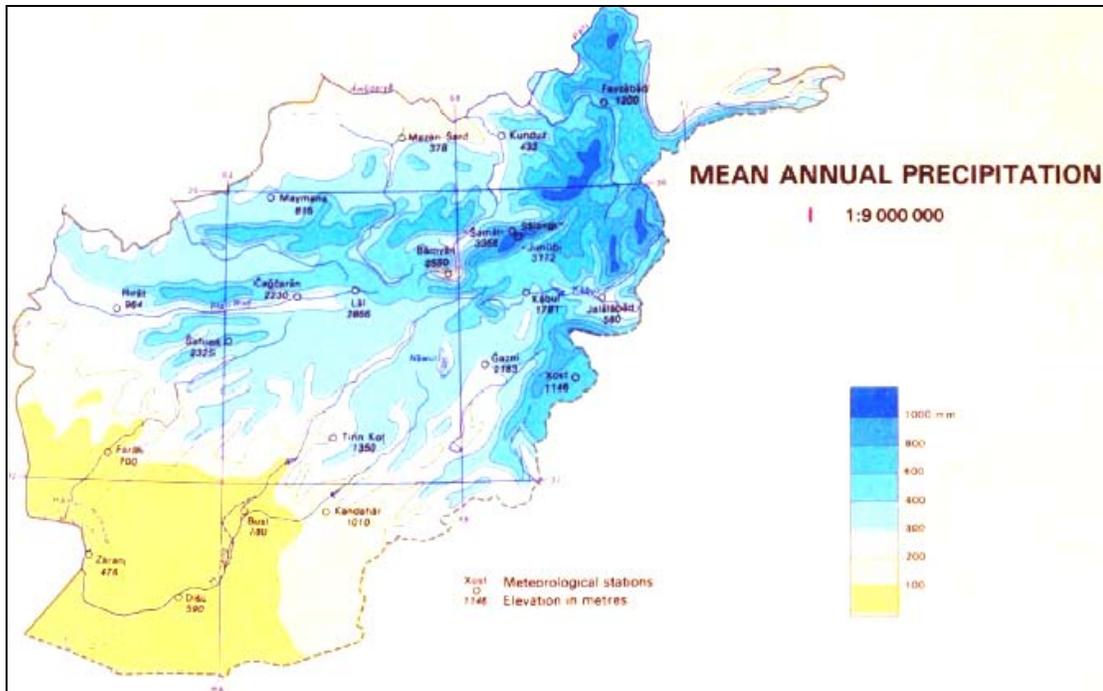
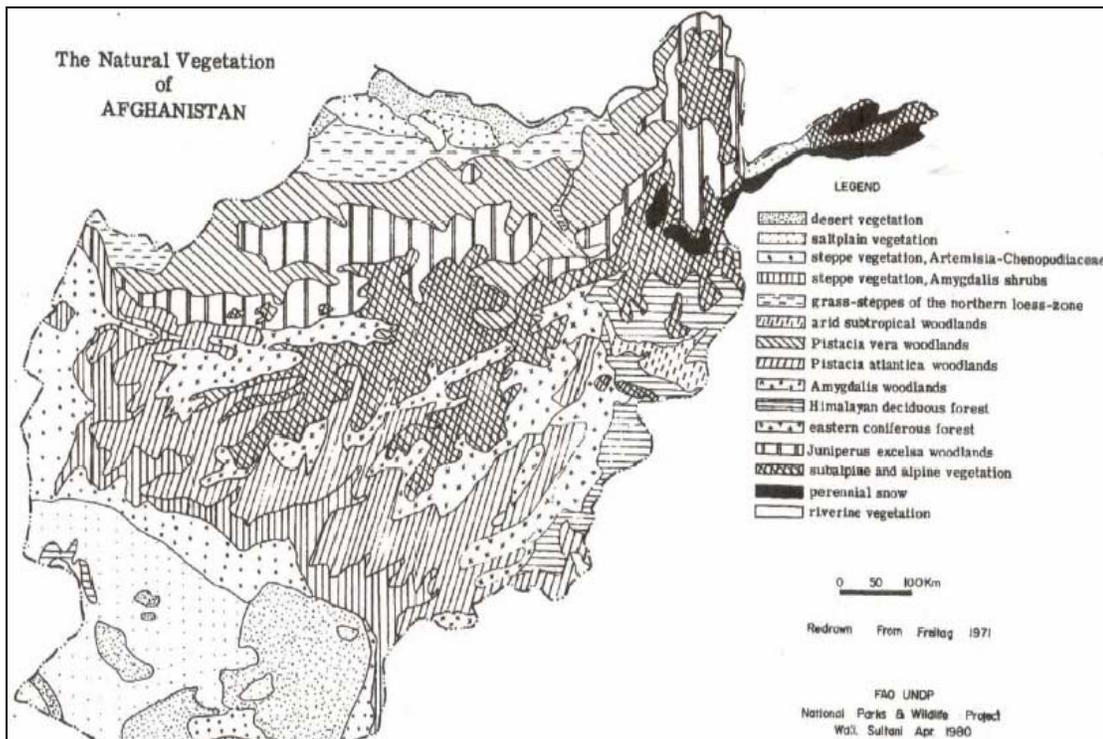


