

## **David Mansfield**



David Mansfield has been doing indepth fieldwork in rural Afghanistan since June 1997. Primarily this work has examined the role that opium poppy plays in rural livelihood strategies and the dynamics of the farmgate trade in opium. However, given the cross cutting nature of the drugs issue in Afghanistan this work has also charted the different socio-economic, political and environmental factors that explain fluctuations in cultivation and why these differ by location and socio-economic group. The evidence base he has produced has been at the forefront of policy development in Afghanistan and represents an important source of primary data for many policy analysts and academics.

David has worked for a variety of different organisations including the Afghan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU), the Aga Khan Development Network, and the United Kingdom's Afghan Drugs Interdepartmental Unit. He has also supported the World Bank, Asian Development Bank and the European Commission in integrating the drugs issue into their development programmes in Afghanistan, including their support to the National Priority Programmes.

Prior to his work in Afghanistan David worked in overseas drugs and development issues, working in each of the major drug producing regions of South and South East Asia, and Latin America. His published work has sought to contextualise drugs as a development issue, and in particular has focused on developing pro-poor approaches to development in drug producing areas.

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# **Challenging the Rhetoric: Supporting an Evidence Based Counter Narcotics Policy in Afghanistan.**

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## 1. Introduction

Illicit drugs are typically cultivated in areas that have poor soils, limited irrigation and where access to agricultural inputs is constrained. These areas, in countries such as Bolivia, Colombia, Pakistan, Laos and Thailand, are also characterized by their proximity to international borders, difficult terrain, and poor physical infrastructure, as well as conflict. Government presence, in the form of civic administration, the provision of social services, such as education, health and welfare, and initiatives aimed at promoting economic and social development, is largely nominal or seen as antagonistic by the local population.

These areas are typically isolated from the wider national economy; the state's economic policies fail to penetrate, markets are fragmented, and the price of food items, basic commodities and agricultural inputs are considerably higher than in neighbouring regions. The absence of the rule of law and the potential for violence limits long-term investment by either the public or private sector. The cumulative impact of this socio-economic, political, and administrative isolation is that many households in these areas pursue livelihood strategies that are largely independent of both the nation state and the national economy. Opium and coca, given their illicit nature, their high weight to volume ratio, and their non-perishable products, are commodities whose markets flourish in such an environment.

However, this testimony focuses on Afghanistan – a country that is increasingly seen as anomalous with regard to illicit drug crop cultivation and the illegal drugs trade. In Afghanistan opium poppy is not confined to marginal, mountainous areas on the periphery of the country's borders and far from national or provincial capitals. Instead, in Afghanistan, opium poppy is cultivated in some of the most fertile, well irrigated, and physically accessible areas of the country. Indeed in some parts of the country opium poppy is visible only a few miles from the major cities in the provinces – highlighting the impact that three decades of conflict have had on the economy, governance and the social and cultural fabric of the country and its population.

In fact it is now widely recognised that the illegal drug economy permeates the political and economic fabric of Afghanistan.<sup>i</sup> This is not simply measured by the extent of opium poppy cultivation and estimates of the drugs trade contribution to the national economy but also by the role that the illegal drug business is playing in fuelling the conflict in Afghanistan. Corruption is endemic and Afghan government officials at various levels in the administration are accused of direct involvement in the drugs trade. Some national and international commentators have gone so far as

to suggest that 'drugs are the glue that holds the government together in the south of Afghanistan'<sup>ii</sup> and that a credible counter-narcotics and counter-insurgency strategy would involve the removal of some of the Government's most senior representatives in the south.<sup>iii</sup>

There is also increasing attention on the role that insurgent groups play in taxing those producing and trading opiates, as well as, some argue, their direct involvement in processing and trafficking illegal drugs. Indeed, some assert that the Taliban are more motivated by the profits to be accrued from the drugs trade than ideology – a statement that is typically accompanied by the narrative of the FARC's trajectory in Colombia from political movement to criminal enterprise. It is now widely reported that 'the insurgency' is funded by the proceeds from the illegal drugs trade and there are even suggestions by some that insurgent groups are attempting to manipulate farmgate prices so as to increase the value of their inventory.

While it is important to challenge the evidence behind each of these different claims it is clear that the production and trade in illegal drugs has exacerbated the conflict in Afghanistan. In particular the involvement of government officials in the drugs trade has resulted in increasing scepticism towards those in authority. The drugs trade has also provided funds and political capital for those in armed opposition to both the Afghan government and international military presence. Given the United States of America's strategic interests in Afghanistan, Pakistan and the region, the military forces it has on the ground in Afghanistan, and the level of development funding provided by the United States Government aimed at improving governance, security and rural development in Afghanistan, the production and trade in illegal has clear implications for US national security interests in the region. The question remains as to what is the appropriate response to the illicit drugs problem given the current fragility of the Afghan government and the growing hostility expressed by the rural population to what is increasingly seen as western intrusion in Afghanistan.

