Local institutions, livelihoods and vulnerability: lessons from Afghanistan

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Acronyms

ALT	Afghanistan Livelihood Trajectory Study
AREDP	Afghanistan Rural Enterprise Development Programme
AREU	Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit
CDC	Community Development Council
DFID	Department for International Development
NGO	non-governmental organisation
NRVA	National Risk and Vulnerability Programme
NSP	National Solidarity Programme

Vernacular terms

Arbob	traditional village leader
Malik	traditional village leader
Mullah	village cleric
Shura	community council
Zakat	religious charity; 1% of harvest and/or livestock holdings offered to the poor once a year

Executive summary

Social relationships are central to the ability of Afghan households to reduce vulnerability and gain a degree of livelihood security. Where there is a robust rural economy, relationships of relative equality provide a high level of security, mutual support and the opportunity to prosper. Where relationships are based on deep inequalities or where the rural economy is in poor health, there may be few benefits beyond precarious survival.

Drawing on a study of 11 villages in Afghanistan, this paper argues that there are significant differences between villages, both in the quality of relationships that can be established and the behaviour of these villages in relation to the provision of public goods. What underlies these differences is the behaviour of village elites and the level of their interest in supporting the common good. Where land inequalities are high and elites are economically secure, they have few incentives to widen the provision of public goods and are largely immune from social sanctions. Where elites are economically less secure, they are likely to have a shared interest in supporting social solidarity and promoting the provision of public goods. Such differences between villages can be analysed, and this paper proposes a way to do this systematically.

The paper argues that these fundamental characteristics of Afghanistan's rural society – the centrality of social relationships and their variability by village – are not being captured in policy and programming responses. It suggests two major reasons why this might be so. First, policy and programming in Afghanistan have specifically sought to displace existing village customary structures, and therefore have little interest in understanding and responding to variability in village contexts. Second, there is an inherent bias in policy towards individuals' own capacities, to the neglect of the structures of inequality that make and keep people poor. Accordingly, there is limited understanding of the ways in which 'modernising' organisational practices have engaged with customary institutions. But interventions have often operated subject to existing practices, rather than displacing them as has been assumed. In some cases this has worked to the good, supporting an existing moral economy within the village and expanding the provision of public goods. In others it has reinforced elite positions and led to external resources being captured by the elite. Policy and programming needs to pay greater attention to the variability between villages and the implications of this variability for intervention design and impact assessment.

Chapter 1
Introduction

In the disputed Afghanistan presidential election in 2009, representatives of President Karzai and his chief opponent Abdullah Abdullah visited three villages in Badakhshan, a mountainous province in the north-east of the country. In the first village, Khilar, Karzai's representatives took the village leaders and local power holders with them to campaign on the president's behalf in the neighbouring valleys. The second village, Toghloq, largely ignored the election and had little to do with either campaign team. In the third village, Shur Qul, representatives of both campaigns asked to set up an election office. Both requests were rejected by the village council on the grounds that the presence of either party might contribute to conflict. In each case, these villages acted in ways in keeping with their past behaviour.

This observation on the differing 'behaviour' of three villages invites at least three questions. First, what do we mean by village behaviour, what governs it and what effects does it have on the livelihood security and welfare of the people who live in these villages? Second, is the variability in behaviour of these three villages exceptional, or is it characteristic of other Afghan villages as well? If it is systematic, can we characterise the underlying sources of this variation and their consequences? And third, if variation is the norm and village behaviour has consequences for the welfare of the inhabitants, is such variation taken into account in the design, implementation and evaluation of humanitarian and development interventions in Afghanistan? If not why not, and what could be done to correct this?

This paper draws on a study [1] (the Afghanistan Livelihood Trajectory or ALT study) of rural livelihoods in four provinces of Afghanistan (Kandahar, Badakhshan, Sar-i-Pul and Faryab) conducted by the authors with the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU). The study was based on a revisit to a sub-sample of 64 households in eight villages from an initial AREU panel study of 390 households in 21 villages established in 2002.[2] Its aims were to investigate the livelihood trajectories and poverty outcomes of Afghan households and to examine how these varied by gender, socio-economic position, community and context. Of particular interest was the relationship between household livelihood practices and insecurity, the role of informal and formal institutions in livelihoods and the nature of household resilience. A core focus was an investigation of the extent to which household trajectories reflected path dependency determined by pre-existing structures, and whether households and communities have been able to bring about changes through individual and collective action.

1 Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) of the UK, grant number RES-167-25-0285.

2 The methods and study locations from which this paper draws are discussed in detail in Kantor and Pain (2011: 9–13).

What emerged clearly from the ALT study was the significance of the social context to livelihood security, and the close links between village behaviour and the behaviour of village elites. How elites acted strongly influenced the provision of public goods, including physical security, and the vulnerabilities of the non-elite. However, as Pain and Kantor (2010) note, policy and programming in Afghanistan have specifically sought to displace existing customary structures, rather than trying to understand how existing arrangements perform. This has had two consequences. The first is that there has been little interest in understanding and responding to the variability of provincial and district contexts, let alone village contexts. The second is that there has been limited understanding of the ways in which 'modernising' organisational practices have engaged with customary institutions. Interventions have more often operated subject to existing practices rather than displacing them, a process called institutional 'bricolage' (Jones, 2009). In some cases this bricolage has worked to the good, supporting an existing moral economy within the village and expanding the provision of public goods. In others it has reinforced elite positions and led to external resources being captured by the elite.

This paper argues that the fundamental characteristics of Afghanistan's rural society – the centrality of social relationships and their variability by village – can be analysed and responded to programmatically. The relationship between social solidarity and inequality is likely to be the critical issue. Where land inequalities are high and the elite are economically secure they have few incentives to widen the provision of public goods and are largely immune from social sanctions. Where the elite are economically insecure they are likely to have a shared interest in supporting social solidarity and promoting the provision of public goods.

The thesis underlying the ODI research project on local institutions, livelihoods and vulnerability is the observation that humanitarian practice has a tendency to treat vulnerability as a generic feature rather than a specific response to particular risks. As a result humanitarian response has understood vulnerability primarily as a lack of economic assets rather than a combination of limited economic and social assets. How and why individuals and households come to lack social resources, and the role of informal institutions in determining this, is little understood (Hickey and du Toit, 2007). A more politically aware and contextually based understanding of vulnerability is a necessary basis for developing more attuned, relevant and effective responses.

The core research questions underlying the ODI study relate to how households adapt their livelihood practices in response

to chronic insecurity, the role that local institutions play in these responses, the intervention logic of policies and programmes seeking to address vulnerability and the ways in which formal interventions engage with informal institutions. Drawing on the ALT study, this paper contributes to the development of an analytical framework that will help inform humanitarian practice.

The specific questions this paper addresses are as follows:

- How have livelihoods been affected by the local institutional context?
- Can the local institutional context be systematically analysed and characterised?
- To what extent do the assumptions and policy prescriptions that drive interventions at the village level address the role of local institutions in mitigating or reinforcing household and individual vulnerabilities?
- How might the variability between villages be reflected in interventions designed to mitigate household vulnerabilities?

The paper begins by describing the methodology and study locations. It then briefly provides background on Afghanistan to situate the ALT study, before addressing the questions outlined above. It concludes with some reflections on methods and approaches, as a contribution to the development of an analytical framework to incorporate stronger contextual analysis and understanding into programme design, implementation and evaluation.

1.1 Methodology and study locations

The methodology and study locations are discussed in detail in Kantor and Pain (2011: 9–13), and are summarised here. The study sought to understand changes in rural livelihoods and how these varied across households, villages and provinces. It took a qualitative approach to collect in-depth information from a small number of carefully selected households. There was some variation in specific procedures according to partner arrangements and security conditions. The field teams applied retrospective in-depth interview techniques to explore household livelihoods from 2002 to 2009. Interview teams comprised two female and two male Afghans, allowing men and women to be interviewed separately. Two interviews were held with men and two with women, giving a total of four interviews per household. Sixty-four households were interviewed in Badakhshan, Sar-i-Pul and Faryab. In a fourth site, Kandahar, security conditions prevented individual households from being interviewed, and group interviews were held instead.

The household interviews involved six steps: the development of a household profile based on the 2002–2003 household data; introductory interviews to gain an understanding of changes in the overall village and household economy; the selection of households based on the introductory interviews, selecting a sub-sample of eight households out of the original 20; the development of household interview guides structured around eight themes (household composition, history, home and services, land and agriculture, income-generating work, credit and savings, external links and the wider context); household interviews, transcription and debriefing; and finally an overall debriefing.

