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# BRIDGING THE PANJ: FORGING A PEACEBUILDING LIVELIHOODS STRATEGY ON THE AFGHAN-TAJIK BORDER

DANIEL J. GERSTLE

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## Abstract

*This article explores strategies to address food security and livelihood threats faced by poor families in the Afghan-Tajik border region of Central Asia. Costly barriers include not only isolation and inadequate infrastructure, but also corrupt security agents, drug-related conflicts and regional rivalry. Development actors working towards improved economic circulation in the region to reduce hunger vulnerability find that success depends as much on confronting local-level security and empowerment issues as building bridges and brokering bilateral agreements.*

## Introduction

In June 2005 Afghan President Hamid Karzai and Tajikistan President Imamali Rahmonov laid the foundation of a new bridge which will span the Panj River from the Afghan village of Shir Khan to the Tajikistani village of Nizhny Pyanj. The 672-metre elevated roadway, which replaces a rudimentary ferry, and the Darwaz and Tem bridges recently built upstream by the Aga Khan Foundation, symbolise a hope for revitalising a once great trade route from Central to South Asia across the Panj Valley as the two nations recover from war (IRIN 2005b).

The further linking of Panj Valley markets, power lines, roadways and one-day railways, government and development actors believe, could be a vital means to reduce chronic food and livelihood insecurity for the poor in the two countries. Increased economic circulation, they suggest, could even reduce the likelihood of conflict within and between communities, particularly because it addresses reasons for which individuals may choose to join local militias, drug traders or terrorist groups. But stakeholders working toward poor-friendly cross-border trade partnerships face serious dangers.

Bridging the Panj, a collective strategy to increase trade circulation in the Afghan-Tajik border region to make life easier for small traders and the poor by reducing cost-raising obstacles, puts 'aid and trade' actors on a confrontational course with security policies seeking to slow and monitor trade in order to stop drug and weapons smuggling, militia mobility and localised violence. Given that both strategies are among the highest priorities of regional actors, identifying ways to reconcile them is critical to the region's peoples. Policies for food security and livelihood development in the region, particularly among Afghan national ministries, donors and aid agencies, are increasingly focused on three objectives which interface with security actors on the border: rebuilding border police and customs systems; replacing the drug trade with alternative livelihoods; and stimulating cross-border trade partnerships.

This article examines hunger vulnerability in the Panj Valley border region, the food and livelihood strategies carried out by stakeholders to address that vulnerability, and how these vulnerabilities and strategies interface with security and peacebuilding efforts. The struggle to reduce hunger vulnerability and local conflict, the study shows, depends ultimately on the protection, empowerment and participation of people at the local level. While financial factors such as currency exchange, interest rates, taxes, and tariffs significantly affect household economies, families will first have to confront the human barriers to food and income.<sup>1</sup>

## Hunger and Conflict Risk in the Panj Valley

Hunger vulnerability, or food insecurity, arises when families are unable to obtain the right quantities, qualities and varieties of food for a healthy life. Though the Panj Valley has year-round rivers and streams, Soviet irrigation projects and functional agriculture, serious barriers to food and livelihood security remain, and are largely of human origin. These barriers include not only the effects of the historical social exclusion of women, female-headed households, minorities and the disabled, but also obstacles which raise the cost of transporting goods to markets, such as broken roads which cause vehicle damage, a lack of roadways and mountain passes, minefields, police checkpoints where poorly paid and trained officers extort tolls from passers-by, and localised, sometimes violent, confrontations between traders.

The Panj River itself originates in snowcap drainage from the Pamir Mountains of Central Asia which flows westward into the Amu-Darya River and eventually fills the Aral Sea. The Panj carves a deep canyon westward from the Chinese border with wide, dramatic bends before the flow widens into a sizable river. This drainage system has hosted trade for centuries between people living on both banks, predominantly ethnic Tajiks on the lowland western Panj and Ismailis along the highland eastern Panj. A number of Pashtuns, Uzbeks, Russians and Kuchis live among them.

