

doi: 10:5191/jiaee.2012.19204

Understanding Afghan Opinion Leaders' Viewpoints About Post-Conflict Foreign Agricultural Development: A Case Study in Herāt Province, Afghanistan

Glen C. Shinn

Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education, and Communications

Texas A&M University

College Station TX 77843-2116

Tel: 979-862-3012

Fax: 979-845-6296

g-shinn@tamu.edu / glen.shinn@gmail.com

Richard K. Ford

Norman Borlaug Institute for International Agriculture

Texas A&M University

College Station TX 77843-2477

Tel: 979-862-3012

Fax: 979-845-6296

Rahmat Attaie

Cooperative Agricultural Research Center

Prairie View A&M University

Prairie View TX 77446

Tel: 936-261-5004

Fax: 936-261-9975

Gary E. Briers

Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education, and Communications

Texas A&M University

College Station TX 77843-2116

Tel: 979-862-3000

Fax: 979-845-6296

Abstract

This investigation sprang from a yearlong immersion in post-conflict agricultural development environments in Herāt Province Afghanistan and from observing an array of NGO development projects. The purpose was to understand better the viewpoints of Afghan opinion leaders regarding the adoption–integration of foreign agricultural development. Objectives included (a) the identification of perceived strengths of foreign agricultural development, (b) perceived weaknesses, (c) opportunities, (d) threats, (e) anomalies, and (f) incentives and barriers. The case method fit the qualitative research design, and IRB approved the protocols. Researchers selected 15 opinion leaders (OLs) based on their knowledge, experience, and positional responsibilities. An interview guide framed 13 open-ended questions. A researcher fluent in Farsi/Pashto/English assisted with each interview. The findings from 15 interviews emerged as 11 themes. Fourteen OLs recognized agriculture and natural resources as strengths for

development. Opinion Leaders recognized government, infrastructure, and corruption as fundamental weaknesses. Opinion Leaders were slow to identify opportunities but generally identified opportunities to exploit labor, land, and water coupled with improving management and mechanization. They universally recognized threats related to personal security and safety but had difficulty separating internal weaknesses from external threats. Two anomalies emerged as incongruous expectations about Afghan government and foreign NGOs. Improving market chains and increasing governmental subsidies were incentives for development. The authors conclude that indigenous knowledge is a fundamental resource and a foundation for local-level decision making and sustainability. Opinion Leaders serve as channels to move the society from poverty and conflict toward security and peacebuilding. The tension between Maslow's hierarchy of needs and Max-Neef's interrelated and interactive needs should be explored.

Keywords: Extension and Advisory Services, Indigenous Knowledge, NGO, Post-Conflict Agricultural Development, Safety and Security, Sustainable Development, Value Chain Development

Introduction

World headline news during 2011 reported a world population that surpassed 7 billion people, significant regional variations in world climate, and widespread social chaos resulting from poverty and conflict. Eight of ten children born during 2011 were in developing countries, where poverty, social chaos and political conflicts have nested in these societies. Physical climate variations had significant impact on food prices and contributed to a 50% spike in food prices in least-developed countries. A global economic recession, double-digit unemployment, increasing national debts, and civil unrest resulted in social turmoil. With disproportional population growth rates, existing social chaos, and political conflicts in the world, it is important to study post-conflict scenarios and to focus on the roots and means of resolving agricultural problems.

Scholars Easterly (2006), Collier (2007) and Sachs (2011) argue about strategies and tactics, but continue to search for an efficient, effective, sustainable development model that is appropriate for least developed, post-conflict countries, and interdependent economies. Futamura, Newman, and Tadjbakhsh (2010) concluded, “Peacebuilding, and by extension state-building, has therefore increasingly become integral to the security agenda” (p. 2). To attain sustainable development, indigenous opinion leaders must accept and integrate innovations into locally adopted practice. A global environment of economic, political, and social chaos prompted the researchers to identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats, and interactions associated with post-conflict agricultural development. The findings provide a holistic view of foreign aid in the agriculture-agribusiness sector of Herāt, Afghanistan.

