

# Natural Resource Management and Peacebuilding in Afghanistan



United Nations Country Team in Afghanistan



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# Foreword

Decades of conflict and instability have had a devastating impact on Afghanistan's people, economy and environment.

But while international attention focuses on the on-going insurgency and conflict between the Afghan national security forces supported by international military forces and a disparate group of anti-government armed groups, at any given time there are numerous conflicts happening at different scales and intensities.

Disputes over the management of natural resources such as land, water, timber, minerals and drugs, underlie and drive many of these conflicts, and often serve to exacerbate existing ethnic, political and regional divisions.

Natural resources are the source of numerous fracture lines in Afghanistan and the wider region. The division of water at local and transboundary levels, disputes over land ownership, the regional drugs trade, and the illegal smuggling of high value timber already generate tension and conflict. Recent investments in mineral and hydrocarbon extraction, if not managed carefully, could generate new problems.

This report looks at the ways in which natural resource management—the institutions, policies and practices that govern land, water, forests, minerals, hydrocarbons—interact with violent conflict in Afghanistan.

The report is the result of a request from the UN Country Team to the EU-UN Global Partnership on Land, Natural Resources and Conflict. The United Nations Environment Programme has led this process with the advice and support of other agencies, funds and programmes operating in Afghanistan.

In essence, the report makes two arguments. The first is that effective Natural Resource Management is a form of conflict prevention and peacebuilding.

The second is that no big development programme, whether from the government or international community, is entirely immune from the impacts of natural resource related conflict, nor to making the situation inadvertently worse.

We are grateful to the EU-UN Global Partnership on Land, Natural Resources and Conflict, funded by the EU's Instrument for Stability, which supported this process. We hope this report helps expand our understanding of the complex nature of conflict in Afghanistan and what the international community can do to strengthen the potential for lasting peace.



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# Summary

This report investigates the ways in which the management of land, water, minerals, forests and drugs are linked to instability and insecurity in Afghanistan. Its aims are two-fold: first, to suggest ways that the government and the international community can maximise the peacebuilding opportunities that come from better natural resource management and, second, to encourage the international community to introduce safeguards in their existing projects to ensure they do not inadvertently exacerbate conflict.

Afghanistan's natural resources—its land, water, forests and mineral deposits—are critical to the country's prospects for a peaceful and prosperous future. An estimated 70-80 per cent of Afghans rely on agriculture, animal husbandry and artisanal mining for their daily survival. The country needs to harness these assets to create jobs, generate revenue to fund basic 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 one that claims the most lives and the most attention, disputes over water and land were the two most commonly reported reasons for violent conflict, accounting for 55 per cent of all cases in a 2008 survey (it is important to note that the survey, conducted by Oxfam, was limited in scope and sample size, nor did it extend to all provinces). Natural resources play a variety of roles in conflicts of different scales, locations and intensities in Afghanistan.

- I. Communities, and sometimes countries, fight over scarce resources such as productive land and irrigation water.
- II. Powerful stakeholders use natural resources as instruments of coercion to exert control over others, such as upstream farmers controlling access to irrigation water for downstream communities.
- III. Natural resources are a source of illicit revenues that have built a powerful war economy and are sustaining serious corruption.

- IV. Natural resources act as incentives for peace spoilers (at a local, national and regional level) who have a vested interest in a continuing security vacuum.
- V. Natural resources are a source of grievance, especially where there is corruption that delegitimizes the government.

The central argument of this report is that better natural resource management has an important role to play in the wider process of peacebuilding. Under 'better' natural resource management, the benefits from natural resources are equitably divided; communities are involved in, and informed about, the decisions that affect them; contracts and payments are transparently conducted; and communities can raise and settle their grievances.

At its heart, effective natural resource management is a form of conflict prevention. By creating structures and rules for managing and sharing natural resources, natural resource management brings order, predictability and trust to situations where otherwise competition and conflicting interests would be rife. This report looks at the peacebuilding challenges and opportunities across five resources: land, water, forests, drugs and extractives.

## I. Land

Decades of conflict have up-ended Afghanistan's land system. A mix of formal and traditional institutions governs a patchy and uncertain land tenure system. The Afghan government has attempted to modernise the land management system and since 2011 a new regime for managing land rights has existed in the form of the Afghan Land Authority, but the organisation is still in its infancy.