Since the Russian Empire's 1896 annexation of the north bank, which became the Soviet Socialist Republic of Tajikistan in 1929, the river border between Afghanistan and Tajikistan has become more and more difficult to cross legally. After the Tajikistani civil war, about 30,000 Russian Army-led forces deployed on the north side of the Afghan-Tajik border to prevent weapons and narcotics smuggling, sealing off the border so effectively that even refugees in the remote mountains could no longer penetrate Tajikistan. By 2001, ten thousand Afghans fleeing fighting between the Taliban and Northern Alliance forces found themselves trapped on islands in the Panj River (Harris 2001).

### *Afghanistan's splintered northeast*

'As a boy I remember using binoculars to look across the Panj,' says Professor Saifuddin Saihoon, Economics Head at Kabul University, about his home town on the river's dramatic bend, Darwaz, in Afghanistan. 'From the beach where we played we could see the children dancing and watching us from the other side, but we never crossed.'

Border barriers cut Darwaz off so much, according to Saihoon, that, rather than taking an hour's boat ride to markets in Tajikistan, traders needed to travel seven to 10 days by donkey over mountain passes to the Afghan towns of Faizabad or Taloqan to trade. In effect, a community which was located in the centre of Eurasian civilisation before the hardening of the border then found itself on the edge of the world with one dirt path

leading out. Families in Darwaz survived on local lamb, wheat, fruits and nuts, leaving town only to trade rugs or migrate for work. Despite local ingenuity, however, hundreds of geographically handicapped communities like Darwaz were not adequately prepared for food-related disasters which were soon to come (Saihoon 2004).

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The Soviet-Afghan war in the 1980s and the Afghan and Tajik civil wars of the 1990s reduced legitimate cross-border trade because of fears of violence and breaks in

distribution chains. Meanwhile profits on drugs, weapons, vehicles and fuel enabled certain traders with start-up capital and survival instinct to transform the cross-border economy (Collinson 2003:68-70). When the Afghan Taliban regime fell in 2001, people in the Panj Valley found themselves within the authority zones of local military leaders such as Mohammad Daoud in Kunduz, former President Burhanuddin Rabbani and commander Nazeer Mohamed in Faizabad, and lesser known small-town leaders.

Despite the security advantages of living in militia-protected, *de facto* autonomous areas, a harsh drought from 2001 to 2004 struck the poor population harder than it would have otherwise because of the consolidation of market power among a few families and breaks between those areas' food markets. By 2003 about 3.8 million Afghans were dependent on food aid from the World Food Programme and other agencies. (WFP 2004). Malnutrition-related deaths, largely of children, were linked not only to infectious diseases, but also to deficiencies of vitamins A and C and iodine (FEWSNet 2004:3; Myatt *et al* 2001:5). In the Afghan Panj Valley province of Badakhshan, maternal mortality was reported to be as high as 6.4% with 6,500 mothers dying during childbirth in 2002 (Naseem & Naseem 2003). The mortality rate for children under five in Afghanistan rose as high as 25.7% of live births over the same period with up to 309,000 child deaths per year throughout the country (ICARDA 2004).

During the 2002 drought, the WFP had such trouble reaching certain isolated Panj Valley communities on the Afghan side that the Tajikistan team delivered supplies by dinghies and overhead cable for lack of vehicle crossings over the river border (Omer 2004; Meghdessian 2004). Poor families tried to cope with lack of income by selling property, eating unusual foods or seeds, migrating in search of jobs, begging, or even selling a daughter into marriage (Lautze *et al* 2002: 45-6). Difficulties eased only in 2004 as Afghanistan boasted a long-awaited surplus harvest (Maletta 2004). Sadly, as a high-level WFP researcher confirmed, the recent rises in average incomes in the Panj Valley area in comparison to other parts of the country – largely due to opium and fuel trade profits – hide from macro-economic actors the fact that a lot of families who do not participate in such trade continue to face serious hardship.

