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As Taliban Poppy Ban Continues, Afghan Poverty Deepens

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The ban on opium cultivation is working but failing to curb exports as landowners liquidate inventories.
- The ban is unsustainable and could trigger political tensions, even armed conflict.
- U.S. and other donors must be clear-eyed, tailoring responses and programs to on-ground realities.

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Afghanistan, historically the leading source of the world's illegal opium, is on-track for an unprecedented second year of dramatically reduced poppy cultivation, reflecting the Taliban regime's continuing prohibition against growing the raw material for opiates. The crackdown has won plaudits in international circles, but its full implications call for clear-eyed analysis and well considered responses by the U.S. and others. The ban has deepened the poverty of millions of rural Afghans who depended on the crop for their livelihoods, yet done nothing to diminish opiate exports, as wealthier landowners sell off inventories. The unfortunate reality is that any aid mobilized to offset harm from the ban will be grossly insufficient and ultimately wasted unless it fosters broad-based [rural](#) and [agricultural development](#) that benefits the most affected poorer households.



Farmers harvest opium from poppies in Maiwand, Afghanistan, Nov. 7, 2021. The Taliban announced on April 3, 2022, that cultivating opium poppy in Afghanistan was banned. (Jim Huylebroek/The New York Times)

The U.S. and other governments and agencies, who will be discussing counter-narcotics and livelihoods at the [U.N.-hosted international meeting in Doha](#) at the end of this month, must face the facts about the ban:

- It is not sustainable. There is no sign of a shift to cash crops, horticulture, livestock and non-farm activities that could replace opium, and the Afghan economy is too weak to generate significant numbers of other jobs.
- Enforcement will prove increasingly difficult as landed interests start to suffer from the ban and pressures intensify to resume cultivation.
- [Political tensions](#) with local interests and possibly within the Taliban are likely to grow, perhaps leading to violent conflict beyond what the protests already seen.
- So-called alternative livelihoods projects [have not worked in the past](#) and will be of little help in mitigating the adverse effects of the poppy ban, let alone creating a sustainable path away from dependence on opium production.

International actors need to ensure that their policy recommendations, and in particular proposed financial support, if any, do not feed into harmful, unsustainable Taliban approaches. They must be sure to avoid inadvertently supporting better-off rural core constituencies of the Taliban, or fueling unrealistic narratives about

the success and longer-term prospects of a ban as pressures to resume more poppy cultivation intensify. On the positive side, there may be scope for cooperation with the Taliban on expanding and improving treatment programs for Afghanistan's numerous drug addicts, and it may be worth exploring the potential for a confluence of interests in strengthening interdiction efforts to curb opiate processing and exports.

An Unprecedented Second Year of Success Against Poppy Cultivation

The Taliban's comprehensive ban against opium cultivation, production, processing and trade, announced by their emir in [April 2022](#), achieved a [more than 85 percent reduction](#) in the total national area of poppy cultivation in the 2022-2023 growing season, predominantly by deterring farmers from planting the crop. All in all, households with an estimate of almost [7 million people](#) were prevented from cultivating opium poppy in that season.

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Vigorous enforcement of the ban has continued in the 2023-2024 growing season. The national picture will not be complete until satellite imagery for Badakhshan province and other higher-altitude, late-harvesting areas becomes available, but all indications point to an unprecedented second year of very low opium poppy cultivation. Indeed, the national figure quite possibly could be below last year's level of [31,000 hectares](#) — [the most accurate estimate of the 2023 poppy harvest](#) based on an analysis of satellite imagery for all agricultural land in the country by the geospatial firm Alcis. This compares with national cultivation [typically exceeding 200,000 hectares](#) during the previous decade.

As in past [successful Afghan poppy bans](#) at regional and national levels, these massive reductions were achieved predominantly by discouraging farmers from planting opium poppy through pressure and threats reinforced by small amounts of eradication, as well as occasional action by law enforcement against poppy farmers. The general pattern in 2023-2024 is no different, characterized by special efforts to deter planting in areas where some cultivation had remained in 2022-2023, for example remote areas of Nangarhar that had resisted the ban in the previous year.

The glaring exception again appears to be Badakhshan province, which had largely escaped the ban and [saw a significant increase in poppy cultivation in 2022-2023](#). Large-scale planting has occurred in Badakhshan in 2023-2024 despite some efforts to deter it. Eradication activities appear to have been limited and sparked open resistance, including violent [protests by farmers](#) and perhaps an [IED attack on a Taliban convoy](#) traveling to an eradication site. But even if there is a second year of expanding poppy cultivation in Badakhshan, this would not detract from the low overall national cultivation.

Unlike the first Taliban opium ban in the year 2000 which applied only to poppy cultivation, the current ban encompasses all stages of illicit narcotics production including trade, processing and exports. Earlier there were some signs that the Taliban might be serious about seeking to [curtail the trade beyond the cultivation stage](#). However, available evidence suggests that trade, processing and exports are continuing at high levels, fueled by landowners and others selling off their accumulated inventories of opium cultivated in the past.

[Analysis by David Mansfield](#) indicates that such inventories, left over from bumper harvests in 2022, 2021 and earlier, can support the overall trade in opiates for several years when combined with ongoing opium production in Badakhshan. Indeed, high prices triggered by the ban mean that landowners and others holding opium inventories have accrued large capital gains and can comfortably support pre-ban income levels with gradual sales. Concentrated in the south and southwest, these landowners are happy with the ban (as long as their inventories last) and comprise a core constituency of the Taliban.

But the Ban is Harmful for Large Numbers of Poor Afghans, and Unsustainable

The story for poorer rural households is very different. With no or limited land, they depended on opium to make ends meet — through sharecropping, tenancy and wage labor — and benefited from the buoyant rural economy engendered by high levels of poppy cultivation and its demand for workers.