Purpose and Objectives

This inquiry emerged during a post-conflict agricultural development mission in Herāt Province, Afghanistan, in 2010–2011. The purposes were to understand better the viewpoints of Afghan opinion leaders (OLs) regarding foreign agricultural development and to identify strategies and tactics for integrating innovations into sustainable agricultural practices. The six objectives of this study included the identification of (a) perceived strengths of foreign agricultural development, (b) perceived weaknesses; (c) opportunities, (d) threats, (e) anomalies, and (f) incentives and barriers for agricultural development.

Methods and Data Sources

The case method (Yin, 2009) fit the criteria of the qualitative research design, and protocols were approved by the Texas A&M University IRB. Grounded theory and sensitizing concepts (Carlile & Christensen, 2005; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002) guided the conceptual framework. Qualitative and quantitative techniques (Acker & Gasperini, 2008; Mwaijande et al., 2009; Rogers, 2003) provided focus for integrating data collection, analysis protocols, research tools, agricultural specialties, and technical and social knowledge systems. SWOT—strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats—was selected as a method to understand better the strengths/weaknesses of foreign agricultural development and the opportunities/threats in the environment (McLean, 2006). A series of open-ended questions posed to key opinion leaders (OLs) guided the interviews and discussions. Prolonged engagement, member checks during interviews, peer debriefing, triangulation of information from multiple sources, and the use of audit trails strengthened trustworthiness of data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009).

Researchers selected 15 OLs for their knowledge and experience in a topic of interest and their positional responsibilities in agricultural education, extension, and development. An interview guide consisting of 13 open-ended questions was used to frame the discussions. Multiple researchers engaged in the interviews, and after-action reviews provided triangulation. Bass and Bass (2008) warned, “Language clearly distinguishes cultures” (p. 982). In order to understand the nuance of language, a researcher fluent in Farsi/Pashto/English assisted with each interview. The researchers acted as natural participants with long-term relationships with the OLs. Interviews were qualitative, in-depth, time-oriented, and semi-structured. To augment the interviews, the researchers used direct observation over a 12-month deployment. Researchers used a detailed daily log to record observations at project sites, during conferences, and during personal visits. Field notes documented on-going activities, processes, discussions, social interactions, conflicts, and observable outcomes. Observation data were collected June 2010 through December 2011, and interviews were conducted January 2011 through November 2011. Individual respondents formed the unit of coding. A continuous process of analysis and transcription occurred during data collection. Patterns, codes, consistencies, anomalies, and themes emerged during the analysis phase (Erlandson et al., 1993; Merriam, 2009). This study was delimited to indigenous opinion leaders with whom the researchers developed positive, collaborative relationships and shared visions of peacebuilding. An assumption was that benefits come from participatory processes and trusting relationships. A limitation of this study could be that some OLs may have expressed their views with reservation on sensitive agricultural issues. This paper does

not reflect the views of the general Afghan population in Herāt Province.

Findings

The findings from 15 interviews with opinion leaders (OLs) emerged as 11 themes—personal security and safety, government policies, natural resources, NGOs, economics and market chains, technologies, change, crop production, corruption, cold storage, and infrastructure. As an “ice-breaker,” each interview began with an inquiry about the opinion leader’s work history and responsibilities of the positions. Each OL was positive about his/her experiences and contributions to Afghan agriculture. Several OLs reported multiple work experiences. Six of the OLs (02, 03, 06, 07, 08, 09) described their work related to education and training. Five OLs (02, 04, 05, 07, 14) described their work with the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation, and Livestock. Four OLs (01, 04, 06, 12) described their work in technical agriscience, particularly crop breeding, horticulture, entomology, and water engineering; four OLs (06, 09, 11, 13) described their work in agribusiness. Four OLs (01, 02, 03, 14) described their work in the agricultural university, and three (10, 13, 15) described their work in farming. The OLs ranged in age from 20–25 to 55–60 years old. The median age of the group was 40–45 years. All OLs had from seven to more than 30 years of experience in Afghan agriculture. The median agricultural experience was 20–25 years. All participating organizations in this study were institutions serving agricultural and rural development in Herāt Province, Afghanistan.

