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Afghanistan, Factor 14: Conflict Resolution

Afghanistan: Diplomatic Methods to Alleviate Conflict-Induced Food Insecurity

A country with an abundance of untapped natural resources concurrent with a proud and historic culture, Afghanistan has been ravaged by decades of inter- and intra-state conflict that have destroyed its economic and political infrastructure, resulting in widespread poverty and food insecurity. Recent conflict, first between the Taliban, a fundamentalist Islamic movement, and the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force has since morphed into a civil war. Taliban fighters, seeking to wrest control from the Afghan government recognized by the international community, have often resorted to terrorism. This constant, internecine warfare has wrought such an exacting toll on the population that, according to UC Davis's e-Afghan Ag, an organization established to provide knowledge to Afghan farmers, over 30 percent of the population experiences food insecurity, with 2.1 million of those 7 million classified as very severely food insecure.

Unfortunately, Afghanistan's situation is by no means a *sui generis* case; the causal link between civil conflict and food insecurity is well substantiated by academia, as this paper discusses later. Worse, attempts at alleviating the crisis through military and diplomatic means have failed, and so a conflict that has continued for more than 15 years now affects countless other factors that contribute to food insecurity. Research has established a definitive link between conflict in Afghanistan and, to name a few, the systematic deprivation of human rights for ethnic minorities and women, a severe deterioration of education infrastructure; a nearly nonexistent health care system, and a significant reduction in international financial aid. These indirect effects of conflict have only exacerbated the food insecurity crisis. Indeed, in areas under the Taliban's control, food is withheld from ethnic minorities, and the local administration severely restricts the ability of women to productively contribute to society. Furthermore, the problem of Afghanistan's uneducated youth being unequipped to utilize improved agricultural methods and re-establish a market economy is compounded by the fact that otherwise treatable diseases are diminishing an already war-weary labor force. Coupled with international investors' loss of confidence in Afghanistan, and the prognosis for this country and its food insecurity catastrophe are uncertain at best. Recent events, however, are encouraging. The government and the Taliban have finally agreed to begin bilateral negotiations. If successful, these agreements, mediated by international third-parties and in conjunction with the peacemaking work of local non-governmental organizations, could form the foundation for Afghanistan's reconstruction. If political stability at the national level can be established, socioeconomic stability at both state and local levels becomes achievable. Only then does the prospect of alleviating eliminating illiteracy, poverty, and ultimately food insecurity become possible. The importance of resolving conflict in order to resolve food insecurity, then, cannot be understated.

Classified as a least developed country by the United Nations, Afghanistan is predominantly rural. Eighty percent of the population lives in the countryside, where most people are farmers. The principal crop is wheat, although "non cereal crops...such as melons, watermelons, pulses and oilseeds" are often cultivated by farmers to supplement their meager incomes, which is quite low at \$2000 GDP per capita (Favre, Maletta 2; CIA World Factbook). Moreover, Favre and Maletta, as part of a study by Afghanistan's Ministry of Agriculture and Animal Husbandry, concluded that farms are quite small; nearly 70 percent of farms are less than 5 hectares (22). Furthermore, equipment is substandard and technology is limited: wooden and iron ploughs predominate, and more than half of all farmers do not have access to mechanical power such as tractors (33). Finally, the situation is aggravated by the opium trade; cultivated in southern and southwestern Afghanistan, narcotics have "not only corrupted the Afghan government," but also helped fund the Taliban, adding yet another obstacle to removing the

insurgency (Peters 33). Despite these bleak statistics, recent assistance in the form of fertilizer and improved seeds from organizations including the Food and Agricultural Organization have helped Afghanistan's agricultural community subsist. Even so, the food crisis persists. According to the World Food Programme (WFP), 8.7 percent of the population currently suffers from acute malnutrition; the threshold for famine is 10 percent. A typical meal consists of "bread with a watery soup, some onions, a potato, perhaps a bone and some yogurt or oil" (Henderson). Staple foods, especially wheat, comprise much of the local diet. Fresh fruits and vegetables are obtainable, though their availability at local markets corresponds with fluctuating market prices and proximity to conflict. Indeed, it is not difficult to imagine that Afghans face hunger on a daily basis.