This large segment of the rural population has been suffering greatly from the ban and is [bitterly opposed to it](#), a sentiment which often spills over into negative views toward the Taliban more generally. Given Afghanistan's economic weakness and limited prospects for recovery let alone robust growth, the poppy cultivation ban is akin to an additional humanitarian shock from an approximately [\\$1 billion loss of income](#) annually for this part of the population.

These households are trying to cope with the shock the opium ban has dealt their incomes and livelihoods, but unfortunately have to do so in counterproductive short- and long-term ways. Like [poor households generally](#), common coping mechanisms include selling off remaining assets such as livestock, eating less and lower-quality food, foregoing healthcare and pulling children out of secondary school. Moreover, [outmigration](#) by family members to seek work abroad (ultimately in Europe) and send back remittances becomes an increasingly attractive option for those who can afford the cost, despite the associated risks.

While outmigration and remittances are good for the involved households and the Afghan economy, they give rise to tensions with neighboring countries and potentially European ones. Overall, the medium-term economic prospects for previously opium-dependent poor rural households are dim in the face of the general weakness of the Afghan economy and its [limited growth potential](#). As long as the ban continues, their few remaining assets and coping mechanisms will be increasingly exhausted, making a recovery later all the more difficult.

Big-picture, replacing poppy cultivation with wheat — the common pattern in the past — is [not a sustainable way forward](#). In the 2022-2023 growing season, for example, [satellite imagery for Helmand](#) — by far Afghanistan's largest poppy cultivating province pre-ban — shows that virtually all of the massive 99 percent decline in poppy cultivation was replaced by sharply higher wheat growing as well as more land apparently left fallow. Primary reliance on wheat, a relatively low-value, low-labor and water-intensive crop, cannot support the country's large rural population.

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The well-known [sustainable path away from dependence on opium](#) involves high-value cash crops, labor-intensive horticulture, livestock and buoyant non-farm activities in rural areas, with wheat part of the picture but by no means dominant as it is now. If the predominance of wheat continues in 2024, it will further underscore the lack of sustainability of the poppy ban, though one advantage of wheat for cultivators is that [it is easy to shift back to poppy](#) at some point in the future.

What Donors Can and Should (and Should Not) Do

The U.S. and other foreign governments and agencies must be clear-eyed about the ban:

- First, it is not sustainable over the longer term, there being no sign of a shift to the activities that could replace opium in rural livelihoods, and with the Afghan economy too weak to generate large numbers of jobs in other sectors. The prognosis, therefore, is for continuing, indeed deepening rural poverty

and deprivation as the ban continues to unfold.

- Second, it will prove increasingly difficult to fully enforce the ban as landed interests deplete their inventories and start to suffer, increasing pressures to resume cultivation, particularly if the anomaly of substantial poppy cultivation in Badakhshan continues. Thus, a return to significant levels of poppy growing [seems likely](#) in the next couple of years.
- Third, it is likely to give rise to intensifying [political tensions](#) between the Taliban leadership and local interests, as well as possibly within the Taliban, potentially even leading to violent conflict. Small examples of this have already been seen in Badakhshan and Nangarhar provinces.
- Fourth, “alternative livelihoods projects” — the default donor response in the past — [have not worked](#) and will be of little help in mitigating the adverse effects of the poppy ban let alone forging a sustainable path away from dependence on opium production. What is needed instead is [broad-based rural development](#) and robust economic growth, the prospects for which are dim in the near future.

Facing this reality, expectations must be kept modest for how much U.S. and other foreign donors can mitigate the effects of the poppy ban through their interventions and financial support. Offsetting the humanitarian shock caused by the ban would require well over a billion dollars a year given administrative overhead and other extra costs, a figure no one could possibly expect would be met, and in any case that would provide only a temporary band-aid. Even hundreds of millions of dollars of well-targeted development aid would not offset the headwinds facing Afghanistan’s rural economy, let alone reverse the economic damage from the opium ban. So, any financial support that donors may consider will at best have only a marginal impact.

Moreover, it would be only too easy to squander limited aid funds on alternative livelihoods projects that will not make a difference or even worse, would be counterproductive.

For example, distributing agricultural inputs, especially for staples like wheat, [to farmers according to their landholdings](#) would not help the poorer households that have suffered the most from the ban, and would foster unsustainable cropping patterns that easily could be reversed if poppy cultivation is resumed. And if aid is targeted at the provinces that have reduced poppy cultivation the most (notably Helmand and other nearby provinces in the southwest), and furthermore is distributed to landowners, it would end up supporting a core constituency of the Taliban that has already benefitted greatly from the ban as a result of [capital gains on their opium inventories](#).

Any aid mobilized should foster broad-based rural and agricultural development and should be targeted at activities that will benefit the poorer rural households.

Any aid mobilized in response to the Taliban’s opium ban should foster broad-based [rural](#) and [agricultural development](#) and should be targeted at activities that will benefit the poorer rural households most affected by the ban. Examples include small livestock, horticulture and labor-intensive non-agricultural activities. But it must be recognized that realistic levels of rural development aid will only have a marginal effect and will not come anywhere near to offsetting the impact of the poppy ban.

On a more positive note, there may be a confluence of interests with the Taliban on expanding and improving treatment programs for the numerous problem drug users in Afghanistan, representing a serious public health problem the authorities are well aware of and are trying to do something about. It may also be worth exploring possible common interests in stronger interdiction efforts against processing and exports of opiates, in cooperation with neighboring countries. But going after the opium inventories held by landowners and other elites — probably the most effective way of cracking down on post-cultivation stages of the trade — most likely would be a nonstarter from the Taliban perspective since it would directly harm the interests of a core constituency of theirs in rural areas of south and southwest Afghanistan.

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The views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s).