I would argue that the first challenge is to disentangle the policy rhetoric from the facts. What remains clear is the debate on both opium production and counter narcotics policy in Afghanistan has consistently been shaped by what sceptics might think were embedded policy positions rather than by the complex reality we face on the ground. Everyone has a view on illicit drugs and views on illicit drug crop cultivation are typically as polarized as they are on other aspects of drugs policy. Some believe farmers are motivated by greed and will continue to cultivate opium poppy or coca until they are compelled to stop. Others argue that illicit drug crop cultivation is a function of poverty and faced with a choice farmers would opt to pursue licit livelihoods. These views are rarely informed by any direct experience with illicit drug growers or traders but are expressed by elite opinion formers - journalists, staff members of international and national organizations, and policy makers - whose exposure to drug crop cultivation is often limited to quick roadside visits or orchestrated trips to project sites. The result is the picture offered of the production and trade in illegal drugs in Afghanistan tends to be limited, partial and largely simplistic - which can have a fundamental impact on policy.

Given the limited time (and space), I will focus on only three themes in the ongoing debate on drugs in Afghanistan and highlight how policy can be found wanting due to the failure to understand, and subsequently build on, the complex realities on the ground. The first is the debate on the profitability of opium poppy in Afghanistan. This is crucial as it shapes peoples perceptions of the rural communities that are either 'the target' or 'the client' of different counter narcotics policies and interventions. The second is what seems to be the most intractable issue in counter narcotics policy in Afghanistan, that of eradication – a policy position that is primarily shaped by

people's perception of motivations and factors that lead to opium poppy cultivation - with those that arguing for the primacy of price and profit adopting the most aggressive position on crop destruction. The third theme to be discussed is the relationship between 'the insurgency' and the drugs trade, an issue that is gaining increasing profile in the media and amongst policy makers and is likely to drive policy in the coming twelve months – possibly in a number of different directions. It is hoped that by drawing on over twelve years indepth fieldwork in rural Afghanistan this testimony will offer the basis for a more evidence-based policy on drugs in Afghanistan.

## 2. Understanding Farmers: Managing Risk Rather than Maximising Profit

Too often it is claimed that the profits on opium production are unassailable. It is this fundamental assertion that shapes large elements of counter narcotics policy in Afghanistan. For example, it is the view that no other legal crop can compete with opium that justifies a policy of aggressive eradication. It is argued that unless efforts are made to increase the risks (and thereby the costs) associated with opium production farmers will simply not make the decision to abandon opium poppy cultivation and take up 'legal livelihoods'. Similarly, many of the development responses to opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan emphasise the profitability of opium production and stress the importance of identifying other high value crops - often a single crop - and improving market chains so as to establish a competitive substitute. Even those pressing for drugs reform refer to the insurmountable profitability of illicit drug crops, the inability to produce comparable incomes from legal crops and therefore the ineffectiveness of rural development interventions aimed at improving the well being of opium poppy farmers.

Yet the claim of the insurmountable profits to be earned from opium poppy is inaccurate. It seems to be largely shaped by inappropriate comparisons between the gross returns on wheat and opium poppy – as if wheat is the only legal crop in Afghanistan – and the assumption that the profit on an illegal crop is automatically higher than the profit earned on a legal one. In fact due to the high labour costs associated with opium production there are in fact a range of different crops<sup>iv</sup> that generate higher net returns than opium poppy under the appropriate market and security conditions – including wheat in 1994, 1997, 1999<sup>v</sup> and more recently in 2009.<sup>vi</sup>

However, estimates of the returns on different crops are misleading and fail to capture the complex socio-economic and political environment farmers in rural Afghanistan inhabit. They present a simplistic economic model of human behaviour that fails to reflect the complex nature of human decision making in the western world let alone in a more traditional and conservative environment such as rural Afghanistan. For example, at the most basic level comparisons of either gross or net returns on a crop-by-crop basis imply a simple choice between a range of different crops. These figures do not capture the impact that choice and the decision to cultivate one crop rather than another has on other potential income streams that a household may be able to draw upon or on the rules that govern access to markets and assets, particularly in areas of chronic insecurity such as southern Afghanistan.

The fact is that rural households in Afghanistan pursue a myriad of livelihood strategies that not only include cultivating a range of different crops on their own land (where they own it) but also incorporates the rearing and sale of livestock, as well as the sale of labour locally, in the cities of Afghanistan and perhaps across the border in Pakistan and Iran. For example, a farmer cultivating opium poppy commits land

and labour to the crop over a six-month period. In the southern and eastern regions it is typically planted in November and harvested in May. As such, the opium poppy season can cut across the season for spring crops preventing the cultivation of vegetables such as okra and green bean, as well as cotton in some places. Opium production is also labour intensive requiring 350 person days per hectare and 200 person days during the harvest period compared to a total of only 54 days for wheat, and 75 days for onion. Many households are required to hire labour during the opium harvest that can typically cost between US\$5 and US\$ 10 per day (plus food, accommodation, and cigarettes) increasing to as much as US\$ 20 in areas where the security situation particularly poor and/or labour shortages are acute.

