

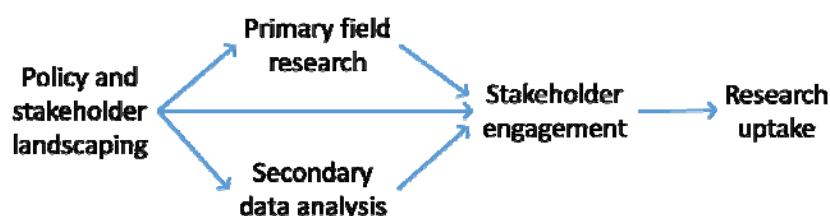
# Influencing Policy and Practice in Afghanistan

## Introduction

The Leveraging Agriculture for Nutrition in South Asia ([LANSA](#)) research programme consortium aims to enhance the impact of agriculture on maternal and child nutrition in [Afghanistan](#). The research focus within LANSAs is on how agriculture and agri-food systems can be better designed to improve nutrition. It is concerned with multisectoral strategies, policies and interventions that can enhance the nutritional status, particularly of women and children. The process involves understanding the facilitators and barriers to linking agriculture and nutrition, and the nutritional impacts of agri-food value chains. LANSAs activities in Afghanistan to date include the mapping of stakeholder perceptions of sectoral policies and programmes, primary research, secondary data analysis, policy dialogue, partnership-building, capacity strengthening, research uptake and dissemination.

The research has been led by SOAS LCIRAH staff of the University of London International Development Centre (LIDC) in collaboration with a range of organisations in Afghanistan: Afghanaid, Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, United Nations Environment Programme, and BRAC. Local partners have been essential in linking to governmental and other organisations in Kabul, and in conducting fieldwork in Provinces such as Badakhshan, Bamyan, Kandahar, and Nangarhar. Colleagues from MSSRF in Chennai, India have contributed to policy dialogue and research uptake activities.

LANSA activities and knowledge management in Afghanistan are categorised as shown in the Figure below and summarised in the following sections:



## Policy and stakeholder landscaping

### Mapping stakeholder perceptions

The objectives of this research were to identify the inter-relationships between key organisations in agriculture and nutrition, evaluate the local evidence linking agriculture to nutrition, understand the perceptions of decision makers about policy making and implementation, and the capacities needed for improving nutrition through agri-food systems. It was found that there was a lack of inter-sectoral policy integration between agriculture and nutrition, and that little attention had been given to women’s specific roles. Policies themselves were said to be often donor-driven, ill-designed through top-down processes, with insufficient knowledge and awareness of local realities and heterogeneity of context.

Communication within and between sectors was good at the national and provincial levels, but communication between the hierarchical — national and subnational — levels of government was poor. There was evidence of coordination activities among myriad policy formulating bodies, funding and implementation partners, but there are many inconsistencies to overcome. Finally, the deteriorating

security situation and increasing humanitarian needs, particularly from returning refugees, point to the need to integrate in a deliberate way the acute humanitarian interventions and long-term development needs of the country, of which malnutrition is just one element. Based on a working paper,<sup>1</sup> an article on policy perceptions has been submitted to the journal *Food Security*.

## Secondary data analysis and primary field research

### Anaemia deficiencies

South Asia is the region of the world with the highest levels of iron-deficiency anaemia. There has been little work on understanding anaemia in Afghanistan, but anaemia prevalence amongst non-pregnant women has been estimated at 25%. Food fortification or supplementation are potential approaches to addressing micronutrient deficiencies, but are problematic in typically dispersed and remote communities. Analysis of secondary data on health and agriculture was conducted in order to identify the drivers of anaemia in women, and the food sources of iron. We found that ownership of agricultural assets, particularly sheep, and their use in food production were found to have an important role in alleviating anaemia, especially where local food markets may be inadequate. This work has been published in *PLoS One*.<sup>2</sup>

### Dietary diversity and food market access

The diversity of foods in diets is an important factor in enhancing nutrition. For Afghanistan, where bread is the principal food, lack of dietary diversity is very important. Secondary national datasets were used to analyse the relationship between agricultural production and dietary diversity. The results so far have confirmed an important seasonal dimension to the interplay between own production and market supplies. Higher levels of farm production diversity were found to be positively associated with dietary diversity in the regular season, but not in the lean season. Livestock species diversity remains important for dietary diversity throughout the year, but particularly so in the lean season when cropping diversity becomes unimportant. A paper on the quantitative analysis of secondary data has been submitted to the journal *Food Policy*.