### ***Tajikistan's disgruntled south***

Across the Panj Valley border the town of Kulab narrowly survived the drought with wide ranges of irrigated farmland that produced cotton and wheat. Yet by the summer of 2004 an Action Against Hunger therapeutic feeding centre at a Kulab hospital still faced a long waiting list for one of its 28 beds for severely malnourished children. Down the road in the green village of Khonabad, mothers lined up to weigh their infants at an agency office to see if they were entitled to free bags of flour and oil. When asked why her child was so underweight, one mother said that her husband had long ago gone to

Russia for work. Not hearing from him, she had remained at her mountain home, walking down to the aid point only when she had no other option.

Tajikistan's disparity, an absurd juxtaposition of productive collective farms and hungry families described by Porteus in his study of land reform, is rooted in the resistance of producers and labourers to revert from Soviet central planning to competitive private enterprise. As part of the Soviet Union, Tajikistan had been deemed a cotton and aluminium producing state, obtaining nearly everything else in exchange from other Soviet republics. Declaring independence in 1991, the state lost the foundation of this economic plan. The amount of goods Tajikistan's newly separated neighbours and foreign corporations were willing to trade in exchange for the raw cotton fell to far less than the country received under the Soviet system (Porteus 2003).

The ensuing depression inspired some regional leaders to use violence to challenge the central authority. The Tajikistani civil war, from 1992 to 1997, saw 70,000 people killed and 10 times as many displaced. Despite the war's end, the country remains somewhat fractured into regional and religious alliances and spotted with minefields and police checkpoints. On the lower Panj, Tajiks of Kulabi and Gharimi ancestry compete for advantage while the Ismaili minority largely controls the upper Panj region of Gorno-Badakhshan. Meanwhile Islamic traditionalists among them distrust the ruling coalition in Dushanbe which is dominated by former Communist officials (Rashid 2002).

Years after the war and drought over a million Tajikistanis remain dependent on food aid (WFP 2003). The annual National Nutrition and Water and Sanitation Survey led by Action Against Hunger found that global acute malnutrition or 'wasting' rates in children under five in Tajikistan fell from 17.4% in 2001 to 4.7% in 2003 due to better harvests, food aid, development assistance and opium trade profits. But global chronic malnutrition or 'stunting' rates remained around 36.2% over the same period (Baronina *et al* 2003:4). Sadly the most common coping strategy for Tajikistanis was outward migration. Along the Panj Valley thousands of heads of households have travelled in search of work in Russia, leaving behind families, some never to return.

### ***Stakeholder motivations***

For stakeholders sharing the interests of poor-friendly economic development, a collective strategy for food security and livelihood protection would be the most fruitful way to confront counter-development forces such as militias, criminal gangs and powerful businessmen who refuse to share control of certain market sectors. To explore the collective development and security strategies, it is vital first to understand what motivates these stakeholders.

Though people on both sides of the Panj trade wheat, cotton, sunflower, nuts, melons, sheep, chicken and cement, each country has unique advantages in the market that it has not fully realised. Afghanistan can provide Central Asia with greater access to Afghan rice, spices, camel products, metals, jewellery and carved furniture like sitting beds and tables; Indian and Pakistani processed goods and spices; and technology imported through Karachi. Likewise, Tajikistan offers the south greater access to Tajik hydropower, aluminium, lumber, cattle and engineering and medicinal training; Kazakh and Uzbek gas and oil; and Russian-made autos and machinery. Large-scale traders now control the movement of such goods and much of that movement crosses through Uzbekistan rather than Tajikistan. Poor families and labourers, though involved in this trade, often do not reap the benefits.