Other crops are not always as labour intensive, take less time to yield (therefore allowing a second crop to be cultivated) and can be intercropped, generating even higher net returns per unit of land.<sup>vii</sup> Some crops such as green bean, okra and leek provide multiple harvests, allowing income to be earned throughout the agricultural season and reducing the need for loans. Those crops that require less labour free family members up for employment or to pursue wage labour opportunities in the bazaar. In contrast, the labour intensive nature of opium poppy can also mean that household labour is too busy and is not in a position to earn income elsewhere. Cultivating opium poppy extensively also leaves less land for fodder crops, as well as for growing wheat for the production of wheat straw. The result is either smaller herds or the purchase of fodder on the market leaving the household vulnerable to price fluctuations. Furthermore, once more than half the total cultivable land is allocated to any one crop, even opium poppy, for a number of seasons, crop rotation suffers and yields are affected. By extending opium poppy cultivation over a certain level the household not only impacts on its capacity to take advantage of other potential income streams (if they are in fact available to them) but also increases its vulnerability to market or crop failure. It is for this reason that opium poppy is rarely monocropped in Afghanistan.

The fact is there are a number of farmers in different parts of Afghanistan - provinces such as Nangarhar in the east, Badakhshan in the north east and even Kandahar in the south - that have abandoned opium poppy and are currently earning a higher income than they were than when they were producing opium three or four years ago. However, these farmers reside in a fairly limited area that is adjacent to the provincial centre and consequently they have access to markets for both the agricultural goods they produce and employment opportunities. Experience in Afghanistan does show that reductions in opium poppy cultivation can be achieved in a relatively short time period in areas with good markets and governance. In these areas, there is greater diversification in cropping systems and a shift to high-value horticultural production. Under these conditions, vegetable traders provide many of the advantages of the opium trade, offering advances, purchasing at the farm gate and absorbing transportation and transaction costs.

In these areas the shift out of opium poppy, which is particularly labour intensive, and into high value horticulture also frees household labour to find work in the city nearby. The proximity of these areas to the provincial centre means that transport costs are minimal and those working in the city can reside in their own household at night, which is preferred by family members from a social perspective and increases their net return on daily wage labour rates. Consequently, the result of crop diversification and a shift out of opium poppy cultivation can be an increase in both the net returns per unit of land as well as non-farm income.

Typically the population in these areas that are adjacent to the provincial centre also see the benefits of being part of the wider Afghan state. They will also be recipients

of public goods such as education, health, physical infrastructure, as well as physical security, thereby improving economic opportunities and extending social contract between the state and community. The improvement of physical infrastructure such as roads and irrigation will have reduced transport costs and improved agricultural productivity. Their proximity to the provincial centre also reduces the number of 'checkposts' where taxes and bribes are demanded. Communities in these areas also believe there is a 'security premium' associated with their location near the provincial centre, enabling longer term investments in high value crops and facilitate the trade of legal goods and services. Eradication is also perceived to be a credible threat in these areas and can act as a catalyst for making the shift from opium poppy to diversifying cropping patterns and income streams. Experience in other former opium poppy growing areas in countries like Thailand and Pakistan illustrate that once these kind of economic, political and security gains are consolidated, farmers are unlikely to return to opium production even when farm-gate prices increase significantly.

However opium poppy cultivating households are diverse and dynamic, and their decision as to how much land to dedicate to opium is as we have seen influenced by a range of different factors – not just price and profitability. The process of moving from illicit to licit livelihoods is likely to be very different in the more remote areas of these very same provinces where agricultural commodity and labour markets remain constrained. In these areas limited natural assets, such as land and water, combined with poor roads and high transportation costs, preclude the shift to high-value vegetable production. There are few wage labour employment opportunities available locally. Insecurity and poor governance stymie the growth of the legal economy.

More often than not the political and financial interests of local powerbrokers reinforce high levels of dependency on opium production and prevent households from making sustainable shifts to legal economic options. Especially in such areas, attempts by the local and provincial authorities to reduce opium poppy cultivation can be viewed negatively and seen as part of a wider attempt by those in power to reinforce their political and economic grip over the area. Counter-narcotics efforts can also impact on the legal economy by reducing disposable income leading to a fall in local sales and employment opportunities. Just such an economic downturn can weaken the relationship between the state and local communities. In the more remote areas where farmers have fewer alternatives to opium poppy, eliminating the crop is likely to take a generation. There are no 'quick fixes' despite interventions that coerce farmers not to plant or to eradicate that would suggest the contrary.

### 3. Watching the Pendulum Swing: The Continuing Shifts in Eradication Policy

It is important to recognise that those who persist in growing the crop do not do so due to a natural disposition to the crop, an inherent bent towards 'illegality' or unmitigated greed (although there may be some exceptions). For example, in the province of Ghor farmers that continue to cultivate opium poppy do so because they do not have livestock to invest in and increasingly have fewer non-farm income opportunities both within the province and across the border in Iran. In the province of Nangarhar those that have better access to resources, as well as greater proximity to the labour and agricultural commodity markets of Jalalabad and Kabul largely refrain from opium poppy cultivation and it is those that have fewer assets and are a greater distance from markets that continue to cultivate the crop. This would all tend to suggest that despite any claims to the contrary the returns on opium poppy are not

unassailable and that those that cultivate the crop are not necessarily the wealthiest members of the community.

