Natural Resource Management and Peacebuilding in Afghanistan

Afghanistan’s precious natural resources – its land, water, forests and mineral deposits – are critical to the country’s prospects for a peaceful and prosperous future. However, the management of natural resources can also influence conflict in Afghanistan. Natural resources are scarce resources that communities fight over, instruments of coercion used to exert control, and a source of illicit revenues that sustains corruption and the war economy and provides incentives for peace spoilers.

In essence effective natural resource management (NRM) is a form of conflict prevention, bringing order and predictability to situations where otherwise competition is rife. This map is by no means comprehensive but illustrates some of the ways natural resource management impacts peacebuilding in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan is renovating old coal and gas sites, and hoping to develop new oil and gas wells. Its location and transit links to many parts of Asia make the country attractive to international companies, and a regionally developed and managed gas pipeline to export gas from Central Asia to South Asia with potentially far-reaching geopolitical implications.

Land is the number one cited driver of local conflict in Afghanistan. The land tenure system is governed by a weak patchwork of institutions. The amount of productive land is limited and faces rapid population growth, refugee return, and environmental degradation.

Afghanistan’s eastern forests have become the source of a lucrative criminal network smuggling high-value cedar wood to Pakistan and beyond, contributing to the region’s insecurity.

Insecurity, endemic corruption and weak management allow land grabbing by powerful elites in many parts of Afghanistan. The economic and political marginalisation that this leads to is a significant cause of conflict.

Afghanistan produces 90% of the world’s opium and is also a leading hashish producer. The drug trade has become one of the main pillars of the Afghan economy, accounting for 15% of GDP and involving 5% of the population. It is intricately linked to insecurity: generating revenues that pay the operational expenses of insurgents (an estimated $155 million for the Taliban in 2009) and incentivising poor governance.

Capital
Provincial capitals
Closed forest
Degraded forest
Potentially irrigated areas
Rangeland and dry farming
Sparse vegetation

Potash
Poppies
Gem stones
Minerals and metals
Oil and gas
Rivers and lakes
Major roads

Poppy fields
Promised TAPI landscape

There is a history of mining revenues in Afghanistan funding local warlords and armed groups. The former leader of the Northern Alliance, Ahmad Shah Massoud, famously imposed a tax on the mining of emeralds and lapis lazuli.

Water is the second most commonly reported source of local conflict in Afghanistan. The availability or irrigation water is the key to most Afghan livelihoods. Conflict frequently shifts the balance of power between neighbors and communities, environmental degradation, inadequate management and increased demand are compounding water insecurity and driving conflict at the local level.

Forest products (firewood, construction materials, construction materials, and trees) contribute to the livelihoods of millions; meanwhile forests are under threat from illegal cutting, fire, and degradation. The past 30 years have seen widespread deforestation and the destruction of previously valuable species.

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Introduction

Afghanistan’s natural resources – its land, water, forests and mineral deposits – are critical to the country’s development and future prosperity. It is estimated that Afghanistan has over 1,400 mineral deposits that could generate revenue to local, government services and lift the country from its position near the bottom of the Human Development Index. Although the conflict that pits insurgents against government and international forces is the conflict that claims the most lives and dollars, it is also a battle over land: land that is needed for basic human needs such as food, shelter, and clean water. Natural resources play a variety of roles in conflicts of different scale, location and intensity in Afghanistan:

1. Scarce local resources that generate livelihoods
2. Instruments of power that pivot how aid is spent to control or exclude others.
3. Sources of illicit finance that enable the international flow of revenue and sustain corruption.
4. Instruments for pressure applied to local, national and regional actors who are a central interest to security actors.
5. A matter of governance, especially if one’s governance is also the government you support.

This guide to managing the ways in which the management of land, water, minerals, forests and drugs are linked to instability and insecurity in Afghanistan should serve as a starting point for those wishing to improve the resilience of communities. The United Nations Country Team in Afghanistan (UNCT) works with the government and civil society across Afghanistan to ensure that the management of natural resources is conflict-sensitive and coherently supports human security in Afghanistan.

This guide, created by UNCT and the Afghanistan National Institute of Security, is a tool for those working to ensure the peacebuilding and conflict mitigation goals of Afghanistan’s future.

Water

Water is a contentious resource in Afghanistan. Research indicates that the country’s water resources are under threat from misuse, mismanagement, and environmental degradation. Water management issues have to include:

1. Managing increased demand for water: Population growth and urbanization is expected to increase the amount of water available per person well above that of 1970s levels.
2. Reducing the risk of climate-related disasters: Droughts and floods are a feature of life in Afghanistan. Floods in 2004, 2006 and 2009 killed nearly 1,200 people and affected 29,000 households.
3. Reserving and building water infrastructure: With just one reservoir, Afghanistan’s water management may not be sufficient to meet the water needs.

Maximizing peacebuilding

Peace in Afghanistan will require a ‘peace and conflict assessment’ of water management. The government needs to implement a ‘peace and conflict assessment’ of water management.

Land

Decades of conflict have left Afghanistan’s land systems in need of a major overhaul. Powerful land owners, the land mafia, and private individuals have likely become the majority of the land owners. Land mafia, which is the Afghan government and partners have failed to address the root causes of the problem. The government needs to implement a ‘peace and conflict assessment’ of land management. The government needs to implement a ‘peace and conflict assessment’ of land management.

Maximizing peacebuilding

Creating a functioning and legal land system is an important element of long-term stability in Afghanistan. The system needs to be inclusive and support the post-conflict society to provide for essential mechanisms of land rights and access to land security, and to establish a functional land market.

Drugs

The drug economy in Afghanistan lies on the spectrum of illicit drugs that are used as conflict goods and means of survival. The drug economy is a major source of Afghanistan’s problems and the economy accounting for an estimated 16 per cent of GDP, and involving an estimated five per cent of the population.

Maximizing peacebuilding

Facing down the conflict pose the drug economy will be one of the most important priorities for the government and the international community. The new government needs to implement a ‘peace and conflict assessment’ of drug management.

Extractives

Afghanistan contains rich underground resources: gemstones, uranium, copper, iron, lead, zinc, and precious metals such as gold and silver. Afghanistan’s natural resources are a strategic priority for the Government and the international community, who see the sector as one of the key drivers for growth and development.

Maximizing peacebuilding

There are many mechanisms for managing the impact of raw materials in Afghanistan. The government needs to implement a ‘peace and conflict assessment’ of raw materials.

Forests

Forests in Afghanistan face many important natural resource management challenges. Afghanistan forest management will face many challenges. Afghanistan’s forests are a source of wood for fuel and construction, as well as a source of food and medicinal products.

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