Socioeconomically, the country's limited infrastructure and lack of urbanization result in "the family [remaining] the single most important institution in Afghan society" (Dupree, Gouttierre). Families are patriarchal, with extended family members and multiple generations living together. Regrettably, little social infrastructure exists to accommodate the individual outside of the family setting. Illness, for example, is usually treated intrafamiliarily, as health care is largely inaccessible: there exists one health care center for every 100,000 people and a 95,000:1 physician:patient ratio (Dupree, Gouttierre). Furthermore, whereas in developed countries children socialize at school, in Afghanistan such socializing occurs within the family setting simply because opportunities for safe education are rare. Oppression of women has also contributed to the lack of educational opportunities for Afghanistan's youth. Not only are girls not allowed to receive an education due to the Taliban's restrictive policies that still operate in many rural areas, "education for boys is also at a standstill in Kabul" as well as the rest of the country "because most of the teachers are women, who now cannot work" (Rashid 106). Today, the CIA ranks Afghanistan as the most illiterate country in Asia.

With such an extensive list of problems, it is clear that even after conflict is resolved, Afghanistan will require an exhaustive overhaul of its administrative methods in order to re-establish its socioeconomic infrastructure and alleviate its food insecurity crisis. To begin with, any serious effort to improve agricultural productivity and access to adequate nutrition begins with education, but the current education curriculum is largely devoid of relevant information; concepts such as sustainable agriculture and human geography, crucial for a rehabilitation effort focused on food security, are nowhere in the curricula. Furthermore, post-secondary education is essentially nonexistent, with less than 0.25% of the population having enrolled in higher education (Samady 12). As a result, research into issues such as plant science, biofuels, and climate volatility must be translated, and even then are difficult to implement. Efforts at reform have been met with apathy by officials. An additional barrier precluding post-conflict growth is the misogyny endemic to Afghan culture. Mehra and Rojas argue that "significant progress against hunger and poverty requires...policy-makers...see women as key actors in economic growth" (2). Until the Afghan people see women as their economic and social equals, it will be difficult for them to become a developing country, as half of their labor force is unable to productively contribute to society.

Conflict resolution itself, however, must be achieved before any of the aforementioned long-term policy changes can be implemented. The reason for this is that there is a causal relationship between conflict and food insecurity, supported by the study "Military Power and Food Security: A Cross-National Analysis of Less-Developed Countries". Jenkins and Scanlan conclude that not only does military conflict cause food insecurity, but it affects nearly all other key factors affecting food security as well, as:

"civil unrest has exacerbating food security consequences that outlive the duration of active conflict itself ... Thus, one should not be surprised that countries such as Afghanistan...which have experienced protracted civil wars and state collapses, are among the countries experiencing the worst food security problems. Many of these countries confront a subsistence crisis in which normal mechanisms for security of adequate nutrition have been disrupted by war." (182-183).

There are several factors involved. First, conflict reduces market accessibility and induces rises in market prices. The United States Department of Agriculture found that “households in conflict-afflicted areas [of Afghanistan] may be more disconnected from markets...than those in non-conflict afflicted areas”. Moreover, data on “important food products” indicate that conflict is directly correlated with sudden increases in prices (D’Souza, Jolliffe 4). These “price spikes” exacerbate an already precarious situation in Afghanistan; fluctuations, such as the sudden doubling of wheat prices in 2008, severely limit farmers’ ability obtain sufficient food.

Yet conflict-induced food insecurity is not caused solely by economic changes; demographic variables contribute as well. Hendrix and Glaser propose that civil conflict affects fishing industries in several ways, including redeployment of labor and population displacement (483). These arguments can be expanded to explain the correlation between conflict and food insecurity. According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, over 800,000 people are internally displaced as a result of the civil war, with another 2.5 million having sought refuge in other countries. As a result, a significant percentage of the labor force is no longer able to grow food and sell it at local markets. Subsequently, demand for food increases while supply decreases. But of greater concern is the fact that internally displaced persons do not readily have access to markets to purchase food. A positive feedback loop is then generated as markets fail, indirectly because labor is no longer available to produce food and directly because conflict reduces accessibility. Because of this, food supplies dwindle and are harder to access for both the displaced and the non-displaced, leading to fewer market interactions and eventually market failures. By continually uprooting people, conflict fuels this vicious cycle.

Minorities are particularly food insecure under the Taliban, as the prediction that “ethnic minorities should be especially vulnerable to military repression and thus to food insecurity”(Jenkins, Scalan 166) proves all too true in Afghanistan. The United Nations has alleged that the Taliban practices systematic denial of food to minority ethnic groups such as the Tajiks, Hazaras, and Uzbeks (Tariq, Ayoubi, Haqbeen 157) as part of an overall war strategy. Even today, the government struggles to eliminate ethnic conflict, although progress is difficult in Taliban strongholds. Furthermore, the Taliban have gained notoriety for their misogynistic human rights violations. Laws passed by the Taliban severely restrict womens’ freedom of movement, ban them from receiving education, and limit their choice of profession (Rashid 105-107). Women have been ruthlessly and publicly whipped, even killed, for attempting to collect food aid, an activity limited to men. By making them dependent on their male family members in order to survive, women under Taliban rule face additional difficulties in securing adequate nutrition.