In southern Afghanistan physical insecurity is at its some of its worst levels for over a decade. It is a rare day when there is not a violent incident involving death or injury in the provinces of Kandahar and Helmand. The impact of such high levels of insecurity should not be underestimated. It has led not only to deaths and injuries, but has also limited the potential for economic growth and employment, and reduced access to economic infrastructure and social services in many parts of the region. Much more importantly, the predatory behaviour of corrupt officials and the proliferation of checkpoints and “nuisance taxes” that beset the mujeheddin and fuelled the Taliban’s rise to power in the mid 1990s have returned. Consequently, the cost of travelling one kilometre in the south has been as much as three times that of travelling the same distance in the eastern, central or northern regions, making transporting legal agricultural crops to market cost-prohibitive.<sup>viii</sup> For those that choose to travel on the roads, violence, intimidation and extortion from state, anti-state and non-state actors have been the rule not the exception.

Under these circumstances, opium poppy has become the preferred crop — a low risk crop in an exceptionally high-risk environment. It is a high-value, low-weight, non-perishable crop. The crop allows farmers to remain in their villages and sell at the farm rather than risking travel to the district, provincial or regional markets to sell, potentially at a price that does not meet the costs of production. While the Taliban would appear to be actively encouraging cultivation for both political and financial advantages, they would also appear to be “pushing on an open door.” The incidence of corruption has not only constrained the functioning of markets for a range of goods and services including crops and labour; it has also increased the impression that opium poppy cultivation is tolerated — if not encouraged — by corrupt government officials.

Where farmers do not have viable alternatives to opium poppy due to resource constraints or due to the local security environment any attempt to destroy the opium crop in the field or to coerce farmers not to plant can prove destabilising. The fact that many farmers in Afghanistan believe that those enforcing a ban on opium and eradicating their crop are actively involved in the trade in opium alienates the population. As does the perception that there is widespread bribery and the belief that eradication often targets the vulnerable and ignores the crops of those with official positions and influence.<sup>ix</sup> In some areas this perception has merely led to a position where parts of the population no longer supports the government, in others communities are beginning to oppose it. Where eradication or a ban on cultivation has been implemented on populations that do not have viable alternatives there are signs of farmers actively looking to oppose the government’s and seek the support of the insurgency. Growing levels of insecurity in the province of Nangarhar are in part attributed to the cumulative effect of the ban on opium poppy cultivation in 2008 and 2009.<sup>x</sup>

The Taliban and other anti government forces appear to be exploiting this sentiment and there is evidence that in contrast to the 1990s where the Taliban established a relatively secure environment in which opium could be grown and traded but where they were not promoting the business<sup>xi</sup>, by 2006 and 2007 the Taliban were actively encouraging opium poppy cultivation.<sup>xii</sup> Whilst some argue that this policy of encouraging opium poppy cultivation is aimed at securing finances for the insurgency, the greater advantage for the Taliban and other anti government elements is the political support they can gain from those directly involved in the cultivation and trade of opiates. In some areas, the Taliban certainly use opium



poppy cultivation as a rallying cry and a way of eliciting the support of the rural population. They have on occasions positioned themselves as protecting crops against eradication<sup>xiii</sup> – even if this has rarely been necessary or delivered and there is the very real possibility that their strategy of encouraging opium poppy cultivation is aimed at provoking the GoIRA to adopt a more aggressive eradication strategy that would drive a wedge between the rural population, the Government of Afghanistan and the International Community.

While the current United States administration has taken a firm anti-eradication position it is unclear how long this policy will continue. There are still those in the international community that are calling for an aggressive eradication policy. The potential for an increase in cultivation in the 2009/10 growing season will test the current US administrations' resolve - perhaps more so with such acute pressure from Congress and the Senate for a notable improvement in 'the metrics' in Afghanistan over the next twelve months. There is the risk that some might attribute any rise in cultivation to this latest shift in eradication policy and ignore the fact that any increase in cultivation is more likely the response of both the changes in provincial governors that are likely to accompany the formation of a new government in Afghanistan and the fact that wheat prices have fallen by more than 50% in the last twelve months.<sup>xiv</sup>

However, the current policy that would appear to limit eradication only to that planned and undertaken by provincial governors (so called Governor Led Eradication) is not without risks. Eradication (or the threat of it) has proven to be an effective catalyst in areas where farmers have viable alternatives to opium poppy and has contributed to greater diversification of both cropping patterns and off and on-farm income in those areas adjacent to provincial centres. It is for this reason that the GoIRA has a policy of 'targeted eradication' – although in practice the actual area targeted has often been in excess of what is both practicable and desirable. While the current strategy of leaving the task of eradication solely to local Governors could be seen within the context of growing calls for 'Afghanisation', it may reinforce the rural population's experience of the kind of partial and predatory campaigns that they have so often complained of. Moreover, there are already anecdotal reports from the field that farmers believe that it is the drugs traders that are the new priority of US policy and they will be free to cultivate.