The emergent themes traversed the six objectives of identification of: (a) perceived strengths of foreign agricultural development, (b) perceived weaknesses, (c) perceived opportunities, (d) perceived

threats, (e) anomalies that emerged from discussions, and (f) incentives and barriers for development in this environment.

Objective 1

Fourteen opinion leaders (OLs) agreed that agriculture and natural resources are the greatest strengths of Herāt Province. Opinion Leader 06 said, “Agriculture is the main income of people in Afghanistan. Afghan people are experienced in agriculture. We have good land, water, and people.” Opinion Leader 15 agreed but added, “Conditions will continue to improve, especially if the water is managed properly.” Opinion Leader 09 opined, “The greatest strength of Afghan agriculture is the knowledge and experience of the farmers.” However, OL-05 said, “There are no strengths—farmers survive on gifts from NGOs. Otherwise, if the NGOs leave, the farmers will die or move to the city.”

Objective 2

There was variability among opinion leaders when asked to describe weaknesses of the agricultural sector. Among the themes, 15 OLs commented on weak government, five (01, 02, 04, 06, 15) identified weak infrastructure, and four (02, 03, 04, 14) identified corruption as a weakness. Opinion Leader 02 said, “There is a weak management system in government, poor infrastructure, and general corruption.” Opinion Leader 12 recognized the “lack of capital, equipment, extension, and know-how” as big weaknesses within the sector. Opinion Leader 12 stated that, “because of poor integration, you see wonderful alfalfa and poor cattle.” Opinion Leader 14 said weaknesses included “old cultural practices in agriculture such as keeping small parcels of land that are difficult to mechanize. Farmers do not sell their land easily. There is a lack of governmental support to farmers. Farmers have a lack of good markets and

transportation and they lack use of modern machinery.” Opinion Leader 15 promptly listed three weaknesses in rank order: “A lack of agricultural machinery, poor pest management, and a poor economy, particularly no government budget for subsidies or incentives.” These findings support the work of U.S. Agency for International Development (2006) and the Peacebuilding Commission (2011).

Objective 3

The word “opportunities” typically did not occur until late in the conversations. When asked specifically about opportunities in the agricultural sector, OL-14 said, “The opportunities that exist are availability of cheap labor force, plenty of land, and water; all we need is good management skills to utilize these opportunities.” Six respondents (03, 06, 08, 11, 13, 15) recognized the opportunities to increase saffron production. Three OLs (03, 10, 15) acknowledged opportunities to improve markets and processing, and OL-09 recommended increased greenhouse production. Two OLs (04, 05) saw no opportunities for agriculture. OL-04 said, “There is a lack of opportunities—this is a big problem—there are no opportunities in Afghanistan. If you were to move to Herāt, you would face multiple problems—security, economics, language, employment, and others.” Opinion Leader 05 was less pessimistic but warned, “If these conditions continue, there are no opportunities unless we correct the weaknesses—lack of technology, market changes, cold storage, price support.”

Objective 4

All 15 of the OLs agreed that threats included personal security and safety and voiced concern regarding both Afghan and Taliban violence. Opinion Leader 06 advocated, “Security—we need more security and more investment. By security, I

mean personal safety.” Others identified threats from weak market chains for exports (01, 03, 07, 08, 09), neighboring countries price-support policies for export of agricultural commodities (01, 02, 05, 15), and scarce use of transnational water (03, 09, 12, 15). Opinion Leader 09 warned, “The greatest threat to Afghan agriculture is the scarcity of water. . .” Opinion Leader 15 agreed, while OL-02 warned, “The greatest threat is from Iran and Pakistan. They are trying to have a strong influence.” The proposal from OL-05 was that “the government should charge a tariff on imported agricultural goods from Iran and Pakistan.” Opinion Leader 15 warned, “Continued production of poppy and insecurity are the greatest threats to the local population.”