Landless labourers on a Tajik *dekhan* collective farm or on an Afghan lord's land might, on an income of \$10 per month, live on a diet of only tea, wheat bread and rice. A special occasion such as the *qurbani eid* Islamic holiday may secure such a family a share of a neighbour's or employer's lamb, lamb fat and garbanzo bean rice pilaf, okra and figs for a day or week. A summer event might secure them watermelon, tomatoes or even chicken, but only if they are connected to better-off families or have a temporary burst of higher-than-usual income from a seasonal project. While poor families in the Panj Valley have access to low-cost nutritious foods like potatoes, okra, beans, nuts, sunflower seeds and greens, they are often unwilling to sell their staples to make the money to purchase them.

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coping activities like selling property, begging, migrating or eating unusual 'famine' foods like weeds, seeds or pack animals. Theoretically the *malik* can take a family's concerns to the local council, which will make a ruling or may pass it up to a district council or even the national council or parliament (Collinson 2003). But when an Afghan landowner with his own militia stakes a claim on a certain market sector in an area, the council may be powerless to help families to address related grievances. If an opposition group gains momentum to oppose the monopolist, violent conflict or

blood feuding may erupt. Local police who are responsible for intervening may be either too afraid of or partly paid by the local strongman.

The United Nations news service quotes Shah Jehan Noori, the Badakhshan Province police chief, calling Kabul for help against conflict-prone local leaders in the spring of 2005: 'We need commandos, we need police, we need helicopters. Commanders are strong. They must be brought under control.' The same report described the national Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration programme as a failure in that it was unable to rid the region of large and small weapons. In Shahr-e-Buzurg, Darahim, and Spingul, all settlements on the Panj border near Faizabad, local leaders have waged lethal rocket and gun battles, threatened officials and manipulated the courts. In Kunduz, the UN reports, old militia leaders continue to traffic drugs, grab land and levy their own taxes on farmers and shopkeepers. The International Security Force gets involved to secure its own bases and lead talks on infrastructure development, but has not become sufficiently involved to stop fire-fights between local groups (IRIN 2005a). Small traders, labourers and poor families often submit to local systems with their poor distribution of benefits because they do not know how to address grievances or because the primary path for addressing those grievances is blocked by someone backed by an armed group.

## Building Peace through a Border Livelihoods Strategy

Stiglitz and Charlton address the controversy on the fairness of international trade agreements in their new book, *Fair Trade for All*. 'Trade liberalisation,' they write, 'opens foreign markets, expanding the demand for domestic firms' goods and enabling them to serve a larger market and realise gains from economies of scale. Trade liberalisation may



make available a range of inputs at lower prices, lowering costs of production' (Stiglitz & Charlton 2005:25). The 'trade promotes development' premise, the team admits, does make restrictive assumptions about efficiency, risk, planning, equality and taxation which may not hold in the reality of many developing countries.

Smaller traders and entrepreneurs may face certain barriers to the liberalisation which larger traders have long learned to overcome, such as vehicle wear-and-tear costs, checkpoint extortion and delays, intimidation by competitors, predatory pricing, crime, and information

access. The fairness of cross-border trade development, therefore, depends on how these inequities are addressed by the government's development strategy.

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Modern theories on food security and livelihood protection which motivate many development actors originate with Amartya Sen's pivotal work, *Poverty and Famines*. Sen was among the first to argue that famine did not occur solely because of a food shortage,

but because people lacked the entitlement, or exchange relationship, needed to obtain existing food or food imported from other regions. An economic shock such as drought caused local shortages which encouraged better-off people to stock up. Meanwhile landowners laid off labourers who lost income as prices rose on staple goods. In some cases people suffered malnutrition or died of related disease when food stocks had not even been depleted (Sen 1982). From Sen's theory development actors have learned that although food aid sometimes helps to lower grain prices and save lives, it does little to eliminate the reasons people are hungry in the first place.

