



Rural Poverty Reduction in Afghanistan

The need to re-emphasise the multidimensionality of poverty

Tania Rohrer, November 2012

By tracing rural livelihoods of Afghan rural households (1), researchers of the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit discovered that even though many of households have experienced improvements in access to basic services in the last decade, livelihood security has declined for the majority. Most households are poorer now than they were at the start of the decade.

Analyzing the approach to poverty in Afghan policy documents such as the Afghan National Development Strategy 2008 (2), Paula Kantor and Adam Pain draw attention to the fact that whilst poverty reduction is clearly identified as the overarching aim, the focus is restricted to promoting GDP growth. The narrative is divorced from an understanding of how power and social inequalities help create and maintain poverty. The researchers express their concern about the fact that “*These programmes do not reflect the social complexities and power dynamics of Afghan rural life, and thus risk investing considerable human and financial resources in pursuit of objectives that are either undeliverable or fall far short of what is needed.*” Provision of economic opportunities through job creation and agricultural growth has overtaken poverty reduction and pro-poor growth as key aims, and analysis of how the social and political context of Afghanistan might restrict the availability of such opportunities is missing.

One such example of this simplifying dynamic is a recently published World Bank study (3), which assesses the expected impact of the withdrawal of the international troops by 2014 on Afghanistan’s economic and development fabric. The analysis of the poverty impacts of transition is limited to economic factors and allows no more than the conclusion that possible slower economic growth and the associated effects on (un)employment can be expected to increase poverty.

As donor and government priorities shift in anticipation of the 2014 transition process, it is time for an urgent re-examination of poverty reduction strategy in Afghanistan (4). Kantor and Adam (1) agree that agriculture and the rural non-farm economy can play a central role in promoting development in some of the world’s poorer nations (5). However, they highlight the importance of reducing households’ exposure to risk and enhancing social protection as part of efforts to enhance rural development and growth. They call for the application of a “concept of transformative social protection to highlight ways for protect peoples basic needs, prevent deprivation, promote improvement and transform the social structures and expectations that bar their path out of poverty”.

The development community – from donors to government and non-government actors – is called to rethink current strategies for rural poverty reduction in Afghanistan. A “*strategic and financial commitment to reprioritising poverty reduction, and openness to acknowledging and addressing the underlying causes of inequality and social drivers of poverty*” (1) needs to be made in order to overcome the privileged position of the market in policy discourse and to carve out an equal space for interventions that mitigate risks and stabilise livelihoods.

References

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