Having been mired in this state of conflict for nearly fifteen years, Afghanistan has remained unable to diminish its levels of food insecurity. One of the primary methods for measuring food insecurity is daily caloric intake. E-Afghan Ag, supported by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), asserts that 30 percent of the population is food insecure, consuming less than 2,100 kcal per day. Around 10 percent are very severely food insecure, consuming less than 1,500 kcal per day. Additionally, according to the WFP, market prices in Afghanistan continue to rise; in May 2014, wheat prices were found to be “16.8 percent higher in comparison to the same time [in 2013],” and 36.3 percent higher than the average of the same month over the last five years. Clearly, the food crisis is both severe and pervasive. However, the United Nations also uses global acute malnutrition (GAM) to measure food insecurity, and although the national average is currently around 8.7 percent, the overall trend here is encouraging, as GAM rates have actually been declining in recent years. For example, many provinces in the conflict-stricken south with almost 30 percent GAM at the start of the decade are now in the 10 to 15 percent category (UN OCHA). The only tenable conclusion that can be drawn from these conflicting statistics is that long-term stability will only follow conflict resolution.

Fortunately, because Afghanistan has yet to modernize, it remains largely unaffected by issues developed countries are currently facing such as pollution and urbanization. However, factors such as water scarcity

and climate volatility have compounded the food insecurity crisis caused by the conflict. Specifically, the lack of governmental control in certain areas has led to “water rights infringement” by “local warlords”; as a result, “too much water is appropriated at the head of the system” and farmers at the tail are forced to abandon their farms because they lack water (Maletta, Favre 2). If this conflict remains unresolved, a fight over water rights and supplies could lead to a warlord society reminiscent of that in Somalia, inviting even more conflict and further hampering Afghanistan’s ability to rebuild. Furthermore, in the summer of 2014, the WDP reported that “natural disasters” and “extreme weather” worsened “acute food insecurity” in much of Afghanistan. While earthquakes and avalanches occur, the country is particularly vulnerable to droughts that can decrease crop yield and increase food prices as well as landslides and flash flooding that destroy crops and buildings. Along with conflict resolution, these are two factors Afghans should work to address if they wish to improve their food security situation.

But resolving conflict would have much more immediate effects than allowing government to enact education reforms or raise awareness about water scarcity and climate volatility. A peaceful agreement between the Taliban and the government would halt any further destruction of socioeconomic infrastructure. Refugees would be able to return to their homes, farmers would be able to plant crops, sell produce, and buy food, and a country currently considered 201st in GDP per capita would be able to begin the process of rebuilding (CIA World Factbook). Permanent stability and peace would then create an environment conducive to addressing the other factors of food insecurity, including promoting international trade, studying plant science, and reducing disease prevalence. Finally, the Taliban’s oppressive policies could be addressed, relieving the burden on ethnic minorities and women and granting them greater access to nutrition. Simply by resolving conflict, Afghanistan is provided with the opportunity to rebuild.

Evidently, conflict resolution in Afghanistan would contribute to the Millennium Development Goals. However, it is unrealistic to assume that this situation can be satisfactorily resolved by 2015. Therefore, it is more apt to work toward the proposed successors of the MDGs, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), in particular SDG 2, ending hunger, achieving food security, and promoting sustainable agriculture, and SDG 3, ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for all people of all ages.