Data on the context was collected from secondary sources, government authorities at provincial and district level, key informants at provincial and district level and from groups of elders in the key villages. This information was supplemented by field observations on location and landscape. Data was collected on provincial, district and village histories, geography and economy over the last 30 years. Discussions focused on the changing roles and actions of village authorities, public goods provision, key actors and relations between villages and districts and changes in security conditions and conflict.

Table 1 summarises the key features of the study provinces and villages. Two provinces – Kandahar and Faryab – contain irrigated plain agriculture generating agricultural surplus. Badakhshan and Sar-i-Pul on the other hand are mountainous or hilly, agriculture is largely rainfed and the agrarian economy is less reliable. Two of the provinces (Kandahar and Badakhshan) have a single dominant ethnic group, while Sari-i-Pul and Faryab are more ethnically mixed. Kandahar and Badakhshan have had strong political identities, Kandahar on account of its historical centrality to state-making processes and Badakhshan because of its mountainous identity and the early emergence of an educated elite. The other two provinces, Sar-i-Pul and Faryab, are situated in the foothills between the Hindu Kush mountains in central Afghanistan and the rich plain economy of Balkh. Both have been peripheral to national politics. Since 2001 these four provinces have followed very different economic and political trajectories. In part this can be linked to the dynamics of the provincial opium poppy economies since 2001.

The evidence points to the fact that the 11 study villages each have distinctive characteristics. The two Kandahar villages are about 10–15 kilometres south of Kandahar City. Situated on an intensively irrigated agricultural plain they are agriculturally rich, although there are major land inequalities. Their proximity to the urban economy of Kandahar has offered labour opportunities and employment for many rural households. Both villages are characterised by a powerful social hierarchy, and their proximity to the birth village of President Karzai has given them strong political connections with the government at provincial and national level. There is limited provision of public goods such as schooling within either of the villages.

The Badakhshan villages are very different from those of Kandahar and there is also greater variability between them.

Table 1: Key features of provinces and study villages*

Province/District	Village	Features
Kandahar		
Dand	Lalakai	Pashtun
		Resource-rich but gross inequalities in land holdings
		Politically connected
Dand	Julan	Pashtun
		Landed elite with inequalities in land ownership
		Resource-rich
		Politically connected
Badakhshan		
Yamgan	Shur Qul	Tajik
		Resources marginal
		Long-term support for education
		Well-connected
Jurm	Toghloq	Tajik
		Relatively resource-rich
		Politically strong
		Late starter education
Jurm	Khilar	Ishmaili
		Ethnic minority
		Resources marginal
		Poorly connected
Sar-i-Pul		
Sayyad	Kushlak	Uzbek
		Resource-poor
		Politically marginal
Sayyad	Pishin	Uzbek
		Relatively resource-rich
		Locally dominant
Sayyad	Sarband	Arab and Pashtun
		Resource-poor and land inequalities
		Absentee landlords
		Two ethnic groups
Faryab		
Dawlatabad	Chakar	Turkman; relatively resource-rich
Dawlatabad	Hisaar	Uzbeq and Pashtun; land inequalities
Dawlatabad	Efroz	Pashtun; downstream, resource-poor

* Village names are fictitious

They are located at between 1,200 and 2,000 metres above sea level. Shur Gul is three hours' drive from the district centre in Jurm, in a narrow plain on the Kokcha valley. It has always been a grain-deficit village and there has been a long history of labour migration. The neighbouring lapis lazuli mines have in the past provided employment for many households in the village, but do not do so at present. The village has had a long history of education. The second Badakhshani village, Toghloq, is at a lower altitude than Shur Gul, in a wide and well-irrigated valley running off the main river plain. It has more irrigated land than Toghloq, but a minority of households own most of the land. In the past most households have found employment on the valley lands but this is no longer the case and there is significant out-migration for work, either in the army or police or to urban centres in Afghanistan and abroad. The third Badakshani village, Khilar, is the smallest of the three. It is located on a small plateau up a narrow valley that runs off the main river. Home to a religious minority and with limited land resources, Khilar is economically and politically marginal. Many households seek off-farm work within the district and beyond.

The three Sar-i-Pul villages are all in Sayyad district, about 30 kilometres south of the provincial centre, Sar-i-Pul. Although

located at a lower altitude than the Badakhshan villages they are probably more economically marginal given their dependence on unreliable rainfed cultivation. All are grain-deficit villages, with some land inequality and increasing levels of out-migration. Kushlak, the village furthest from Sar-i-Pul, is the poorest and most isolated, in part because of its location and in part because of its somewhat inward-looking attitude, which has limited its exposure to the outside world. Pishin, the district centre, is better located agriculturally, and many of its inhabitants lived as refugees in Pakistan during the 1990s. Sarband has two ethnic groups. Most of the land belongs to people resident in the nearby provincial town, Sar-i-Pul. There is therefore a high degree of landlessness and greater land ownership inequalities than in the other two villages. Many households rely on non-farm labour and there is significant seasonal out- migration to urban centres in the north.

Finally there are the three Faryab villages in Dawlatabad district, about an hour from the provincial centre, Maymana. Located on an irrigated plain surrounded by low-lying hills, they have historically combined irrigated agriculture with rainfed cultivation and livestock rearing. There is however considerable land inequality; most households are grain-deficit, and have increasingly had to seek off and non-farm labour to survive, including migration to Iran. All three villages have different ethnic identities. When the agrarian economy was strong this was not important, but conflict, drought and issues of water sharing have made ethnicity a source of tension.

Chapter 2
Afghanistan: setting the scene

Four major regions – around Herat in the west, Qandahar in the south, Balkh in the north and Kabul in the east – are central to Afghanistan's political history (Barfield, 2010). Regional identities are strong, and there is long-standing regional resistance to central government. Since the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001 key regional strongmen have positioned themselves in an uneasy and shifting alliance with Karzai's government, seeking to strengthen their political position and enhance their economic resources. Table 2 draws out some of the key contrasts between the four provinces and their political and economic history.

The four provinces have very different relations with the government in Kabul, and very different levels of engagement from donors and international security forces. On account of its history, economic resources and location, Kandahar has been central to the interests of President Karzai, international security forces and the reconstruction effort. With the fall of the Taliban in 2001 and their removal from their stronghold in Kandahar, the United States established a strong military presence in its campaign against both Al- Qaeda and the Taliban leadership, and sought to buy support from key local power-holders. With US support Gul Agha Sherzai of the Barakzai tribe established control of key economic resources in the province, including the border trade with Pakistan (Guistozzi and Ullah, 2007). Sherzai also promoted his tribal members in provincial political structures. However, high levels of corruption and administrative dysfunction led the US to end its support, allowing Karzai's brother, Ahmad Wali Karzai, to gain control of provincial politics. He in turn promoted members of his tribe, the Popalzai, into the provincial and district administration. Patronage derived from the interests of international actors and direct connections to Karzai has played a critical role in local politics, and local politicians have become increasingly dependent on foreign support (Guistozzi and Ullah, 2007: 182).

The presence of international military forces, reconstruction efforts and Kandahar's strategic location have all combined to support a turbulent and dynamic urban economy. This has been superimposed on a strong trading economy in high-value horticultural produce, notably fruit, and the regional opium economy. Kandahar itself has been a significant centre for opium cultivation and a key regional centre for the opium trade. It is widely assumed that provincial political figures draw significant income from this trade. Since the re-emergence of the Taliban in 2004 insecurity has increased. Although the district of Dand is close to Kandahar and relatively secure, household accounts point to daily concerns about safety and disruption to movement.

Badakhshan also has significant economic and political resources (Pain, 2010a). Following the US-led invasion in 2001 the key power-holders, notably Burhanuddin Rabbanni and his opposition Jamiat-i-Islami party, managed to maintain a weak grip on the province through patronage, thus providing a degree of stability. Political contention centred around control of the trade in natural resources – lapis lazuli – and opium poppy. Between 2001 and 2004 (when the Taliban imposed their ban) the area under cultivation increased dramatically, to 15,000ha, before falling back to 3,600ha in 2007 (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and the Afghan Ministry of Counter Narcotics, 2007). From 2005, in an attempt to neutralise his opponent Karzai threw his support behind former commander turned local politician Zalmay Khan (Guistozzi and Orsini, 2009). Despite a limited political base in the province Khan has gained control of key economic resources and succeeded in building up his own patronage networks. For the rural households of Badakhshan, the rise of the opium economy brought unprecedented prosperity (Pain, 2008). Since 2006, however, the decline in poppy cultivation, combined with a couple of dry years and rising grain prices, has seen the rural economy decline and many households now have to ration food.