There is the real risk that the policy on eradication may once again swing from one extreme to another. If cultivation rises in the next twelve months, those who are less well informed, or those with a particular, perhaps rather ingrained, policy position, will press once again for an aggressive eradication campaign. They may even push for chemical eradication arguing that there is little point in trying to 'win hearts and minds' in the poppy growing provinces of the southern region of Afghanistan as this population has already been 'lost'. What is more, it may also be claimed, that the population in the south occupies the more fertile agricultural areas (wealth is implicit in this statement) and is actively funding the insurgency with opium production. Regardless of the weaknesses of this argument it is well versed and it will not be the first time we have heard it. It is also hard to think it would be the last.

There is a need to be clear: the use of chemical sprays to eradicate opium poppy crops would be incredibly divisive in Afghanistan. Polling by NATO has consistently shown that the rural population opposes such a move. Field evidence collected in November and December 2006, at a time when chemical eradication was being discussed in the media and by officials in the provinces, indicated a hostile response from the rural population.<sup>xv</sup> A campaign of spraying the opium crop with chemicals was typically perceived as an act of hostility against the population and not solely at

the plants. Indeed, many believed that spraying would result in crop failures and sickness and perhaps the death of livestock and people.

Whether or not these fears are well founded, the fact is that chemical spraying is most commonly used in areas of extensive wheat cultivation and there is limited knowledge of it in areas where opium poppy is cultivated most intensively,<sup>xvi</sup> indicating considerable scope for misunderstanding and for exploitation by those who wish to do so. In an environment where child mortality and morbidity rates are so high, where crop failure is common, and where livestock are vulnerable to a variety of diseases, there is considerable potential for the rural population, no doubt encouraged by those opposing the government, across Afghanistan to link such events to chemical eradication should it be implemented.

For the insurgents the use of spraying to destroy opium poppy would represent a major propaganda victory. Many rural communities in the south and east do not actively support the Taliban but are growing increasingly concerned that the Government of Afghanistan cannot guarantee even their physical security – a core function of a legitimate and viable state. They do not wish to return to an ‘Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan’ but are disillusioned by the number of civilian casualties, the perception of unprecedented levels of corruption, and concerns that the international community is no longer present in Afghanistan to serve the vital interests of the population.

The rural populations in many areas are forced to hedge their bets, hoping that the Government of Afghanistan will deliver the security, governance and economic growth required for the population to prosper whilst recognising it is weak and corrupt, and in some areas will not achieve these objectives. In this context an intensive eradication campaign particularly one that involves spraying chemicals would undoubtedly further damage if not destroy any trust that rural communities might have for their government. While counterinsurgency arguments are sometimes made to support aggressive eradication arguing that it will remove funding for anti-government groups, history shows that successful counterinsurgency requires the support of the local population to marginalize the insurgents – the use of chemical spray can only drive these two groups ever closer together.

### 3. Deconstructing the Insurgency: Drugs, Funds and Politics

This brings us on to the last theme that needs to be discussed - that of the relationship between ‘the insurgency’ and illegal drugs in Afghanistan. Here the debate can appear as polemic as that which besets discussions on eradication - and sometimes almost as divorced from the complex realities on the ground. Much of the media discussion has focused on the role that the drugs trade plays in funding and motivating the Taliban in Afghanistan - with continuing debates over the proportion of their total money that is derived from the illegal opium economy and what the appropriate response might be.

Estimates of the revenue generated by the Taliban (although it is often unclear which insurgent groups are included under this ‘heading’) range from US\$ 70 million to US\$ 500 million per year suggesting there is a need for further refinement of these calculations. There are now suggestions that ‘the Taliban’ are directly involved in the production and processing of opiates themselves and have become no more than criminal organisations, discarding their political or religious doctrines in favour of the pursuit of profit and market share. The United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime have suggested that ‘the Taliban’ are engaged in market manipulation, retaining

stocks of opium so as to prevent further reductions in the price of opium and looking to impose a further ban on opium poppy cultivation to increase the value of their inventories. As such, the Taliban are now increasingly seen as synonymous with drug traffickers and an increasing number of reports use these two terms as if they are one in the same thing. The policy response to these claims has been to target (for kill or capture) those traffickers with links to the insurgency. This has resulted in some high profile arrests, seizures and subsequent destruction of opiates.

Yet, while perhaps attractive to some (and undoubtedly there is some degree of truth to the claims), this image of the Talib as drugs trafficker and the drugs trafficker as Talib is not the one that is most recognisable to the bulk of the Afghan population. In fact there is a growing impression in the south that those working for the government are more actively involved in the trade in narcotics than the Taliban<sup>xvii</sup> and even in other parts of the country accusations are made against senior government officials and are widely believed by Afghans.