An in-depth empirical study of drivers of dietary diversity and food sourcing strategies using a small-scale qualitative approach has been conducted in Bamyan Province. Two workshops were held in Bamyan City in July 2018 to validate results and feed back to participants and local stakeholders. Report writing is under way and will be prepared for publication later in 2018. Findings again highlight the important impact of seasonality on dietary diversity, and the role of livestock and particularly dairy products in the 'lean' season. Strategies to increase the use of dairy products are constrained by environmental limitations to grazing and limited capacities to conserve fodder over the harsh winter. On diets more generally, the dependence of households on the commercial production of potatoes in Bamyan Province illustrates the importance of cash income for paying off credit, meeting food sufficiency requirements and well as other household demands, and also signals the potential vulnerability of mono-cropping systems to high irrigation requirements and disease.

### Irrigation and dietary diversity

The linkages between irrigation and dietary diversity are a largely unexplored phenomenon. This is important in an arid country such as Afghanistan, where productive enterprises such as kitchen gardens,

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<sup>1</sup> [http://ims.ids.ac.uk/sites/ims.ids.ac.uk/files/documents/Mapping%20stakeholder%20perceptions%20%20Afghanistan%20on%20template\\_0.pdf](http://ims.ids.ac.uk/sites/ims.ids.ac.uk/files/documents/Mapping%20stakeholder%20perceptions%20%20Afghanistan%20on%20template_0.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> DOI 10.1371/journal.pone.0156878

fruit trees, fodder crops, staple grains and potatoes depend on irrigation. Analysis of secondary data from the Afghanistan Living Conditions Survey (2013-14) showed that household access to irrigation infrastructure is associated with greater household dietary diversity. The irrigation effects could be mediated through two pathways: enabling household production and consumption of a greater diversity of foodstuffs, particularly nutrient-rich foods; and also through greater access to nutrient-rich foods sourced from markets, purchased with income from more productive enterprises, particularly horticulture and tree crops such as fruits and nuts.

### **Seasonality and market access**

As we have noted above, seasonality of agricultural production in remote and extreme environments is an important factor in limiting food self-sufficiency. Emerging from these studies is the question of how easy – or difficult - it is even for rural people to buy food from local markets. Access to markets for nutrient-rich foods can be critical for food security and nutrition – except that logistics and communication problems can also limit availability of, and access to, marketed foods during the same lean periods. This reinforces the view that agri-nutrition policies have major multi-sectoral ramifications, and suggests that investments in infrastructure and communications systems are significantly important for addressing seasonal nutritional deficits, alongside ensuring both food production and food diversity secured through markets – especially in remote and harsh environments.

### **Vegetable gardening by adolescent girls**

A [pilot project](#) has been undertaken to assess the impact of nutrition promotion and collective vegetable gardening by adolescent girls in three Provinces around Kabul. This initiative combined elements of nutrition education and social empowerment in community settings in addition to training in technical horticultural production and realising improved supplies of nutrient-rich foods to participating households. Traditional social constraints and gender conservatism were significant barriers, but the nature of collective endeavour was found to provide safeguards enabling the girls to participate in the project and contribute to a degree of community transformation.

### **The contribution of dairy production and value chains**

Empowering women is an important way of ensuring that household resources and decision making contribute to nutrition. We have noted that access to micronutrient-rich foods can be achieved by increasing incomes which enable net consumers to purchase nutrient-rich foods from markets. Dairy is not only important for providing nutrient-rich foods that can be stored, but in Afghanistan is also one agricultural sector in which female participation is very high, with a range of potential benefits for women in terms of income and employment.

We have reported on a study undertaken by partners in Badakhshan Province on the value chains for dairying, with a focus on women's empowerment, published in the *IDS Bulletin*.<sup>3</sup> Primary survey work has also been undertaken to gain further insights into the contribution of dairying and the consumption of dairy foods to livelihoods and nutrition, including those of urban consumers. Thereby we are gaining insights into the effectiveness of gender-sensitive interventions in nutrient-rich food value chains. At the same time, we aim to identify opportunities to increase domestic production and dairy processing vis-à-vis dependence on imports - or - dumping - of foodstuffs from neighbouring countries. The dairy value chain model is relevant for other provinces and other countries characterised by similar nutritional vulnerabilities and underdeveloped production and market opportunities. However, in upscaling, we are finding that it is essential to recognise diversity and 'locality', rather than adopt a blueprint approach. The survey data on

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<sup>3</sup> DOI 10.19088/1968-2018.107.

dairy consumption in Badakhshan are being analysed and findings will be disseminated in late 2018, with the intention of publication in 2019.

## Capacity building and stakeholder engagement

Various capacity building activities have been undertaken. Stakeholders participated in an online discussion in February 2015 which brought together expert participants from across Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Pakistan and India, to discuss the regional experiences of orienting agricultural value chains towards better nutrition of vulnerable groups.

Other stakeholders enrolled on the FAO-hosted ENACT online course on nutrition education piloted between January-April 2016.