Sar-i-Pul is the most politically and economically marginal of the four provinces, and has received the lowest levels of funding from the government and international sources (Waldman,

Table 2: Four provinces compared

Province	Geography	Political history and Actors	Relative Social inequalities in land holdings	Opium economy
Kandahar	Borderland; intensively irrigated plain agriculture	Karzai stronghold and centre of opposition by Taliban	Large	Significant
Badakhshan	Borderland; marginal mountain economy	Opposition to Taliban and Karzai	Medium	Significant
Sar-i-Pul	Marginal foothill economy	Marginal	Small	Moderate
Faryab	Borderland; foothill and plain economy	Marginal but locally contested	Medium	Slight

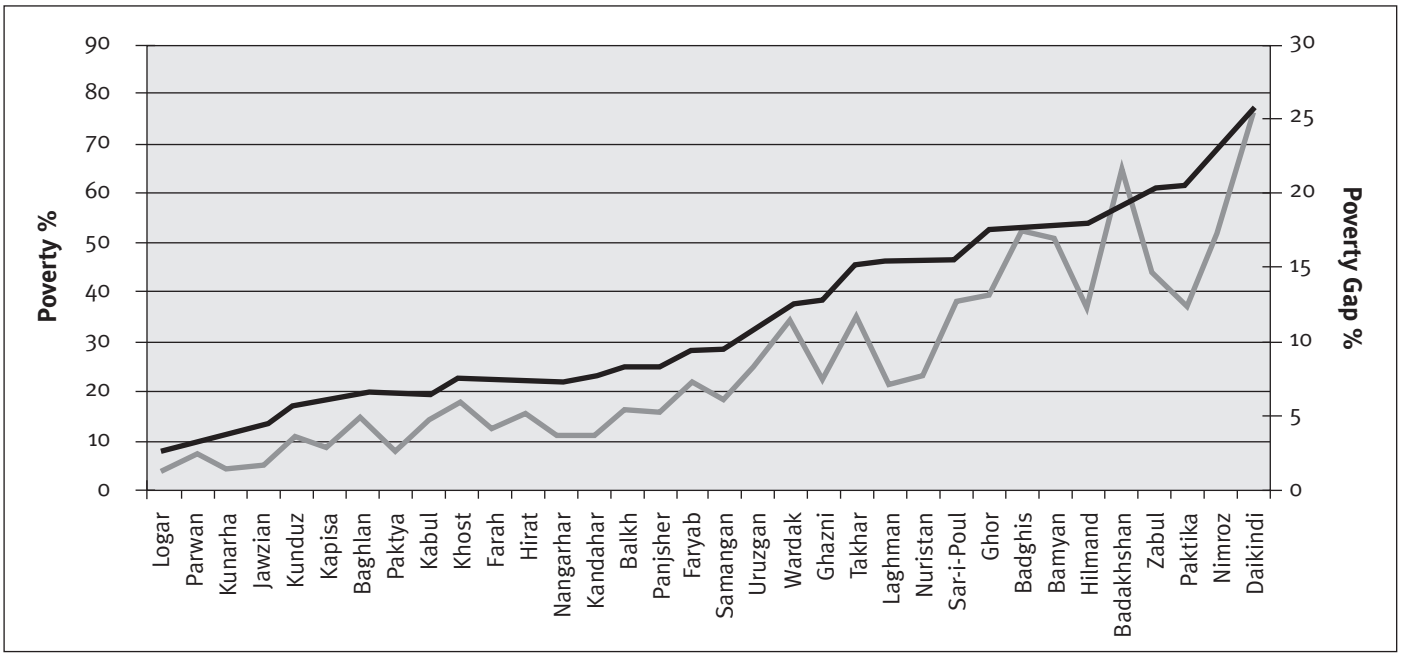
2008). The province is extremely poor, in part due to its geographical position and its reliance on rainfed agriculture, which in the recent past has not generated significant surplus produce. There is no significant opium economy or insurgency.

The political situation in the fourth province, Faryab, is dominated by longstanding rivalry between two northern groups, Jamiat and Junbesh, an Uzbeki party under the leadership of General Dostum (Nezami with Kantor, 2010). Efforts to bring the province under Karzai's control have failed in part because of the strength of provincial strongmen but also because of the political and administrative weakness of the governors appointed by the central government. Meanwhile insecurity has increased, with predation on resident populations and the spread of insurgency from the south. The rural economy is in long-term decline as a result of recurring drought and unresolved conflicts over the distribution of river water between upstream and downstream districts; Dawlatabad, the study district, has been affected.

A final summary point of comparison can be made between the study provinces, drawing on the National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment (NRVA) exercise of 2005, with respect to poverty headcount rates (the number of poor people) and the poverty gap which is a measure of how far people are below the poverty line. What is clear, and this is supported by 2007/08 NRVA data, is that poverty rates increase with altitude and the roughness of the terrain. Thus the levels of poverty and the poverty gap are considerably higher in Sar-i-Pul and Badakhshan than in the provinces of Faryab and Kandahar, supporting the above account of the differences between the provinces.

In sum, there are deep structural contrasts between the four provinces, and the nature of conflict, insecurity and the rural economy varies between locations. What have these broader patterns of provincial change meant for the livelihoods of the study households in the four provinces?

Figure 1: Provincial poverty headcount and provincial gap rates (NRVA, 2005)



Source: Azarbaijani-Mogaddam et al., 2008.

Chapter 3
Household vulnerabilities, livelihoods and social resources

Table 3 provides an overall assessment of the livelihood trajectories of the 64 study households since 2001, according to provincial location. The outcomes are assessed based on whether households reported that they were now better off (prospered), had more or less maintained their economic position (coping) or had suffered a decline in economic circumstances (declining).

Table 3: Livelihood trajectories by provincial location

	N	Prospering	Coping	Declining
Kandahar	16	10	3	3
Badakhshan	24	3	3	18
Sar-i-Pul	24	0	0	24

Source: Pain and Kantor, 2011: 6.

The data shows that only about a quarter (13) of the households had improved their economic circumstances; ten of the 13 came from Kandahar, suggesting some location-specific effects. Six of the 64 households were more or less where they had been economically in 2002. But a majority of the households (45) were worse off than they had been eight years ago; all the households in Sar-i-Pul reported being worse off, as did 18 of the 24 households in Badakhshan.

What explains this concentration of prospering households in Kandahar, and what can be learnt from the means by which they have been able to prosper? Table 3 summarises what were seen to be the primary factors that had helped these households gain greater prosperity. For the two richest households, inherited wealth, primarily land, and strong social and political connections allowed them to diversify their income sources. Another four households exploited their social connections in a similar way, and two of the four also had land resources that connected them to the provincial elite, helping to secure jobs or business opportunities. The third household had built up a substantial contracting business on the basis of strong personal connections with the key village landlord, and the fourth had built up the household economy using loans from relations.

The remaining four households in Kandahar that had prospered had done so through the opportunities provided by the vibrant urban economy of Kandahar City, albeit working as petty traders. In two cases where a large number (more than four) of active men were working, there was sufficient work in the casual labour market in the urban economy to help support improvements in the household economy.

Of the three Badakshani households that had improved, two had done so through salaried employment with an NGO, one on the basis of the man's education, the other on the basis of driving skills and social connections. A third household had improved its position because it had sufficient labour resources for sharecropping (this was the only example of a household that had prospered through agriculture). In this case there had been an element of luck in that the sons came of working age just as the opium economy was on the rise.

Since 2002, most households have managed to maintain the status quo or have suffered a decline in livelihood security. The six households that have coped have either had sufficient land or sufficient household labour to help them, although for many various health events have drained household resources. Off and non-farm employment has declined and competition for this work has grown as households have diversified into seasonal, erratic and low-return labouring activities. Many households have seen members migrate to urban areas in Afghanistan, Iran or Pakistan looking for employment. Migration is however risky given the costs of being smuggled across the border and the dangers of being caught and sent back or worse. Some in Badakhshan in particular have sought employment in the army or police, and several case households reported sons being killed.

Table 4: Prospering households

	Primary determinant				
	Inherited wealth	Social connections	Salaried employment	Urban informal economy	Household composition
Kandahar	2	4		2	2
No. with land assets	2	2		0	1
Badakhshan			2		1
No. with land assets			1		1*

Source: Pain and Kantor, 2011: 7.