Ultimately the success of the various formal and traditional land management structures will be a function of how well they can address three challenges. The first challenge is to manage the growing demand for land: rapid population growth, returning refugees, and environmental degradation are



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simultaneously constraining the amount of productive land available and increasing competition over land both in rural areas (for agriculture) and in urban centres (for building). The second challenge is to stop land grabbing: weak and inconsistent land management, endemic corruption, and insecurity have permitted opportunistic land grabs by powerful elites, which undermine the rule of law, and breed resentment among local people. And finally, the third challenge is to put in place the structures to resolve land disputes: Afghanistan needs to develop more effective mechanisms to resolve land disputes, which are inhibiting development and poisoning community relations.

Creating a functioning and equitable land system is an important element of long-term peace and stability in Afghanistan. The system needs to accomplish three things: (1) bring more land into productive use through better irrigation, soil conservation techniques, and extension services for farmers and herders; (2) build capacity for dispute

resolution; and (3) ensure that all major projects go through a 'peace and conflict assessment' screening process that evaluates the potential negative impacts of the project and that puts necessary safeguards in place.

## II. Water

Water is a contentious resource in Afghanistan; research indicates that disputes over the allocation of water are the second-most commonly cited cause of conflict after land. Afghanistan's irrigation network and water storage capacities have been degraded by decades of war, underinvestment and inadequate management. Water management systems have to tackle three inter-related challenges. The first is to manage the increased demand for water: Population growth and economic development are rapidly increasing the demand for water. By 2025 the amount of water available per person is predicted to drop by one third from 2004 levels. The second challenge is to

reduce the risk of climate-related disasters: Droughts and floods are a feature of life in Afghanistan. Floods in 2009 killed nearly 1,200 people and affected almost 29,000 households. Third, is to build and rebuild water infrastructure without exacerbating regional tensions: with just one exception, Afghanistan's major rivers flow into neighbouring, water scarce countries.

Water can divide countries and communities but can also bind them together. Managing water resources effectively is critical for Afghanistan's development, security and stability. Addressing its many water problems requires an integrated approach that does the following; (1) reduces competition over scarce water resources through more efficient irrigation systems, drought resistant crops, and public awareness campaigns; (2) increases the supply of water through water harvesting and infrastructure investments; (3) improves water governance by addressing the inequitable access to water for marginalised groups (including women), reducing corruption in the sector, supporting the community management of water, and building capacity for dispute resolution; (4) understands and prepares for the impact of climate and other human-driven change that will impact Afghanistan's water security; and (5) improves transboundary water management.

### III. Forests

After water, forests may be Afghanistan's most important renewable resource, as forest products (firewood, timber, animal fodder and tree crops) contribute to the livelihoods of millions. Forests provide a range of important ecosystem services; they are a critical source of rural energy but they also reduce the risk of soil erosion, land degradation and landslides. Meanwhile, the forestry industry in the

the border into Pakistan, providing incentives for powerful groups profiting from timber smuggling to perpetuate instability.

Afghanistan's forest sector faces two quite distinct challenges. The first is to reduce the rate of deforestation for firewood (increasing supply by planting woodlots and involving communities more closely in the management of their local forests). The second is to combat the illegal trade in high-value timber. One way to begin to address the illegal timber trade is to raise awareness of the impacts of the trade. Future steps could include some kind of certification scheme that provides a market for sustainably produced, conflict-free timber.

### IV. Drugs

The drug economy in Afghanistan falls into the spectrum of natural resource management because poppies and hashish are both conflict goods and a means of survival for many rural communities. As such these illicit crops reflect decisions over the use of land and water. Afghanistan is the world's largest producer of both opium (generating roughly 90 per cent of global supply) and hashish. The drugs trade has become one of the main pillars of the Afghan economy accounting for an estimated 16 per cent of GDP, and involving an estimated five per cent of the population.

Drug production in Afghanistan has built a powerful shadow narco-economy that provides huge revenues for traffickers, as well as some insurgents. The drugs trade has also contributed to pervasive corruption at many levels of government. Finding ways to reduce the flow of drugs has been a major preoccupation of the government and international community. But drug cultivation in Afghanistan has

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