The process of conflict resolution begins at the national level with reconciliation between the Taliban and the Afghan government. On this front efforts are promising. In July 2015, Afghan High Peace Council members and Taliban leaders met in Islamabad, which “was the most promising contact between the two warring sides in years” (Goldstein, Mashal). Afghanistan’s President Ghani’s commitment to reaching a peace agreement is certainly invigorative, but it should be noted that a peace agreement cannot merely be a compromise. As per Barbara Walter’s research on civil conflict, two factors must be included in order to allow the treaty to succeed: credible commitment by a third party to guarantee the security of both sides and a constitutional compromise that allows the Taliban to retain some degree of power and control (360). The credible-commitment hypothesis has been proven to be the single most reliable and necessary factor for a successful transition from conflict to compromise, but it is contingent upon the third party being willing to utilize force to protect the warring sides. The reason for this is that demobilization and demilitarization is inherently risky for the Taliban in particular; without a security guarantee, both sides face a “prisoner’s dilemma”, in which defecting and attacking rather than cooperating is highly advantageous. Considering that meetings have already taken part in Islamabad, Pakistan is the preferred mediator; despite Pakistan’s well-known support for the Taliban, Walter’s research has shown that mediator neutrality is not necessary. Secondly, to achieve peace, a peace agreement must not only agree to the cessation of hostilities, but also recognize and accommodate the differing objectives of the Taliban and the government. Such a peace agreement would require the Taliban be adequately represented and consulted as long as it denounces terrorism and human rights’ violations. By doing so, the framework for a power-sharing agreement that both parties can work toward is established, thereby allowing the rule of

law and order to supercede ideological disparities. Future military and political conflict is thus prevented, assuring a stable, conflict-less government nationwide.

Following successful national diplomatic efforts, conflict resolution can begin *en masse* at the state and local levels. Here, this paper emphasizes the importance of helping the Afghans help themselves. It is important not to force Western political institutions on Afghan society. Not only would doing so lead to anti-Western resentment, but there exists historically effective local institutions that Afghans are familiar with and upon which Western democracy can be grafted. The most prominent of these include shura and jira councils. Already used by the national government, these democratic councils, organized for representatives to discuss and vote on key issues, can be expanded to form the basis of state and local administration. They are remarkably similar to Afghanistan's family unit; indeed, by attending and participating in jira councils and voting for shura council members, Afghan families can establish a democratic process tailored to their country and traditions. Moreover, maliks, "key local power brokers throughout Afghanistan who serve as traditional arbiters in local conflicts, interlocutors in state policy-making, ...and delegates to provincial and national jirgas" (Sughrue), are Afghanistan's versions of mayors, governors, and other government officials. The otherwise difficult task of establishing governmental administration can be simplified by having maliks head up the hierarchical structure of state and local government. Finally, there exists Peace Council members who have been "specially trained in non-violent and non-discriminatory dispute resolution" (Dennys) by the NGO Cooperation for Peace and Unity. Having already resolved disputes in areas that lack effective judiciary systems, these peacemakers can be adapted to serve as an "informal dispute resolution mechanism" until such time as a judicial system can be established in those areas, at which point these mediators, with additional training, can become judges that discuss disputes in courts of law. Through the formalizing and codifying of these three endogenous and exogenous institutions, the inherently democratic traditions of Afghans can be incorporated into a democratic republic, where conflict is ameliorated by law and democracy.

With many of Afghanistan's citizens forcibly relocated, its buildings destroyed and its economy in shambles, it is no surprise that many Afghans face hunger, thirst, poverty, illiteracy, disease, immobility and discrimination on a daily basis. But while it is difficult for a nation in which people fall asleep to the sound of gunfire and play soccer on roads with improvised explosive devices to recognize its food insecurity crisis, and then for its people to construct and implement a strategy to deal with it, a solution is possible, even achievable, with the plan outlined here. Considering the evidence presented earlier in this paper, it should be obvious that "peace-building is thus a precondition for restoring viable economies, much less creating economic growth" (Scanlan, Jenkins 183). Therefore, in the short-term, only through a formal resolution of conflict can Afghanistan as a country begin to alleviate food shortages, market inaccessibility, price spikes, and achieve a stable economy conducive to growth and prosperity. In the long-term, the integration of democratic traditions into traditional Afghan culture generates regional and local stability that allow the government to enact reforms, address grievances, and re-establish socioeconomic infrastructure and a national economy. Only then will hunger and poverty be alleviated, and only then can Afghanistan afford to address other issues of food security. It is clear that conflict is the single most important factor currently affecting food security in Afghanistan, and conflict resolution is the single most important goal Afghans can work toward.

After more than fifteen years of civil war and indeed centuries of perpetual conflict with the British, Soviets, Americans and now the Taliban, the citizens of Afghanistan most certainly deserve an end to bloodshed and a cessation of conflict. However, until that time when a peace agreement is finally reached, Afghanistan is no longer an active war zone and its humanitarian crises are only part of textbooks, it remains a country facing a "forgotten emergency" (Bowden). Hopefully, with this plan, the day when the citizens of Afghanistan will finally be able to fall asleep without explosions, go to school regardless of gender, and know that their next meal is guaranteed can come sooner rather than later.

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