In summary, a series of broader trends (decline in opium, drought and food price rises) combined with idiosyncratic events specific to households have driven people into deeper poverty (Kantor and Pain, 2011: 20). Households have responded in a number of ways, by rationing consumption, delaying marriage, marrying daughters at a younger age and taking on debt. Note the specific gender dimensions of these responses, not only with respect to girls and marriage but also as regards the economic role of women. As the rural economy has declined, so the economic contribution of women's work to the household economy has increased, particularly in Sari-i-Pul and Faryab. Although women may be economically active markets are primarily controlled by men. In the case of the carpet markets, where women are particularly active in Faryab, this control has increasingly led to engagement in markets under adverse terms (a form of what is called 'adverse incorporation'), whereby women's work is essential to household survival but women are dependent on credit from traders under declining terms of trade over which they have no control (Nezami and Kantor, 2010).

This account of the economic fortunes of 64 case households since 2002 is only a very partial one. Clearly the overall poor health of the rural economy has had a major effect on the household economy of most, and it is significant that, where households have prospered, they have done so through the urban economy and not through the rural one. This account also shows the social resources on which households might have been able to draw, and the relationships that underpin them.

3.1 Social relations

All households, whether prospering or in decline, use social relationships to secure access to resources and survival. At the

Table 5: Social relationships

Social relationships	Nature	Benefits	Risks	Who?	Degrees of prevalence?
Reciprocal	Informal credit	Shared risks	Decline in availability due to poor health rural economy	Amongst equals	Most village some level but Lalakai, Julan ++ and Shur Gul +
Hierarchical					
Charitable	Informal entitlement to support	Underpinned by moral economy	Decline in wealth of givers Reliability & amount	Destitute	Present in most villages but Shur Gul +
Patronage	Patron–client relations for survival	Access to resources to cope & survive	Loss of autonomy Economic decline of patron Arbitrary behaviour of patron	Households with limited reciprocal relations?	Present in most villages but Toghloq + Shur Gul Pishin Chakar
Adverse incorporation	Dependent relations on adverse terms	Minimum security	Exploitation Acutely insecure Unreliable	Those who might otherwise be destitute	Lalakai ++ Julan ++ Toghloq Sarband Chakar
Elite Inclusion					
Privileged	Upwards & predatory downwards connections	Accumulation	Loss of external patronage	Social & landed elite	Lalakai ++ Julan ++ Toghloq
Secondary	Upward connections	Access to wider resources	Dependent on patron	Strong individuals	Lalakai ++ Julan ++
Exclusion	Excluded from reciprocal relations	None	Resort to charity or adverse incorporation	Destitute	Lalakai Shur Qul

heart of the effort to ensure security is ensuring predictable access to resources (Wood, 2003). The relationships that can be established vary significantly in quality – in the benefits offered and the costs of securing them, particularly with respect to individual autonomy. Drawing on Kantor and Pain (2010a:), Table 5 characterises the different social relationships that were found, their nature, the benefits secured and the risks associated with them, who could access them and where they were present. As will become clear, location and the social order within each village account for the variable presence and quality of these relationships.

Social relationships can be divided into four broad categories: reciprocal, hierarchical, elite inclusion and exclusion (Kantor and Pain, 2010a: 2–5). Reciprocal relations are the most equitable, evidenced most strongly by the membership and use of informal credit networks. As has been documented elsewhere (Klijn and Pain, 2006), many households give and receive informal credit, usually on a no-interest basis. Where there was a relatively strong economy, as in urban Kandahar or when opium was cultivated in Badakhshan, such credit was widely available. As the rural economy has declined, the availability of informal credit has also declined.

With respect to hierarchical relations, there are three 'ideal types'. The first, charitable relations, is essentially an informal entitlement to a basic food supply from wealthy patrons without any clear reciprocal obligations. It is based on Islamic norms and is accessed by the destitute. The next level is that of a client in a patronage relationship, which carries certain obligations in order to secure a certain level of provision. Reliability cannot be assured. The third level is 'adverse incorporation', whereby households become locked in dependent relations either with a landlord or a market. It may secure survival but little more.

At the other end of the spectrum are the social elite, who by virtue of social connections beyond the village (Kabeer, 2000) gain access to wider resources, employment and patronage. They may also draw on a wider range of dependent relations with poorer households. There is also a second group of 'lesser' elite who, through connections with key village elite (described as secondary inclusion (Kabeer, 2000)), and as a form of patronage, are in a position to support the elite and gain benefits from it.

Finally there are those who, through a lack of resources or connections, ill-health or loss of labour, are excluded from other social relations and have to rely for survival on charity or are drawn into adverse relations and a complete loss of autonomy.

Although these types of social relationships were present in many of the villages, their role varied considerably (Kantor and Pain, 2010a: 13–24). In the Kandahar villages examples of elite inclusion, strong reciprocal relations and adverse incorporation were visible. In Shur Gul in Badakhshan a stronger moral economy supporting charity was evident. In the economically distressed villages of Sar-i-Pul many drew on reciprocal relations for access to credit, but support was limited. Elite inclusion was absent in the Sar-i-Pul villages.

Household accounts made clear (see Pain, 2010a; Pain, 2010b; Shaw, 2010) that households were active in their efforts to build and invest in these relationships. At best, such resources could provide and promote welfare, but for many there were limited choices in the relationships that could be established, and many carried costs in terms of predictability, the level of security afforded and the risk of exploitation through loss of autonomy, particularly in the Kandahar households (Kantor and Pain, 2010: 16–18). But what explains the variability between the villages in terms of the social relationships on offer?

Chapter 4
Village contexts

The need for individuals and households to seek welfare through informal means is neither new nor recent in Afghanistan. Neither the state nor the market have ever provided welfare for all in Afghanistan: before 1978 state presence was limited; from 1978 the state was for many the enemy, and since 2001 the behaviour of the state has been seen as predatory by many. The role of the village and its capacity to provide public goods (dispute resolution, physical security and welfare) has a deep historical basis and is not an outcome of any recent loss of state or market capacity.

A village is of course a geographical place, but like the market, for example, villages also contain institutions that govern and regulate behaviour. The institutional practices of villages vary, and in this sense they can be seen to have distinct social profiles. In most villages, it was found that people have built the range of social relationships needed to bring predictability and reduce vulnerability. However, there is also evidence of patterns in the existence of these relationships, with the Kandahar village showing strong evidence of elite inclusion, adverse incorporation into dependent social relations, robust reciprocal relations amongst family members but also limited charitable relations. In contrast, although in Toghloq evidence of elite inclusion and adverse incorporation were found, the extent and degree of elite inclusion and adverse incorporation was much reduced in the non- Kandahar villages. Here charitable and patronage relations were more widespread among the study households, as were reciprocal relations, although, as noted above, the resources that could be drawn on through reciprocity were severely constrained given the poor health of the rural economy. What explains these differences between villages in terms of the social relationships that they support and how might these be related to wider aspects of village behaviour as discussed in the introduction?

4.1 Eleven Afghan villages

As summarised in Table 1, the 11 study villages are each distinctive in their social order and their behaviour. This is in part attributable to the broader provincial context within which they are located, and the ways in which the social order within the village works. Critical to this is the nature of the elite, and the extent to which they pursue individual interests as opposed to the collective interests of the village. Table 6 summarises in schematic form the contrasts between the villages in terms of the key factors that may influence the interests of the elite and the conditions under which the provision of public goods is likely to be greatest.

It is argued that, where there are considerable land inequalities and villages are resource-rich (a high proportion of irrigated land, for example) the incentives for village elites to be supportive

Table 6: Relative level of land inequalities and public good outcomes in study villages

Province/village	Land inequalities	Ratio irrigated/rainfed agriculture	Education	Village public goods
Kandahar				
Lalakai	+++++	++++	– –	+
Julan	++++	++++	– –	+
Badakhshan				
Shur Qul	+	+	+++	++++
Toghloq	+++	++	+	+
Khilar	+	+	+	+
Sar-I-Pul				
Gahdy	+	+	+	+
Tuty	+	+	++	++
Sarband	++	+	+	+
Faryab				
Chakar	++	+++	++	++
Hisaar	+++	+++	+	++
Efroz	+++*	++	–	+

* Land owned by absentee landlords

Source: Pain and Kantor, 2010: 31.

of wider public goods provision are weakest. Where land inequalities are lower and villages are resource-poor, village elites may be more inclined to be supportive of the provision of public goods, for reasons not least (but not only) of self-interest. This summary proposition is explored in more detail through an investigation of the social order of the different villages.