The United Kingdom Department for International Development (DFID) is among the leading donors basing its work on the entitlement theory and investing in development to solve food security challenges, providing thorough guidelines for practitioners on its site, [www.livelihoods.org](http://www.livelihoods.org). UN experts describe DFID's Sustainable Livelihoods Framework as 'people-centred, responsive and participatory, multi-level, conducted in partnership with both the public and private sectors, sustainable, dynamic and holistic' (Flores *et al* 2005:543). In this framework households, councils, assemblies, ministries, and aid agencies work together at every level. Transparency and rapid information flow are vital. Keeley and Pasteur argue that the success of the collective strategy requires that all stakeholders take ownership of the policy and its outcome, that actors embrace a common policy process narrative at every level, and that intervening ministries and agencies have specific and measurable objectives (Keeley 2001; Pasteur 2001).

But what is missing in most entitlement-based livelihood frameworks are guidelines for development actors operating amid violent or criminal disruptions of the economy. In *On Violence*, Hannah Arendt argues that it is when a group is losing authority, such as when others threaten to reduce its market share of rice or its role in local decision making, that the group is most likely to resort to violence (Arendt 1970). For the Overseas Development Institute Bhatia and Goodhand describe the process of evaluating livelihoods in the volatile Afghan case, providing a detailed commodity-chain analysis, reminding aid practitioners that the Afghan economy is not as bound to subsistence agriculture as it once was – that the war and black economies have transformed local markets (Collinson 2003).

The Feinstein International Famine Centre has also contributed a great deal to livelihoods research in the Afghan case. The Centre's 2003 Nationwide Risk and Vulnerability Assessment

(NRVA) survey explores local perceptions on livelihoods in relation to security issues, advising that development actors do a better job preventing armed groups from co-opting aid. Feinstein's Sue Lautze has stressed the importance of markets over aid in providing communities a greater diversity in diet and income options (Lautze 1997:17). Armed groups that dominate certain sectors may stunt market growth, preventing competitive efficiency and innovation. Similarly in the Tajikistan case local collective farm bosses who wish to protect their private advantages through monopoly may stunt market growth there (Porteus 2003). Again, the entitlement theory suggests that development actors help to de-concentrate power, but the theory exposes development actors to the risk of a dangerous confrontation with those holding power and willing to use violence to keep it.

In both Afghanistan and Tajikistan humanitarian aid has reduced hardship, but has not addressed the root causes the way conflict resolution and market growth could. International aid agencies partly coordinated by the United Nations – like the Aga Khan Foundation, Action Against Hunger, the International Rescue Committee, and Save the Children – as well as local agencies such as the Kunduz Rehabilitation Agency, Mehribon

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and Hamdillah have rebuilt agricultural infrastructure and improved the training and employment capacity of local groups, contributing to the national strategies in many ways. But aid agencies cannot directly address the controversial cross-border political issues, especially those that involve exchanges of gunfire, the way international security forces, governments and local councils can. Governmental and non-

governmental forces require a unified approach where all actors understand each other's particular role. While aid agencies can take a greater role in educating vulnerable groups on how to address their grievances appropriately, it is critical that governmental forces intervene to deal with the concerns of threatened large-scale traders who resist regulation.

Frederick Starr, a leading Johns Hopkins' researcher, was one of the first to suggest a cross-border initiative in the Central Asia case through his four-pronged strategy used here. Following Starr's strategy, development actors would first need to rehabilitate infrastructure, then rebuild the security and justice apparatus, get rid of corruption and retrain workers at customs points, and forge and publicise fair trade agreements. Starr argues that the trade barriers which this article confronts cost traders a 'distance tariff' on products coming in and out of the area, thus driving up prices in blocked markets (2003: 8). The strategy confronts the challenges this researcher seeks to resolve and was soon echoed by development actors in Afghanistan.

The Berlin Work Plan, repackaged at the April 2005 Afghan Development Forum, serves as a framework for the Afghan government to take ownership over development from international donors in every sector in terms of both management and funding. Speakers proposed pro-poor economic growth policies friendly to small businesses, women and ethnic minorities, which, like Starr's strategy, would include greater road security, the abolition of multiple toll points and the simplification of border customs systems. Tajikistan's ministries have participated in similar public discourse (ADF 2005).