Figure 2: Natural Vegetation of Afghanistan



Environmental degradation in general, and quality degradation in particular, are a manifestation of deeper causes relative to weak institutions, conflicting and unequal access to ownership, poverty, population pressures, urbanization, and insufficient training in good environmental and natural resource management. The UN Common Country Assessment (CCA) for the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (2004) identified the following root causes for

development challenges in Afghanistan, including environmental challenges (CCA 2004, p. 40):

- A young governance structure still in the process of establishment and/or early stages of development, and unable to curb political insecurity
- A culture of unsustainable resource use that must be reversed
- Wide variations in socio-economic indicators, by gender, region, and rural–urban divide
- Socio-cultural traditions that result in widespread marginalization based on gender, social status, or ethnicity
- Obsolete industrial and agricultural technology and practices that harm the environment

The report points out that for communities there is lack of awareness of sound environmental practices, which needs to be addressed at the same time as improving their livelihoods and economic conditions. Communities must become owners of their natural resource base and feel that they actively participate in national economic growth. Otherwise, poverty and environmental damage can be caught in a downward spiral (CCA 2004, p. 47). Also the lack of reliable statistics for several critical sectors, including the environment, is considered a major impediment in tackling the root causes for improving natural resource management.

Post-Taliban Vision and Strategy on the Environment and Natural Resources

Environment

The Government of Afghanistan fully recognizes that failure to address environmental degradation will negatively affect the long-term growth of the country as well as meeting the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).³ However, the Government’s institutional and policy framework on the environment is fairly young, and is still very much in the process of formulation and development. Since the Afghanistan Compact 2006—a political commitment of both Afghanistan and the international community to work towards five-year high-level benchmarks—was adopted, the Government has embarked on a comprehensive program of national planning and development through the implementation of the interim Afghanistan National Development Strategy (i-ANDS) (2006–2007) and full ANDS (to be formulated by March 2008), which are fully aligned with Afghanistan’s MDGs.

The environment is a cross-cutting component in the i-ANDS its five-year strategic benchmark on the environment was adopted as follows:

In line with Afghanistan’s MDGs, environmental regulatory frameworks and management services will be established for the protection of air and water quality, waste management and pollution control, and natural resource policies will be developed and implementation started at all levels of government, as well as at the community level, by 1386 (end 2007) (i-ANDS 2006-2007, p 27).

i-ANDS recognizes the following constraints to achieving this benchmark:

³ Afghanistan endorsed the MDGs in 2004, much later than other countries due to the ongoing conflict at the time of the Millennium Summit in 2000. As a result Afghanistan has an extended deadline (2020 as opposed to 2015) and due to the particular postconflict challenge of the country, it has one added goal—“Goal 9: Enhancing Security.”

- Lack of Government ability to integrate sustainable development approaches into the national development framework
- Underdeveloped and unenforceable environmental legislation and regulatory framework
- Limited public awareness of environmental and natural resource issues
- Unsustainable exploitation of and inequitable access to natural resources exacerbated by insecurity

Furthermore, i-ANDS lists the following areas as part of the Government's sectoral strategic focus on the environment that require support from the international community:

- Clarification of responsibilities in the environmental arena and capacity enhancement of the National Environmental Protection Agency (NEPA)
- Development and implementation of a legal and regulatory framework that ensures sustainable use of natural resources
- Establishment of environmental and natural resource management capacity within line ministries
- Initiation of community-based management of natural resources
- Introduction of environmental education and vocational training
- Promotion of regional cooperation on environmental and natural resource management

Natural Resource Management Strategies in the PostTaliban Period

Consistent with the tenets of Afghanistan's Environment Law and upcoming natural resource laws and regulations, the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock (MAIL) has designed a natural resource management program with a community-based approach that positions communities throughout Afghanistan to assume responsibility for practising productive and environment-enhancing management of natural resources for their own benefit. The value of this approach hinges crucially on the involvement of communities, not just in the implementation of natural resource management, but in its planning, with assistance from the Government and other partners. Thus the natural resource management program relies on technical, legal, policy, and institutional changes and the creation of functional relationships among the Government, communities, and other partners.

Objectives

Communities and institutions throughout Afghanistan will establish and maintain natural resources and define regimes of utilization that achieve a balance between maximization of production and productivity in all agricultural land uses and effective maintenance and enhancement of natural resource bases.

This objective leads to a set of activities and results that will enable communities and Government institutions at provincial, district, and central levels to establish systems of governance and management, to build their capacity to resolve conflicts over natural resources, and to develop and maintain natural resources. The following components, listed in order of priority, comprise the natural resource management program activities.

Proposed Components and Output

Legal and institutional framework: Government institutions and communities throughout Afghanistan clarify rights to natural resources, in accordance with laws, with the support of national and provincial authorities.

Infrastructure: Inputs necessary for natural resource management activities such as construction, equipment, and materials.