The Kandahar villages[3]

As made clear by one informant from Lalakai, the village is characterised by major land inequalities: 'In the villages of Dand, you will not find such a village where the whole land belongs to three families … in other villages there is a malik system but in our village the main landowner is the head of the shura as well' (Pain and Kantor, 2010a: 18). All his land is cultivated by sharecroppers, most of whom live in houses he owns. In the village of Julan there is also a strong hierarchy, with five *maliks* operating under a head *malik*.[4] Together they control a large part of the village landholdings, although land is not as concentrated as in Lalakai. The village elite is largely self-interested. Many of the sharecroppers in Lalakai are immigrants to the village, and work in constant fear of losing access to the patronage that the landlord provides. One poor sharecropping household reported how the landlord had taken their land and house away after the husband suffered an injury which meant that he could no longer work (Pain, 2010b: 26). The wife continues to work for the landlord as a servant paid with leftover food, but she is given no wage. In Julan village another poor household lost access to land they had been sharecropping for 20 years after the landlord gave the land to a relative. The explanation offered by the wife is revealing:

> *[the landlord] used to say 'You have to work on my lands honestly. If you do so, then you will be working on my lands forever. If you do not, then I will take my lands in two weeks'. [My sons] used to work on his lands and in another place too. The landlord didn't like that and he took his land away. We couldn't argue with him anymore. He is powerful and also has wealth; we are afraid if someday we were to ask him for credit, he will deny it to us* (Pain, 2010b: 37).

A second landlord in Julan, the head *malik* of the village, was ruthless in his dealings with others, even with his own relatives. Three of the case study households were related and each had an account of the ways in which the landlord had used his power to seize assets that belonged to them. In one case he took over a shop that had been left to his nephews; in another he was reported to have taken land from the widow of a deceased brother. In a third case he simply ignored the needs of a poor young relative struggling to survive. In neither village did the village elite display much interest in the provision of public goods, including education. Indeed, where public goods provision was externally provided – for example through the National Solidarity Programme – this was largely captured for the elite's own benefit. They elected themselves to the formal village leadership and secured road access to their houses: 'there wasn't any voting process because the *malik* elected himself and the *haji* for the *shura* … this road was only gravelled for his car. We are far from that road and don't have access to it'.

The Badakhshan villages[5]

The three Badakshan villages are characterised as much by the differences among them as by the differences between them and the villages in Kandahar. The village most similar to the Kandahar villages was Toghloq, in the sense that, in comparison with Shur Gul and Khilar, it has relatively high land inequalities and is relatively rich in resources, although the degree of land inequality and the extent of irrigation do not compare with the two Kandahar villages. In the past Toghloq was self-sufficient in grain and there was sufficient land to provide sharecropping and labouring opportunities for the landless.

Prior to 1978 the village had a school, but it produced few graduates and no one from the village went to university or into government service. During the war with the Soviets the village was the site of intense resistance to the communist government, and there was considerable conflict. The *mujahiddin* destroyed the school and killed teachers in the valley, stopping education until after 2001. There were accounts of old customary structures prior to 1978: one householder, for example, told of how his father had been asked to become the village leader (*arbob*) on account of his good reputation. His father had little land and had been on the point of moving away from the village because of poverty. With the onset of the conflict these customary structures appear to have been overtaken by the rise of a new village elite based on fighting capacity. While this might have provided a degree of protection against external forces, there were accounts of insecurity within the village. One informant described how a commander had married his daughter by force. After 2001 the major commanders left the valley and moved to Kabul.

With reasonable irrigation resources the village was less affected by drought than other Badakhshani villages, and it profited considerably from opium cultivation. Attempts to destroy the opium crop in 2005 were met with armed resistance, which would have been unlikely in the other two Badakhshani villages. However, the decline of opium has badly affected the village economy and an increasing number of men are quitting the village to join the army or the police, often gaining this employment through former commanders living in Kabul. While farming still supports some households, for many this is no longer possible. Although a school has been re-established in the village, an NGO working locally reported that the village was one of the more difficult locations to operate in due to opposition from the key power-holders. A Community Development Committee (CDC) was formed, but disputes within

3 This section draws on Pain, 2010b.
4 A *malik* is a village leader.
6 This section draws on Shaw, 2010.

it led to its collapse. A new committee has been set up, but does not appear to be working well. Security within the village is still problematic; one informant reported that the son of one commander had tried to take her daughter by force into marriage. Because of its geographical position and resources and its relatively powerful elite, the village has enjoyed a degree of physical security and independence from the outside world. Within the village, however, the provision of public goods, including education, has been limited and the village elite have been largely self-interested.

Khilar is a marginal village, and has had to establish and maintain external protective relations in order to ensure its physical security. In part this is because it is small and poor, and in part because of its social identity as a village populated by Ishmailis. During the first phase of the war the village was subject to considerable hostility on account of its religious minority status. Violence was used against households and land was taken by force by powerful people in the neighbouring valleys. The village was finally able to establish dependent relations with a key valley commander, giving it some measure of physical security, but the drought led to many households falling into debt and many had to mortgage and ultimately sell their land; about a third of the village's irrigated land now belongs to non-residents. Although the opium business offered some recovery villagers largely worked as labourers on other people's land.

Since 2001 the village has maintained dependent relations with the valley commander. The commander's authority exceeds that of the village *shura* and he is responsible for dispute resolution within the village. This commander's relations with key political figures in the district's main valley are uneasy, and as a result the village has limited political influence. Many villagers are related, so internal security and social support are strong. But its small size and its dependence on external support has made it difficult for the village to access wider resources. It only recently gained road access and, although more children are now going to school in the valley, because of the distance involved many girls do not attend beyond grade 8.

The third village, Shur Gul, is both the largest and the furthest from Jurm. During the 1950s its location close to the Badakhshan lapis lazuli mines resulted in the village *arbob* coming into contact with educated government officials, prompting the village elite to establish a school. By 1978, a significant number of men had graduated from tertiary education and established wider contacts. With the conflict from 1978 many returned and supported the village, keeping the school going, managing security and, through wider social connections, gaining access to economic resources in times of need; in the 1990s, for example, the lapis lazuli mine provided employment for village households during the drought. During the 1990s a girls' school was also established. Although the village derived some benefits from opium, given its altitude and limited land it did not benefit to the same extent as Toqhloq. After 2001 the educated elite have been active in bringing NGOs to the village, expanding the provision of education, improving roads and providing clean water and electricity through a micro-hydro scheme. With the decline of agriculture after 2006 the village has suffered economically and there has been a rise in out-migration to other provinces and Iran, and a move by poorer households into consumption rationing. However, even poorer households make every effort to keep children in school, helped by food for education support.

All three villages benefited from the opium economy in the years 2000–2006, although the extent of this benefit varied according to the land available to the village; all have suffered serious economic decline since then. But it is the differences between the villages in terms of their social order and the behaviour of the social elite that provide the key points of contrast. All the villages have survived, but through different means and with contrasting outcomes.

The Sar-i-Pul villages[6]

Sar-i-Pul province has a more marginal economy than Badakshan given its location in the foothills, its largely rainfed agriculture and little history of investment in public goods, most notably education. Since 2001 the rural economy has gone into steep decline. The three villages lie within 30km of Sar-i-Pul town, the provincial centre. The most prosperous of the three villages, Pishin, is also the district centre, and contains boys' and girls' schools as well as a health and veterinary clinic. It is the best resourced of the three villages with respect to land – although in all three villages there is limited access to irrigation water. A boys' primary school was established in the 1960s and a small number of boys graduated to the high school in Sar-i-Pul town before the war, two qualifying later as a teacher and a doctor. The doctor was a prominent figure in the migration of most of the village to Pakistan after 1978, and the refugee experience was reported to have had an important effect in driving new aspirations. Migration also established important economic connections, and there are now regular seasonal movements of labour from the village back to Pakistan for employment. As with Shur Qul, the educated elite seem to have played a key role in bringing public goods to the village after 2001, including an electricity supply, a community-managed generator and communal water pumps. A girls' school has been built with village labour on land donated by a wealthy landowner.

The village of Kushlak, about 2km south of Pishin, is the poorest of the three villages, with almost no irrigated land and a lower level of provision of public goods. Socially conservative, its members did not migrate, and the leadership is in a dependent relationship to powerful figures in Pishin. The village elders are not supportive of girls' education, so few girls go to Pishin for school, and a community generator, purchased with money from the National Solidarity Programme, lies unused due to lack of funds for fuel.

6 This section draws on Shaw, 2010.

The most northerly of the villages, Sariband, is peri-urban. It is ethnically divided and much of the land belongs to absentee landlords. There is a high level of landlessness and levels of land inequality are the highest among the three villages. There is significant out-migration of labour to the neighbouring provincial centre and to other cities in the northern plains of Afghanistan. Ethnic division has led to the formation of two separate ethnically-based community councils (*shuras*), both of which are largely dysfunctional, with the leadership of each using the funds for their own benefit. That said, despite ethnic differences in times of conflict, the two groups have protected each other.