Indeed, farmers in some of the most remote rural areas will often claim that it is only those in positions of power in their area that can trade illegal drugs in Afghanistan. These farmers will typically go on to make allegations against specific ministers, as well as provincial and local government officials. Governors that have banned opium production are also accused of market dominance and the manipulation of prices for self-interest. Regardless of the evidence (or lack of) to support any of these claims they are widely believed to be true by the rural population. The implications for the legitimacy of the state and its institutions are clear, and are only exacerbated by allegations of fraud at the recent Presidential election.

Despite what would appear to be attempts to portray the drugs trade as partisan and dominated by either 'the Taliban' or 'the government' (but typically the former), there is a growing acknowledgement amongst policy makers of the role that both insurgents and corrupt government officials play in the drugs trade. There are even questions over the level of cooperation that might exist between state and anti state actors not only in facilitating the movement of drugs from one part of the country to another, but also in engineering a level of instability in a given area so that the production and trade of opium can thrive.

More recently there have also been attempts to provide a disaggregated picture of the insurgency and to differentiate between the various groups within what has all too often been labelled as 'the Taliban'. This is welcome. However, the issue that needs much more attention both in terms of analysis and policy responses is the question of how much the insurgency has become 'demand led', driven in part by the rural populations perception of unparalleled levels of corruption within the Afghan administration.

If this is the case, surely the highest priority should be to improve the quality of governance in Afghanistan and tackle corruption (including involvement in the drugs trade) rather than target traffickers with links to the Taliban per se. In fact a strategy that prioritises the 'kill or capture' of traffickers with links to the insurgency could serve to eliminate the competition and increase the market power of those government officials involved in the trade. It is unlikely that this course of action would achieve much with regard to reducing the flow of opiates out of Afghanistan if those in government were not also pursued. But more importantly such a move is likely to prove counter productive in terms of improving the legitimacy of the Afghan government in the eyes of the local population.

#### 4. Towards a Better Counter Narcotics Policy in Afghanistan

It is clear that as the production and trade of opium impacts on the security of Afghanistan so might hasty and ill-considered attempts to eliminate it. Interventions that are based on assumptions of the Afghan farmer as a profit maximiser, rather than a risk manager are not informed by the situation on the ground. Attempts to pursue dramatic reductions in opium poppy cultivation over a short time frame and without consideration of their impact on the economic well being of the rural population may increase the population's resentment of the GoIRA and offer entry points to insurgent groups. Similarly exclusively targeting those traffickers who are believed to have links to insurgents could serve to increase the market position of corrupt government officials involved in the trade, achieving little in terms of reducing the flow of narcotics out of Afghanistan and possibly further damaging the legitimacy of the GoIRA with the population.

Evidence shows that the solution to opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan lies with a combination of improved security, governance and economic growth. Where this in place farmers can reduce and subsequently abandon cultivation. However, there has been a tendency for many to see the drugs issue in Afghanistan in a rather limited way. Counter-narcotics efforts are often viewed as synonymous with interdiction, eradication, information campaigns and so called 'alternative livelihoods' interventions — all areas that are action-oriented and specifically labelled counter-narcotics. This limited understanding of what constitutes effective counter-narcotics policy leads to an expectation that such interventions on their own will directly lead to the reduction in the production of opium. They cannot.

What are currently regarded as counter-narcotics activities are necessary — but not sufficient — to reduce the level of opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan. Isolating counter-narcotics efforts has given some in the drug-control community the illusion of control and the budget and policy lead, it has also given many in the development community the opportunity to avoid involvement in the issue for fear of "contaminating" their programmers. This kind of approach has led those that see their primary aim as reducing opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan to push for the kind of effects seen in Nangarhar and Balkh in recent years, and risk undermining the longer-term development effort in Afghanistan. Neither the drug-control community nor development actors have benefited from this artificial separation.

The reality is that counter-narcotics success can only come as an outcome of a wider process of state building and economic development. A combination of interventions is required to reduce the livelihood insecurity that led to increasing levels of opium poppy cultivation in the first place. Many of these interventions will be outside what is so often described as counter-narcotics activities or strategy.

Sustained improvements in rural livelihood security require a coordinated effort to deliver physical security and development interventions. Investments in rural development alone cannot deliver these or produce sustained reductions in opium poppy cultivation. For example, interventions aimed at improving access to public goods and services, social protection and diversifying on-farm, off-farm and non-farm income will falter if security and governance are not improved. Corruption, insecurity and ineffective government institutions hamper the functioning of both agricultural commodity and labour markets, which in turn constrains licit livelihood options. The presence of Anti Government Elements can prevent the delivery of all but the most limited development assistance.

Officially the Government of Afghanistan has recognized that the production, trade and consumption of opium and its derivatives pose a significant threat to the country's overall development. It has also recognised that no single project or programme can address the multiple factors that have led to the expansion of opium

poppy cultivation and that a more concerted and comprehensive effort is required. Evidence in other drug-crop-producing countries, as well as in Afghanistan, point to the fact that the combination of security, economic growth and governance is needed to deliver the development impact that will reduce overall dependency on opium poppy cultivation.<sup>xviii</sup>

There are a range of government activities designed to directly tackle the narcotics issue in Afghanistan, including law enforcement efforts, such as support to the Counter Narcotics Police of Afghanistan (CNPA), institutional strengthening for the Ministry for Counter Narcotics (MCN) and demand reduction efforts. All of these, though, require a wider institutional framework and more integrated approach to be both effective and sustainable. For example, interdiction efforts require investments in the judicial system to result in successful prosecution; demand reduction efforts need to operate within a functioning health system to address the underlying causes of drug use while avoiding high rates of recidivism; and the MCN has to operate within a coherent government ministerial structure and a wider programme of public administrative reform to be able to deliver effective leadership on counter-narcotics.