Objective 5

The researchers identified two anomalies—views about local government and foreign *NGOs*—that emerged from discussions. There was widespread distrust of “government” (01, 02, 03, 04, 06, 07, 08, 09, 11, 13, 15), yet there was a general expectation for “government” to provide solutions to transform weaknesses and threats into strengths and opportunities. Opinion Leader 02 said, we must “. . . increase the financial resources that create job opportunities. If the government provides jobs, the people support the government. People without jobs are motivated against the government. This creates bad conditions and insecurity for the country.” Opinion Leader 06 said, “If there were more jobs, there would be more opportunities. This problem must be solved by the government.” Opinion Leader 04 said, “Government should provide more subsidies to farmers for their crops.” Opinion Leader 11 said, “The government should help the farmers more, to train them in better livestock management procedures

and in better cultivation, fertilization, and pruning practices.”

When examining the theme of *NGOs*, 12 OLs (01, 02, 03, 04, 05, 08, 09, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15) were generally positive about technical and financial support by *NGOs* in Herāt. OL-03 remarked, “Foreigners [*NGOs*] have helped a lot” and OL-10 acknowledged, “*NGOs* have brought new technologies and capacity building projects.” Opinion Leader 15 attested, “*NGOs* have greatly assisted farmers, particularly with the distribution of saffron corms and improved wheat seed, thereby reducing poppy production . . .” However, OL-02 lamented, “Most of foreign aid is spent on administration charges, security, vehicles, and their own salaries with only a small amount spent directly on farmers.” Opinion Leader 06 said disparagingly, “Most *NGOs* think only about getting money.” . . . “*NGOs* do not think about the future, only about their profits.” There was a majority support for increased foreign aid, but a negative viewpoint on foreign control of development projects and programs. Opinion Leader 14 opined, “Donors do not give according to our needs, but they give according to their desires or to the sectors that they choose and usually these priorities do not match.” These findings corroborate the proposition of Futamura, Newman, and Tadjbakhsh (2010) that “. . . peacebuilding often neglects the welfare needs of local populations and fails to engage with indigenous traditional institutions” (p. 3).

Objective 6

Opinion leaders identified six incentives to enhance agricultural development. All OLs recognized the value of improved market chains as an incentive, and 10 recommended governmental subsidies for crop production (01, 02, 03, 04, 06, 07, 08, 09, 11, 13) and better marketing policies (01, 02, 03, 04, 06, 07,

08, 09, 11, 13). These findings support the work of Kock and Edwards (2007) and Kock, Harder, and Saisi (2007).

Six OLs opined that better NGO policies and priorities would incentivize development (01, 02, 03, 04, 06, 11) and improve infrastructure (04, 06). Opinion Leader 02 recognized that, “To bring significant change in a big system is difficult. The people who are expected to run agriculture must know about agriculture—they must have management and technical knowledge.”

All OLs agreed that personal security and safety is a barrier to agricultural

development under the current circumstances. Seven OLs (01, 02, 03, 04, 05, 06, 10) viewed Iranian and Pakistani policies as barriers while four (02, 03, 04, 14) identified national corruption as a barrier to development. OL-06 lamented, “When investors come to Herāt, they will not invest because of the lack of security. I am concerned about security for my family. Let’s say I invest US\$150,000 in a farm. Criminals will kidnap my son and ask for US\$250,000. Investors are afraid because of the lack of security.”