Baseline assessment: Community, district, provincial, and national authorities complete a baseline assessment on the diversity, availability, and distribution of natural resources at community, provincial, and national levels.

Implementation of natural resource conservation systems: Community-, district-, provincial-, and national-level authorities put in place and implement the systems to protect natural resources from natural threats and restore and enhance the natural resource base.

Sustainable improvement of livelihoods: Communities and private sector entities generate income from the harvest and commercialization of natural resource products while ensuring the natural resource base is protected and maintained.

Facilitate communities to manage natural resources sustainably: Communities bring natural resources under working, sustainable management regimes, with the guidance and support of Government and support agencies. Communities are aware of the importance of the sustainable management of natural resources and are motivated to establish regimes of utilization that achieve a balance between maximization of production and productivity in all agricultural land uses and effective maintenance and enhancement of natural resource bases.

In MAIL strategy documents it is mentioned that “The Natural Resources Management Development projects” are aimed at improving the livelihood and economic conditions of rural families and enhancing household food security with their active participation in national economic growth. The aforesaid goals are intended to be guaranteed through the development of improved, efficient, and sustainable use of water resources, agriculture, food processing, forestry, range land, and other subsector development. The natural resource management sector sets some indicators to evaluate its activities in future. These indicators are:

- Enactment, realization, and enforcement of natural resource laws and regulations by MAIL and relevant sectors of the Government in place by 2010
- A decrease in conflicts over natural resources, including land, and successful establishment and maintenance of regimes of utilization for different types of natural resources evident by 2010
- Central-, provincial-, and district-level agricultural departments have the ability to coordinate among partners involved in natural resource management, and to provide appropriate and effective participatory and technical outreach to communities in support of the implementation of natural resource management projects

Overall Picture

After the fall of the Taliban, the international community and Government of Afghanistan

have a significant challenge to achieve the MDG that needs equitable and sustained pro-poor growth over a long period of time. To tackle the poverty which is deeply embedded in rural areas, rural development as a strategy is placed at the center of pro-poor growth as national policy. Afghanistan's rural development needs investment and considerable financial and human resources in order to translate these policies into concrete actions. Therefore, the Government with the support of the international community has designed and begun to implement a number of national priority programs. Beside the international aid and support to build sustainable development in Afghanistan, there is an absolute need for economic regeneration and employment based on resource mobilization—resources which have been badly exploited during the last three decades. To tackle this issue and mobilize natural resources for more employment opportunities, domestic products, and services, policy-makers are confronting serious challenges:

- Poverty that is deeply interconnected and entwined with lack of security, lack of infrastructure, and resource distribution
- Poverty embedded in rural areas; rural life is deeply dependent on natural resources
- There is a need for economic/income regeneration and employment based on resource mobilization in rural Afghanistan to eradicate intensive poverty
- The Government (with the weak support of the international community) has designed and begun to implement a number of separated national programs on natural resource management
- These programs, which are based on conventional technology transfer and Government control over resources, have not been significantly successful and achieved their targets
- The land/pasture dispute is one of the most important and growing issues in Afghanistan; it has caused many local security issues in recent years and is linked with tribal identity and international drug trafficking and terrorism
- Policy adjustment is required towards a more pro-poor and participatory approach in the context of a society mired in severe conflict with a shortage of functioning governance at a variety of levels

Further Challenges

Based on the practical results and outcomes of the last five years of natural resource management activities in the field, this paper argues that the challenges in introducing and implementing pro-poor natural resource policy in such situations are more demanding in the field than expected. Being successful in implementing such human-focused development and pro-poor approaches, there is a need for radical changes on conceptualizing and formulating comprehensive approaches to tackle the interrelated complex issues and address such challenges.

In such a complex context, the Government and international forces are facing three major issues including security, governance, and development all at once and the problems of governance associated with the dissatisfaction of citizens and increasing insecurity. The proposition of this paper, which is based on concrete examples on the ground, suggests that the generalization of natural resource management in such a socio-economic context through simplified, standardized, top-down natural resource management approaches is not applicable and effective. There is a need for reframing the conceptual and administrative framework, which could improve the situation and resolve the sectoral policy-making process.

To tackle the issue, there are further challenges and requirements that need to be achieved including:

- A more comprehensive approach to planning is needed to integrate rural development and natural resource management to be able to tackle the *complex, diverse, and deeply rooted* issues
- Community forestry in contemporary Afghanistan is promising and could play a major role in targeting natural resource management but it needs radical changes in approaching people and ways of integrating people in the process of co-management of the resources
- Rehabilitation and empowerment of Government staff as a basis for the community forestry approach is critical
- Recognition of the indigenous knowledge of local people and also searching for existing local institutions for natural resource management is essential for people's active participation
- Proper, clear, and urgent legislation for a land tenure system is needed so that recognition of community property rights based on customary rights (*Urf*) and Sharia (Islamic religious law) are considered (based on the Constitution)
- Development of associated infrastructure and small-medium enterprises is fundamental and a commodity chain analysis on timber profits and market development reform for NWFPs is needed
- Technological assistance and training for value-added processing of forest products should be simple, affordable, and sustainable

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