There are also many other interventions not specifically aimed at reducing the production, trade or consumption of illicit drugs in Afghanistan that will nevertheless make significant contributions to delivering drug control outcomes. Many of the interventions that are anticipated to have a less direct effect on the drug-control effort relate to rural livelihoods interventions, programmes in sectors such as transport, public works, and vocational training could also contribute to reducing the threat that narcotics poses to Afghanistan's development.

Within this framework there are few projects or programmes that should be considered discrete, stand-alone counter-narcotics interventions, and none that would result in the elimination of either the production, consumption or trade of illegal drugs. Instead, counter-narcotics needs to be integrated within the wider process of state building and economic development. This is not to suggest that the drug issue can be ignored and considered simply an externality of development. There is a clear need to consider the effect different interventions in each of the main sectors (security, governance and economic growth) have on the cultivation, trade and consumption of illegal drugs and ensure efforts maximise counter-narcotics outcomes.

The foundation for such an integrated approach already exists, although at this stage in aspiration rather than reality, with drugs being recognised as a "cross-cutting issue" in both the Afghanistan National Development Strategy and National Drug Control Strategy (NDCS).<sup>xix</sup> Such an approach is not one that seeks to downgrade or ignore the drug issue: far from it. It attempts to put counter-narcotics at the front and centre of policy and operational planning and give it the recognition required to deliver the improvement in lives and livelihoods that the Afghan population is both desperately seeking and deserves. It is time that this approach was operationalised and less attention was given to the kind of hyperbole and inaccurate narratives that have a tendency to dominate policy discussions and detract from what is actually needed in rural Afghanistan.

### **About David Mansfield**

David Mansfield has been doing indepth fieldwork in rural Afghanistan since June 1997. Primarily this work has examined the role that opium poppy plays in rural livelihood strategies and the dynamics of the farmgate trade in opium. However, given the cross cutting nature of the drugs issue in Afghanistan this work has also charted the different socio-economic, political and environmental factors that explain fluctuations in cultivation and why these differ by location and socio-economic group. The evidence base he has produced has been at the forefront of policy development in Afghanistan and represents an important source of primary data for many policy analysts and academics.

David has worked for a variety of different organisations including the Afghan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU), the Aga Khan Development Network, and the United Kingdom's Afghan Drugs Interdepartmental Unit. He has also supported the World Bank, Asian Development Bank and the European Commission in integrating the drugs issue into their development programmes in Afghanistan, including their support to the National Priority Programmes.

Prior to his work in Afghanistan David worked in overseas drugs and development issues, working in each of the major drug producing regions of South and South East Asia, and Latin America. His published work has sought to contextualise drugs as a development issue, and in particular has focused on developing pro-poor approaches to development in drug producing areas.

David is currently a fellow in the Afghanistan/Pakistan State Building and Human Rights Programme in the Carr Center at the Kennedy School of Harvard University. Copies of his reports can be found at [www.davidmansfield.org](http://www.davidmansfield.org)

## ENDNOTES

<sup>i</sup> “The sheer size and nature of the opium economy means that it infiltrates and seriously affects Afghanistan’s economy, state society and politics. The opium economy is a massive source of corruption and gravely undermines the credibility of the government and its local representatives.” Christopher Ward, David Mansfield, Peter Oldham and Bill Byrd, “Afghanistan: Economic Incentives and Development Initiatives to Reduce Opium Production,” (report for the World Bank and Department for International Development, February 2008), 1.

<sup>ii</sup> Respondents in southern Afghanistan, pers. comm., February and April 2008.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iv</sup> For an account of the different crops that competed with opium poppy in the 1990s see Mumtaz, Alternative Cropping Systems for the Development of Agriculture in Qandahar. Report for UNDCP Afghanistan Programme, Islamabad, 1997; and K. Dawlaty and Omar Anwarzay, ‘War a Booster of Poppy Cultivation in Afghanistan: Background and Areas for Research’. An Unpublished Report prepared for The Swedish Committee for Afghanistan, Peshawar, Pakistan, 1993; Nicole Potulski, Alternative Crops for Drug Growing Areas in Asia (Pakistan, Afghanistan, Nepal, Thailand). A literature review commissioned by the ODA from the International Centre for Underutilised Crops, Wye College, University of London, 1991. For more recent estimates of the profitability of different legal crops see Mansfield, David (2007) Governance, Security and Economic Growth: The Determinants of Opium Poppy Cultivation in the Districts of Jurm and Baharak in Badakhshan. A Report for the Aga Khan Development Network, February 2007 and . Mansfield, David (2008) Resurgence and Reductions: Explanations for Changing Levels of Opium Poppy Cultivation in Nangarhar and Ghor in 2005-2007. A report for AREU’s Applied Thematic Research into Water Management, Livestock and the Opium Economy. AREU, Kabul. May 2008,

<sup>v</sup> See UNDCP, Afghanistan: Assessment Strategy and Programming Mission to Afghanistan, May-July 1995; and UNDCP, Afghanistan Annual Opium Poppy Survey 1997, (Islamabad, UNDCP, p. 11).