Table 1. Emergent Themes in Foreign Agricultural Development and Their Frequency and Distribution by Afghan Opinion Leaders

Theme	Frequency by opinion leader	Frequency by theme	Distribution by opinion leader
Government	15	44	01, 02, 03, 04, 05, 06, 07, 08, 09, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15
Personal security and safety	15	44	01, 02, 03, 04, 05, 06, 07, 08, 09, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15
NGOs	14	41	01, 02, 03, 04, 05, 06, 07, 08, 09, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15
Water	12	61	01, 02, 03, 04, 06, 07, 08, 09, 11, 13, 14, 15
Markets and economics	11	39	03, 04, 05, 07, 08, 09, 10, 11, 13, 14, 15
Technology	11	15	02, 03, 04, 05, 06, 07, 08, 10, 11, 12, 15
Wheat	8	35	01, 03, 04, 05, 07, 11, 12, 15
Change	6	24	02, 03, 06, 09, 12, 14
Cold storage	5	7	04, 05, 09, 11, 13
Infrastructure	5	6	01, 02, 04, 06, 15
Corruption	4	10	02, 03, 04, 14

Conclusions, Recommendations, and Implications

Poverty, conflict and security are intertwined—with each condition exacerbating the other and obscuring the vision for peace and wellbeing. However, Afghan opinion leaders seek safety and security as a precondition to agricultural development. Opinion leaders—elders and shura members—possess community knowledge, appreciate cultural values, and have authority and influence over how, when and if a community will accept foreign development. The spirit of foreign agricultural development and basis of sustainable development should be more about people, cultures, and knowledge exchange and less about objects and ambitions. This finding is consistent with the conclusions of Subba Rao (2006), that indigenous knowledge is the key resource for development and forms the basis for local-level decision making in agriculture.

There was a history of mistrust of foreign development agencies by Afghan OLs. Trust was slowly being built by demonstrating respect and sensitivity, improving cultural understanding, and immersion into local activities. Accountability and transparency played important roles in building trust. These findings are consistent with those cited by Neufeldt et al., of Lederach's work (1997) that “. . . peacebuilding needs to be (a) comprehensive, (b) strengthen interdependent relationships, (c) be sustainable, (d) be strategic in its focus and (e) construct an infrastructure for peace” (p. 94).

Fifteen OLs appeared to hold comparatively consistent viewpoints on seven of eleven emergent themes regarding foreign agricultural development and the post-conflict goals and strategies for Herāt Province. Opinion Leaders recognized strengths and weaknesses associated with

agricultural development, but were challenged or reluctant to recognize opportunities and threats to development. There was a pervasive lack of self-reliance and an external locus of control exhibited among OLs. These findings are consistent with that of Rola-Rubzen, Hardaker, and Dillon (2001), who concluded that farmers need to be empowered, take more control of their own activities, and reduce dependency on external factors that they cannot control. OLs have incongruent expectations about government. OLs generally view government as a weak, corrupt system while at the same time as a principal source of solutions to social and economic problems.

Recommendations

Six strategies and tactics are recommended to improve the integration of innovations into sustainable agricultural practices.

1. Post-conflict development should advance personal safety and security as a basis for sustainable development. Post-conflict development must address personal security and safety of local people and investors. This is consistent with findings of Kock, Harder, and Saisi (2007). Caan (2005) cautioned, “The interdependence between security and reconstruction must not be overlooked in post-conflict reconstruction and stabilization operations. Security strategies must therefore be inextricably linked with reconstruction strategies” (para. 12).

2. Foreign agricultural development workers should use methods that show respect, trust and appreciation of indigenous opinion leaders and their authority. Foreign workers should be aware of spiritual and cultural events and the specific roles of men and women. Activities should be appropriate with culture and holidays.