In summary, none of the Sar-i-Pul villages enjoys the kind of autonomy found in the Badakshan villages of Shur Gul or Toghloq, and Kushlaq is in certain respects in a similar position to Khilar, although with less internal cohesion and solidarity. In all three villages elders play a key role in dispute resolution subject to the influence of the elite, but in contrast to the Kandahar and Badakhshan villages, strong external connections outside the district or province were not in evidence. The three villages remain economically marginal, reflecting the position of Sar-i-Pul in general in relation to the plain economy of Balkh.

The Faryab villages[7]

The Faryab villages are located in an agricultural plain through which the Andkhoy river runs north, providing irrigation. The villages are comparable to those in Kandahar given the extent of irrigation and the levels of land inequality, particularly in Hisaar. Many households have little or no land. In the past there was a relatively rich and secure agrarian economy that was more mixed than Kandahar's, combining irrigated land with rainfed cultivation and livestock. Women in Chakar, a Turkmen village, wove high-quality carpets.

In contrast to the other three provinces, ethnic differences have been a significant factor driving village behaviour. While ethnic divisions have always been present these rose to prominence during the *mujahiddin* period and the subsequent period of Taliban rule, with one provincial commander during the former period targeting Pashtun villages, an action reciprocated by the Taliban against non-Pashtun villages when they came to power. Many from Efroz migrated out of the province during the *mujahiddin* period, and during the Taliban times many from Chakar and Hisaar left their villages. Since 2007 ethnic tensions have increased, reinforced by a drought-induced decline in the rural economy and conflict over water distribution between upstream and downstream districts.

The issue for the Faryab villages has been managing their internal affairs and providing for their physical security in an uncertain and changing environment. Thus, although there had been conflict between Chakar and Efroz during the *mujahiddin* period, after the fall of the Taliban in 2001 elders from the two villages sought to improve relations and reduce conflict. One informant from Chakar noted: 'Our elders said that these people have treated us badly. If we do the same to them, then how are we different? After the Taliban we took no revenge on anyone, even those who escaped and came back to the village later' (Pain and Kantor, 2010a: 29). Even so, insecurity and uncertainty have increased in the district, fuelled by the continuing contention between the two key political parties, Junbesh and Jamiat. Through provincial appointments Karzai has sought to undermine Junbesh, and there have been divisions within Junbesh between the reforming and the military wings, leading to the re-emergence of local commanders. Chakar has been host to one such commander; he had earlier been exiled from the village due to his bad reputation and record but had returned. Incursions by insurgents from outside the province have also increased. The sense of increasing insecurity was conveyed well by one informant:

> *before the Taliban and during their rule, people knew their enemies, but now in this government people do not know their enemies. They don't even know whether these terrorists are Taliban or the government. We used to know where the enemy came from, who they were and what they were doing, but now it is very difficult to confirm who is our enemy and who is our friend* (Pain and Kantor, 2010a: 29).

The government suspects Pashtun villages such as Efroz of being linked with the insurgents. This is not a position that elders from other non-Pashtun villages agree with, arguing that the insecurity is not ethnically based and that they are in a better position to reduce tensions between villages. Nevertheless, each of the villages has taken steps to increase their own security. In Hisar, for example, guards are posted at night to protect the school. The commander of Chakar was recently assassinated, potentially making the village vulnerable to attack.

The villages are caught between a corrupt government on the one hand and an insurgency on the other, and are essentially left to provide for their own security. Villagers have armed themselves – though the death of the Chakar commander indicates the limits of the protection that this affords – or have negotiated with the insurgents and paid 'taxes' for protection. The danger is that the authorities may take this as evidence of support for the insurgents and punish the village accordingly.

External circumstances clearly have a major effect on the behaviour of the village in relation to the outside world. But what governs village behaviour overall, with respect to both its internal and external world?

4.2 Understanding village behaviour

This analysis began by examining the livelihoods of 64 households from 11 villages. It drew attention to the significant role of social relations in helping households increase the

7 This section draws from Nezami with Kantor, 2010.

security and certainty in their lives given the failure of both the state and the market to provide either. It has argued that households can draw on a wide range of social relations, some more advantageous and equal than others and all with differing benefits and risks. All this points to the importance of informal relationships and social networks in obtaining what security can be achieved and reducing vulnerabilities. But the evidence has also pointed to significant differences between villages, both in the quality of the relationships that can be established and in the behaviour of these villages in relation to the provision of public goods.

The most fundamental public good that a village can provide is security. This can be done through military means, as Toghloq did in the past and the Faryab villages are struggling to do now. But it can also be done through building strong external connections with more powerful or influential people. This cannot be done in Faryab because power is contested within the province, but it has been possible in Kandahar and in the Badakhshan villages – notably Shur Gul, which managed external security extremely effectively during the *mujahiddin* period and after (Pain, 2010b: 16–19). In the case of Khilar or Kushlak, which are not strong enough to defend themselves, security can be obtained by assuming 'protectorate status'.

There are of course limits to what a village can do to defend itself against the outside world. Even Toghloq, which was successful in keeping the government out during the Soviet period (and whose members attacked and destroyed the vehicles of an opium eradication team in 2006, an act that would have been unthinkable in the other Badakhshan villages), has suffered considerable destruction. In many cases insecurity is so great that people are compelled to migrate, as happened in all of the Faryab villages and in Pishin and Sarband.

External security does not mean internal security – Kandahar, Chakar and Toghloq all provided evidence of a lack of security within villages, with powerful people abusing their position (see Pain, 2011). Households see physical strength in the institution of the joint household – as one informant from Toghloq put it (Pain, 2011: 22): 'A big family can also protect themselves against problems and conflicts emerging in the village. No one can fight with a family because a big family can properly defend itself'. Beyond security a village can also provide other public goods, including welfare and dispute resolution, as well as investment in education and health, as found in Shur Gul, Pishin and Chakar, both through village efforts and by building connections to external sources of provision, primarily NGOs.

The case study villages also show the key role of external relationships with more powerful figures at district and provincial level. Villages are not autonomous but should be seen as part of a wider web of relationships and connections. Some are better at building these links through elite connections, and are helped where there is a degree of political consensus in the region. Building these connections is more difficult where there is no political settlement, as in Faryab, or where villages (and provinces) are marginal, as in the case of Sar-i-Pul.

The case has been made that villages have distinctive social orders that underlie the way they behave. There is no wider systematic study of Afghan villages exploring the extent of this, though there is a wide range of observational evidence (see Pain and Kantor, 2010a: 32–33) to support the view that this variability is not unique to the study villages. Many field workers talk of how different villages are easier or harder to work with. There is also evidence of the capacities of the village to provide dispute resolution and public goods through customary structures (Smith, 2009; Brick, 2008). What is the connection between elite behaviour, the degree of public goods provision available in a village and the quality of social relationships that can be drawn on to provide security?

The evidence presented in Chapter 3 argued that the resource endowments of the village, the ownership of these endowments and village customary institutions and their performance should be seen as interrelated dimensions of the village rather than separate aspects of it. Conditions in Shur Gul, with its limited irrigated area, small land inequalities, grain deficit and relatively flat social hierarchy, all suggest that efforts to secure public goods are likely to be maximal, and the quality of social relationships on which people can draw highest, even if the level of provision is limited by the overall poverty of the village. In contrast the Kandahar villages, with their rich resources and major land and social inequalities, have the least provision of public goods and the poorest social relationships.

Drawing on Brick (2008), what appears to matter is the way in which village customary structures work. Three key customary structures found in most Afghan villages – the village council (shura), the village leaders (*maliks* or *arbobs*) and the village clergy (*mullahs*) – can give rise to conditions that are supportive of public goods provision. Four key features drive this. First, each of these customary structures has distinct and non-overlapping areas of authority, and each derives its authority and legitimacy from different sources. The village council manages dispute resolution; the village headman is the key interlocutor between the village and the government, representing the village; and the clergy, whose authority is derived from religion, speak on matters determined by Sharia law. The evidence from the case study households and villages is consistent with this. What the evidence also confirms is the second key feature – the capacity of these customary structures to independently raise revenue from within the village. The school in Shur Gul, for instance, was paid for by a levy instigated by the *shura*. There were several examples of payments being made to mullahs.

Third, there are checks and balances that can prevent abuse of these customary structures. Even in Kandahar the clergy

were able to impose constraints on the behaviour of the elite (Pain, 2010a: 96) in relation to matters determined by Sharia law. The ways in which these checks and balances work can be variable, constraining abuses of authority in Badakhshan but not in Kandahar. The reason for this relates to the fourth factor – the need for sufficient actors with the ability to stop potential abuse of power and act as veto players. Where land distribution is relatively equal there are many landowners and power is dispersed. Where land ownership is concentrated so is power. Under such conditions there are few constraints on elite behaviour and elites are more likely to act in their own interests.