MSSRF and LCIRAH organised a research uptake and capacity strengthening [workshop](#) in New Delhi for agriculture scientists from the Afghanistan National Agriculture Science and Technology University (ANASTU), Kandahar, in April 2016. The scientists were at IARI for trainings involving specialised courses as part of the Government of India initiative to build the capacity of faculty at ANASTU. In this way, LANSAs leveraged rapport built over time by country partners to mobilise stakeholders from Afghanistan in order to encourage them to consider how agriculture can help address the problem of undernutrition in their country.

A [stakeholder consultation](#) on the landscaping study was held in Kabul in April 2016 to consider results, seek feedback and inform future work. In addition, Afghan participants contributed to the online discussion hosted by LANSAs in April 2017 focused on 'What public and private actions are needed to strengthen the impacts of agri-food value chains on nutrition?'

Besides the [community and stakeholder workshops](#) held in Bamyan City on July 2018, a knowledge exchange event was held in Kabul at the British Embassy for DFID staff and other invitees which was used to summarise LANSAs findings generally, and consider the findings specific to Afghanistan and the policy implications. It is evident that there are linkages between findings about policy formulation and implementation and the proposed new Citizen's Charter. The challenges for efficient and effective policy processes remain. The managerial complexity of the inter-sectoral governance structures envisaged, for example, in the Afghanistan Food and Nutrition Security Agenda (AFSeN) below, may prove to be a real practical constraint to policy implementation.

Presentations have been made to separate stakeholder organisations in Afghanistan, and in academic and other fora in the UK and at conferences elsewhere (e.g. Turkey).

## How will this research make a difference?

### Outputs

Research outputs have been disseminated through a range of media such as conferences, small-scale meetings, and in written form as policy briefs, working papers and refereed journal articles, national and international seminars and conferences.

### Raising policy focus

LANSA will continue to engage with stakeholders through a variety of channels and media beyond the end of the programme in order to integrate agriculture and nutrition policies and programmes and to promote coherence among national and international stakeholders in addressing the complex challenges of

malnutrition in the diverse regions of Afghanistan.

The AFSeN was formally launched in October 2017 and is an appropriate policy framework for linking interventions in agriculture and health. It can facilitate a multisectoral approach, integrating development sector policies and programmes for tackling undernutrition. To be effective it requires leadership from central Ministries in Kabul, and close coordination within sub-national governance structures in Provinces and Districts. It involves ten ministries and a wide range of other stakeholders and will have to overcome serious management challenges at the central level. The Citizen's Charter provides a framework for decentralising policy processes to the Provinces but will face equally daunting challenges in achieving efficient vertical coordination from the centre in Kabul right down to Community Development Councils at sub-provincial level.

Agriculture policy, including that of DFID, is largely directed towards commercial producers to increase incomes and employment opportunities, and not towards the improving the livelihoods of the mass of the rural poor. Overall, improving nutrition, particularly through food-based approaches, needs a higher profile in Afghan policy discourse: food security and nutrition are not mentioned in the Highlights of the Mid-Term Results of the Living Conditions Survey 2016-17.<sup>4</sup> And according to the Government's July 2017 'SDG Progress Report' at the High Level Political Forum, the Nutrition Action Framework (NAF) of the Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) is said to be dormant due to resource and capacity constraints.<sup>5</sup>

### **Policy dialogue**

The evidence from this research programme has potential to impact areas from agriculture through food markets, consumption patterns and household nutrition to the policy-making environment. It has already fed into the work of Afghanistan's Zero Hunger strategic review group. However, serious challenges remain. Devolution of agri-nutrition policies requires a balance of responsibilities between the capital and the provinces, taking into account the availability of technical expertise and local capacity, and the ability for sectors and organisations to communicate effectively in provincial and district fora. It is expected that provincial-level or sub-national governance will result in policies that are context-specific, and with fewer inappropriate projects and policies created centrally or copied from other countries. In the medium term, a donor and stakeholder conference is needed to synthesise perspectives and policies of all stakeholders, linked to the decentralisation agenda. The principal objective is the redistribution of roles and responsibilities for the design and delivery of more appropriate and more effective public policies, projects and services through government and non-governmental organisations.

What is needed is a development donor conference, like the Brussels donor conference on security, not to design agri-nutrition and related policies, which exist in abundance, but to plan the practice and implementation by the multiple types of stakeholders along the different horizontal and vertical scales envisaged in the Citizen's Charter. DFID is a potential leader but the profile of pro-poor agriculture and nutrition needs to be raised by DFID in Kabul to build on the work of LANSA for the future of Afghanistan.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://cso.gov.af/Content/files/ALCS/ALCS%20Mid-termresult-Highlights%202016-17.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/16277Afghanistan.pdf>