3. Engage opinion leaders in the adoption and diffusion process. Opinion

leaders are the guardians of indigenous knowledge, principal change agents, and the ones who provide legitimacy and sustainability for post-conflict development practices. Fitzhugh (2011) opined that the fundamental factors for success in foreign agricultural development are focus, flexibility, partners, and ownership. Opinion leaders may not always advocate the latest knowledge or technology, but they serve as channels to move incrementally from knowledge to confirmation and from poverty and conflict toward prosperity and peacebuilding.

4. Indigenous knowledge is a crucial element for sustainable development, but indigenous knowledge must be coaxed and encouraged. It is crucial that opinion leaders feel that subject matter experts (SMEs) are interested in learning what local leaders believe are their genuine needs. Additionally, it is important for SMEs to appear willing to help opinion leaders reach their goals before opinion leaders are willing to engage in foreign development projects. Balance competing goals by planning sustainable agricultural development initiatives while initiating flexible tactical projects that fit the current priorities of indigenous opinion leaders and communities.

5. Strategies should purposively encourage individual responsibility and ownership while minimizing powerful others and the locus of destiny or chance for sustainable development.

6. SWOT is an approach to strategic planning. While internal strengths and weaknesses may be openly discussed early in a relationship, it will take time before opinion leaders are willing to discuss external obstacles and threats to agricultural development.

Lesson learned: Ask the right questions and listen carefully to the opinion leaders' aspirations. This is consistent with

the recommendations of Shinn and Briers (2009). Caan (2005) concluded, "High hopes and lofty promises are no substitute for sound planning and prudent expectations" (para. 9).

Implications

Four implications emerged from this study.

1. Foreign NGOs who come in-country with a prescribed scope of work, a predetermined "burn-rate," and with little inclination or power to adapt or accommodate indigenous knowledge will more likely produce bitterness and unsustainable projects. These conditions fail to connect foreign investments to the priorities of local people or traditional institutions. Sustainable development is coupled with sound policies, accountability, ownership, and effective local projects. Sustainability relies on complementary networks among opinion leaders, the work, and the larger community.

2. There is a tendency by some NGOs to implement and control projects that are more aligned with their personal goals, expertise, and experience. Sachs (2011) corroborated saying, "The extent of contracting vastly exceeds agencies' ability to oversee the contractors' work" (p. 246). Sachs concluded, "The proper approach is to rebuild public management, not to turn it over to voracious private firms" (p. 246).

3. Opinion leaders are more likely to embrace development when a clearly articulated vision and mutually negotiated strategies are communicated. Maslow (1954) and Max-Neef, Elizalde, and Hopenhayn (1987) agreed that sustainable development begins by satisfying fundamental human needs. Human needs and wants change over time as issues and challenges are resolved. Consequently, the scope of development work should be well planned with flexibility and creativity to

integrate activities into existing local priorities. Max-Neef, Elizalde, and Hopenhayn (1987) proposed that human needs, self-reliance, and engagement are pillars that support human development. Unlike Maslow, Max-Neef, Elizalde, and Hopenhayn posit there is no hierarchy of needs other than safety and security. Rather, they hypothesized nine human needs, such as subsistence or freedom, can be juxtaposed against four existential categories of “being, having, doing and interacting,” resulting in a 36-cell matrix. They caution, “This matrix is neither normative nor conclusive. . . . In fact, this matrix of satisfiers, if completed by individuals or groups from diverse cultures and in different historical moments, might vary considerably” (p. 32). Max-Neef, Elizalde, and Hopenhayn concluded, “development is about people and not about objects” (p. 19). The authors have concluded that post-conflict foreign agricultural development is complex but satisfying.

4. Enabling or empowering opinion leaders with an internal locus of control will increase empowerment, self-determination, and control of their destiny. The lesson learned: Listen carefully to the desires, dreams, and hopes of local opinion leaders—these priorities will continue long after the project team is gone.

Note: The opinions and recommendations expressed herein reflect the authors' personal observations and do not imply endorsement by or official policy of The Norman Borlaug Institute for International Agriculture, Texas A&M University, Prairie View A&M University, or the U.S. Department of State.

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