Chapter 5
Policy and programming: the response to village conditions

The core argument of this paper has been that social relations are central to the ability of Afghan households to reduce vulnerability and gain a degree of livelihood security. The level and quality of the security that can be gained is fundamentally dependent on the quality of the social relationships that can be established. This is determined by the behaviour of the elite in the village, which in turn is influenced by the degree to which the elite supports the moral economy in the village. The case study villages of Kandahar clearly showed a rich elite treating the village simply as a resource to build their private wealth. In Sar-i-Pul or some of the Badakhshan villages, the village elite may be more vulnerable and the incentives to support a moral order stronger. To what extent are these fundamental characteristics of Afghanistan's rural society – the centrality of social relationships and their variability by village – captured in policy and programme responses? The simple answer is hardly at all, reflecting three characteristics of policy and programming in Afghanistan as they relate to the rural economy.

First, many key interventions at the village level, most notably the National Solidarity Programme,[8] have had the specific intent of displacing customary structures and life based on personalised relationships with new organisations and structures based on competition and impersonalised relationships. There has been little interest in understanding what exists at present, given the assumption that existing practices are inherently unequal and exploitative. While it is true that seeking security through personalised relationships does not ensure that everyone has equal access or benefits equally, it cannot be assumed that such interventions have simply displaced what was there before, or have replaced what was there with stronger, more reliable and more equitable access to welfare.

Reinforcing this, and this is the second characteristic, has been the bias towards agency, which excludes the structures that limit it and which create and perpetuate poverty and vulnerability in the first place. This has been compounded by a conceptual muddle between symptoms and causes that pervades the debate on poverty (Harriss, 2007). Thus, the symptoms of poverty and vulnerability – often translated by agencies into lack of assets, lack of access to the market and so forth – have come to be treated as the causes of poverty, thus denying the underlying structural inequalities that might have created them, and failing to ask why these people had no assets or were vulnerable in the first place.

8 'The introduction of democratically elected community decision-making bodies as a viable alternative to the traditional local governance structure has provided a vehicle to re-build the social fabric and relationships at grassroots level' http://www.nspafghanistan.org/default.aspx?sel=103.

This chapter briefly explores these issues by looking at the way poverty has been described and responded to in Afghanistan, before going on to consider the consequences of this policy and practice when it engages with informal credit and village customary structures.

5.1 The limits of the debate on poverty in Afghanistan

No policy discussion on Afghanistan is complete without descriptions of poverty indices and where Afghanistan lies in international comparisons. But poverty indices are simply a reflection of what you choose to measure, and measuring poverty outcomes reveals little of the root causes of poverty and vulnerability. The early discussion on poverty in Afghanistan (for a more extensive analysis of these issues see Kantor and Pain, 2010b) as seen in the first national development report (Saba and Zakhilwal, 2004) considered not only the limited asset base of poor households but also the underlying issues of inequality of access to resources that contributed to poverty creation. It argued strongly that pro-growth policies had to be attentive to distributional outcomes and questioned the heavy focus on market-led growth in reconstruction policy. The Afghanistan National Development Report (Afghanistan National Development Strategy, 2008) claimed a pro-poor focus, stating that it saw pro-poor growth, poverty reduction and livelihood security as central to its strategy (ANDS, 2008: 5 and 27). However, a closer reading of the policy document indicates considerable differences between the stated principles and actual policy prescriptions (Kantor, Pain et al., 2009), with little attention to issues of inequality.

Since then poverty has slipped down the political agenda and stabilisation, reconciliation, anti-corruption efforts and economic growth have crept up it (Kantor and Pain, 2010b: 4–5). At the same time there has been increasing focus on poverty as simply a gap in resources. A reading of the core policy documents in the agriculture and rural development sector indicates a consistent lack of attention to and analysis of inequalities in wealth and power, little concern for distributional outcomes, a programming focus on input delivery and an instrumental use of communities to achieve programme ends, with some deeply problematic assumptions about how communities work (Kantor and Pain, 2010b: 3–9).

This is illustrated well by the Afghanistan Rural Enterprise Development Program (AREDP), with its claims to address the needs of the 'extreme poor' by promoting rural employment and reducing poverty through market-led growth (see Pain and Kantor, 2011, for a more extensive discussion of this

programme). It assumes that lack of access to formal credit is the key factor limiting the poor's engagement in markets, and that collective action at the village level and norms of solidarity will facilitate better access to credit and market engagement. However, it fails to consider where and how collective action might be based on solidarity, and ignores evidence on where social solidarity might be strongest and why. The market-driven approach biases programming towards areas of relatively high resource potential and good market access (indeed, the trial programme is being carried out in such locations), which is precisely where social solidarity is likely to be lowest and inequalities greatest. None of the proposed programme monitoring indicators addresses assumptions of community solidarity or examines distributional outcomes in terms of who is a member of the group and who gets the employment.

5.2 Programme models meet village social relations

The assumptions about lack of access to formal credit among the poor in the AREDP documentation reflect a common focus on the formal to the exclusion of the informal in general. The evidence on the widespread existence of informal credit is well documented (Klijn and Pain, 2007), and is supported by the evidence on household trajectories and social relationships reported here. The point about informal credit is that it is primarily used for consumption smoothing and is often borrowed on a no-interest basis. Its pervasive nature indicates the need for credit for survival and for reducing insecurity, not for market engagement. The AREDP thus assumes that the poor need to develop a savings habit when what they need first is livelihood security before they can save. But it is when formal credit meets informal credit that the limits of understanding of the role of money and credit in supporting and investing in social relationships are revealed. Not only can formal credit be used for consumption smoothing rather than investment and paid back through borrowing on informal credit, but access to formal credit and membership of the groups through which micro-credit is disbursed can be regulated through existing social relationships (Kantor, 2009). In other words, formal credit becomes subject to the same practices that drive the use of informal credit and the social relationships that underpin these.

The National Solidarity Programme (NSP) is more aware of existing customary village institutions (Beath et al., 2008), but more in terms of their possible effects on programme success rather than their significance in structuring social relationships within the village. As the case study evidence reported in this paper shows, where existing customary structures are strong and work well, as in Shur Gul village, this lays the basis for additional external public goods investment to work synergistically with existing social structures and achieve good distributional outcomes. Where customary structures have been co-opted, external investment in villages is simply captured by the elite, despite the formal appearance of new organisational arrangements. Thus, the Ministry of Rural Development official in Kandahar might claim that 'NSP shuras have been selected by village elections … in the village we don't work for individuals like *maliks*, *khans*, mullahs and commanders'. The *malik* might assert that 'as head of the NSP *shura* we constructed a road, which was very beneficial for the village … that is why the people of our area again requested me to become head of the NSP *shura*'. But the evidence points to the elite largely serving their own interests.

Pre-existing village conditions matter and can affect programme outcomes. This process of institutional 'bricolage', whereby new organisational arrangements are built out of and superimposed on pre-existing ones, more often than not operates subject to pre-existing social institutions, rather than displacing them (see Jones, 2009; Harriss-White and Jankaran, 2004: 58 with respect to the impacts of market liberalisation on gender and caste in India). This argues strongly for the need for programming to build better understanding of those pre-existing conditions.

The evidence on the significance of village conditions to livelihood security raises a bigger question over the transformational objectives implicit in much of the policy and programming in Afghanistan. It is assumed that competition, democracy and markets will lead to a widening of access to resources by the poor, and will take them out of poverty. But the logic of the existing social order operates to entirely different principles, revolving more around personalised relations and the use of these relations to regulate access to resources. There is no evidence that this logic will easily, quickly or fully be displaced by a model of competition. Thus, the policy and programming issue is to build much better understanding of the way in which social relationships provide greater predictability in an insecure world, and seeking incremental improvements to bring about change. Fundamental to that is understanding the incentives that govern elite behaviour.

Chapter 6
Analysing context – tools of exploration

This paper has argued that understanding the context in Afghanistan – the social orders of villages and regions – and the social relationships that can be established is fundamental to an assessment of the central structural causes of poverty and vulnerability, and the ways in which households can mitigate or address these. Thus, understanding of village conditions should be fundamental to policy and programming practice that seeks to address poverty and vulnerability. However, there is little evidence that this is the case. Instead, assumptions about what village behaviour should be have driven practice. This has been compounded by the Western bias towards individual capacities to escape poverty and vulnerability, rather than the structures of inequality that create and perpetuate poverty in the first place. This in turn has resulted in the descriptors of poverty – lack of assets or savings – being treated as the causes of poverty and vulnerability, rather than as symptoms.