<sup>vi</sup> David Manfield (2009) Sustaining the Decline? Understanding the Nature of Change in the Rural Livelihoods of Opium Poppy Growing Households in the 2007/08 Growing Season. A Report for the Afghan Drugs Inter Departmental Unit of the UK Government (May). Page 51.

<sup>vii</sup> Mansfield, David (2008) Resurgence and Reductions: Explanations for Changing Levels of Opium Poppy Cultivation in Nangarhar and Ghor in 2005-2007. A report for AREU’s Applied Thematic Research into Water Management, Livestock and the Opium Economy. AREU, Kabul. May 2008, Page 21-26

<sup>viii</sup> Mansfield, “Responding to Risk and Uncertainty.”

<sup>ix</sup> William Byrd and Doris Buddenberg in Afghanistan’s Drugs Industry: Structure, functioning, dynamics and implications for counter narcotics policy ed by Buddenberg, D. and W. Byrd. UNODC/World Bank. Kabul. November. Page 20 ‘Beyond the Metrics’: Understanding the Nature of Change in the Rural Livelihoods of Opium Poppy Growing Households in the 2006/07 Growing Season. A Report for the Afghan Drugs Inter Departmental Unit of the UK Government (May). Mansfield, David (2006). “Exploring the ‘Shades of Grey’: An Assessment of the Factors Influencing Decisions to Cultivate Opium Poppy in 2005/06.” A Report for the Afghan Drugs Inter Departmental Unit of the UK Government (February).

<sup>x</sup> David Mansfield Fieldwork in Nangarhar 2009 (forthcoming AREU Briefing Paper, February 2010)

<sup>xi</sup> In the 1990s the Taliban provided a level of security in which the trade in opium thrived. At the same time the impact of the conflict and the lack of public and private sector investment provided few alternatives to opium poppy cultivation. This is not to say that elements of the Taliban were not involved in the trade but there was not a consistent national policy that was applied towards the opium economy until the promulgation of the Taliban prohibition on opium until July 2000. UNODC (1999) *The Dynamics of the Farmgate Opium Trade and the Coping Strategies of Opium Traders*. By David Mansfield. UNODC Afghanistan Programme, Strategic Study 2. UNODC: Islamabad.

<sup>xii</sup> ‘Beyond the Metrics’: Understanding the Nature of Change in the Rural Livelihoods of Opium Poppy Growing Households in the 2006/07 Growing Season. A Report for the Afghan Drugs Inter Departmental Unit of the UK Government (May).

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<sup>xiii</sup> Mansfield, David (2006). "Exploring the 'Shades of Grey': An Assessment of the Factors Influencing Decisions to Cultivate Opium Poppy in 2005/06." A Report for the Afghan Drugs Inter Departmental Unit of the UK Government (February).

<sup>xiv</sup> USAID/FEWS Afghanistan Security Update, August 2009. Page 1.

<sup>xv</sup> 'Beyond the Metrics': Understanding the Nature of Change in the Rural Livelihoods of Opium Poppy Growing Households in the 2006/07 Growing Season. A Report for the Afghan Drugs Inter Departmental Unit of the UK Government (May). Page 44-45.

<sup>xvi</sup> Herbicides are used but typically only where there are large landholdings with extensive wheat cultivation. These herbicides are used to control the weeds in light of sub optimal crop rotation. In the east this would be districts like Behsud, Surkhrud, and Kama in Nangarhar and Qarghai in Laghman. In districts where landholdings are smaller, wheat cultivation less extensive, and there is livestock, herbicides are not used as the weeds are used as fodder for livestock. David Mansfield Unpublished fieldwork Nangarhar 2007.

<sup>xvii</sup> Mansfield, "Responding to Risk and Uncertainty."

<sup>xviii</sup> GTZ, "Development in a Drugs Environment: Towards a Strategic Approach to 'Alternative Development.'" (discussion paper, Development-Oriented Drug Control Programme, February 2006), 9–10.

<sup>xix</sup> '....it is crucial that counter narcotics is fully integrated into the broader national development agenda as set out in the National Development Strategy and the Government Security Sector Reform programmes laid out in the National Security Policy' (Page 7) 'The Government's CN policy must occur within the context of a broader stabilisation process. CN policy must therefore be mainstreamed, that is included, and facilitated in both national and provincial plans and strategies.' (Page 15) Ministry of Counter-Narcotics. 'National Drug Control Strategy: An Updated Five Year Strategy for Tackling the Illicit Drug Problem'. Kabul, January 2006.