While a humanitarian focus does not necessarily engage fully with the longer-term development and state-building agenda in Afghanistan, its concern to mitigate acute vulnerability can be informed by the contextual understanding that this paper has sought to build. It is suggested that analysis at three levels can help humanitarian actors to respond more effectively to vulnerability in design, monitoring and impact assessment. These three levels – the regional identities within which villages are located, village social orders and the patterns of social relationships within villages – are briefly presented in turn, before discussing how they might be used.

6.1 Towards a better understanding of context

Building understanding of regional identities

The first level of analysis is essentially a political analysis informed by geography and history. It pays attention to the behaviour of regional elites and strongmen (see Guistozzi, 2009 for a discussion on two such regional figures), the political and economic resources that each of the regions generate and the interplay between different regional elites at the national level. The situation in Afghanistan is essentially one where the political elite from their regional bases have divided control of the country and economy amongst themselves, creating mini-states and maintaining an uneasy peace between themselves. The current environment of conflict and instability is likely to persist, and this is tacitly recognised in the shift from state-building to stabilisation in the international reconstruction agenda. What characterises this existing social order – one which North et al. (2007) would class as a 'basic limited access order' – is a pattern of behaviour whereby regional elites gain control of resources and regulate access to them. This access requires personal connections. This existing regime is likely to persist and change will not come quickly or easily.

Afghan village social orders

Drawing on the 11 village studies a number of key indicators of village conditions can be identified, which may provide a basic understanding of the way in which the village social order might work in Afghanistan, and to whose benefit (see Pain and Kantor, 2010a: 38–42 for more detailed discussion on these). The indicators (Table 7, page 22) are divided between those that help build understanding of the physical and social position of the village in relation to its wider world, and those that help build knowledge of how the village might work internally; they draw directly from Pain and Kantor (2010a: 40).

The analysis of social relationships

The third aspect that needs examining is the nature and prevalence of the various forms of informal social relationships that can be established, using a framework that captures social relationships with different qualities and the basis (or resource position) on which people or households enter into these relationships. This captures the dimensions of 'social capital' that are critical to the way households handle insecurity and vulnerability, and are dependent both on the particular social structural characteristics within the village and the wider context within which the village is embedded. Where villages are poor and land inequalities are low then it is more likely that social relationships of greater equality may be established, even if the level of support that can be provided is low given the overall health of the village economy. Conversely, in richer areas with large social inequalities more hierarchical social relationships might be expected. But it is possible, as in the Kandahar villages where there is a more robust regional economy, that some households can evade hierarchical relationships and draw on reciprocal ones. To understand these dimensions requires a social analysis of the village, and Table 8 suggests a range of potential indicators that could be used to identify these different sorts of relationships, their quality and who is included or excluded from them.

6.2 Applying the context analysis

Three levels of context analysis have been proposed to help build understanding of the ways in which households build and maintain social relationships in order to reduce vulnerability and increase predictability in the uncertain and insecure world of Afghanistan.

The higher analysis at the regional level draws attention to how things actually work and the logic of the existing social order. This understanding is fundamentally absent from policy and programming, which works to normative views of the construction of a state on the basis of competitive behaviour in the market place, in democracy and in the bureaucracy. This

Table 7: Key indicators of village preconditions

Measure	Indicator	Use/relevance
(a) Position of village in relation to outer world		
Altitude	Metres above sea level	Remoteness/resources
Landscape position	Plain/main valley floor/lateral valley/ valley edge/hillside/hilltop	Resource base position
Water resource position	Up-/mid-/down- stream /irrigation or valley	Resource access
Distance	Distance (hours travel) to district centre/ provincial city by specified travel means	Relative measure of remoteness/access to non-farm income; dependent on size of urban economy
Social identity	Ethnic composition	Ethnic identity in relation to surrounding villages
(b) Internal to village		
Resource endowment	Proportion of irrigated to rainfed land	Relative indicator of wealth of village resource base
Land distribution	Degree of inequality (land holdings of largest landowner, number/ proportion of land owners' similar holdings as proportion of total landholdings Percent of landless households	Linked to issues of power and customary structures; where high, lowest levels of village public good provision likely
Social identity	If more than one social group, proportions of each	Internally potential sources of divided loyalties
Customary structures	Presence, role and practices of customary structures	Assessment of their presence and performance & contribution to public good provision
Village economy	Grain surplus/deficit Degree of labour migration/proportion of households with one member migrating	Livelihood base
Start date boys education	First date boys going to school in village/ neighbourhood Schooling between 1978– 2001?	Evidence of early access to education/ presence of educated men in village
Start date girls education	First date of girls going to school Proportion of girls at school	Proxy indicator for attitudes to women

view excludes the dimensions of inequality that make and keep people poor, including the social relationships that they enter into and maintain in order to gain a degree of welfare that the state and market does not, and never has, provided. The evidence of history clearly shows (North et al., 2010) that transitions from the basic access order that characterises Afghanistan do not happen easily and quickly, and much depends on the behaviour of the elite, and the incentives that drive them to change that behaviour. Afghanistan's social order works to different principles than those of the reconstruction agenda and will not be easily displaced.

Policy and programming has to be based on a robust understanding of the social inequalities that underpin poverty and the constraints they impose on the ability of households to act independently. This has to be reinforced with a much better understanding and strategic approach to working with the existing social order. It will not be simply displaced, and external interventions will largely be captured and subjugated to the existing social order. It is at the village level that agencies can more systematically apply the lessons of this paper in design, monitoring and evaluation. A first minimal step would be to group villages according to the characterisation of inequality and social relations suggested, and to use this grouping to start comparing programme outcomes and impacts.

Where village inequalities are low, and the moral economy has a higher level of social solidarity, there are opportunities to

Table 8: Assessing the prevalence and membership of different qualities of social relationship

Social relationships	Potential indicators of significance/level	Who is party to the relationships – included or excluded?
Reciprocal	Availability of informal credit and changes over time Levels of informal credit & changes over time Use of informal credit & links with microcredit	Who? How many? Who is not part of it?
Hierarchical		
Charitable	Number of households receiving Levels/frequency/reliability of charity Changes over time	Who gives and who receives How many of each
Patronage	Number of patrons & clients Nature of relationships Reliability of patronage? Changes over time	Who are the patrons? What role do they play in the village? Who are the clients
Adverse incorporation	Household living in landlords housing, working as servants Exchange conditions and terms of trade in markets	Who provides? Who is dependent? How many?
Elite inclusion		
Privileged	Elite with strong external connections and income sources; Those with dependent households	Who & how many?
Secondary	Allies of the elite	Who & how many?
Exclusion	Potentially those in hierarchical relations, particularly adverse incorporation	Who and how many?

build on existing social structures. This could include a greater level of resource provision building on informal rights, as with entitlements to charity, to increase their reliability and quality. These conditions apply in Shur Gul village. Where villages are in a dependent relationship to others, as in the case of Khilar and Kushak, a different approach is needed that has to take account of both external and internal relations, even if village social hierarchies are supportive of a moral economy. This would probably require a step-by-step approach to building up village public goods provision and resources.

The greatest challenges lie in villages where there are high inequalities. The elite cannot be ignored or marginalised. They can easily capture additional resources, and working round them can create deeper vulnerabilities for the poor. Strategies have to be developed to engage with the village elite, seeking to create incentives that make them more likely to open up access to resources and improve the terms and conditions under which social relationships are engaged. The same issues arise when there are structural inequalities between villages, caused either by ethnic identity or resource position, for instance upstream–downstream positions in irrigation systems.

Monitoring of any interventions has to take account of different conditions in different villages, and assess how interventions work in different social orders and with what outcomes – in particular the distribution of any benefits.

6.3 Closing discussion

The design of the NSP randomised impact evaluation takes note of pre-existing village conditions: 'it is expected that significant variation in (NSP) impacts will be observed and that these will be correlated with variation in pre-existing conditions such as ethnic diversity, income inequality and the quality of pre-existing local governance structures' (Beath et al., 2008: 15). However, rather than seeing these preconditions as something to be better understood and engaged with from the beginning, they are seen as potential obstacles to programme success and NSP impact. Given the limits of state and market capacity to provide public goods and ensure security in Afghanistan, village preconditions are not just statistical 'noise' to be argued away in an impact evaluation. Rather, they are fundamental to most households' security and access to public goods. They need both better understanding and better responses, so that vulnerability can be contextualised and addressed.

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