This article illustrates how development actors such as these have started to apply the entitlement theory for livelihoods protection through what resembles Starr's four-pronged strategy for overcoming Central Asian-specific trade and security barriers. Though actors

do not always realise it, these efforts succeed or fail based on whether poor families, struggling small traders and threatened monopolists understand how to address their grievances peacefully and whether they perceive that political actors are responding positively to their quest for progress.

### ***Rebuilding infrastructure and border security***

From the Central Asian hub of Tashkent, Uzbekistan, traders bound for the Panj-Valley cross the Varzob Gorge to the Tajikistan capital, Dushanbe. During research in July 2004 a strong summer rain washed out 50 metres of the sole mountain pass just south of Ayni, as well as damaging Dushanbe's brittle municipal water system and raising the risk of typhoid. My colleagues and I were stranded on the north side of the collapsed highway with truckers and other travellers. While people with cash and little luggage scrambled back to Khojand to catch a flight over the pass to Dushanbe, many truckers and traders slept in their vehicles on the side of the road for days waiting for the pass to be rebuilt. Beyond the precarious gorge pass the route south of Dushanbe leads traders through checkpoints also present on the parallel Uzbek route where police sometimes ask for 'tolls' or demand searches.

Crossing from Tajikistan to Afghanistan over the Panj River before the recent building of the Darwaz, Tem, and Shirkhan bridges required a weight-sensitive ferry crossing, book-ended by a series of military and customs searches. From the Afghan city of Kunduz to Baghlan the route prior to 2005 remained broken and extremely hard on vehicles, with landmine risk on the shoulders in some places. In 2004 eleven Chinese workers rebuilding the road between the two cities were killed as they slept; an act either of terrorism or of bitterness against foreigners for filling jobs that locals need. Commenting on the issues of border checkpoint extortion and subsequent reforms, Yaqub Ibrahim of the Institute for War & Peace Reporting wrote in 2004 that:

For years, travellers not only had to pay out 'fees' levied by the militias, but also faced the risk of being accosted and robbed – even beaten or killed – when they drove along the major highways between northern cities. But now uniformed members of Afghanistan's central police have replaced the militia gunmen, whom drivers referred to as 'highway bandits'... (Local driver Sarajuddin claimed that) 'Those who controlled the checkpoints taxed passengers and drivers under pretexts such as *chai puli* (tea money), *jeb kharchi* (pocket money) and lunch costs, and if someone didn't pay he would be beaten and robbed. We didn't mind paying those taxes, but the most frightening thing was that the armed men who controlled the checkpoints by day became looters at night...and they would even kill someone if they didn't like him. For all those reasons, I haven't driven at night for the last few years.'

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Traders willing to navigate the risky Tajik-Afghan highway and its connecting roads often charge extra for their goods to recover the 'distance tariff'. Large trading companies who can afford it sometimes monopolise city-to-city shipping, leaving local small traders dependent on them for

supplies at local shops. Fortunately international donors and lenders have begun to fund the construction of new roads and bridges. National reforms in both countries are beginning to reduce checkpoint extortion and crime on heavily trafficked routes, but the



practice continues on remote mountain roads. The European Union has introduced the Border Management Programme for Central Asia specifically to work out border issues like this in the region. However, work on the Afghan-Tajik border itself has yet to start. The programme addresses security and customs primarily, with designs to reduce corruption, but has not yet prioritised food security and livelihood issues within the training scheme (EU 2005). If checkpoint extortion is to be fully eliminated national governments need to educate travellers how to address such grievances and need to empower local councils to hear and act on the issue.

### ***Replacing narcotics trade***

The UN Office on Drugs and Crime estimates that three-quarters of the world's opium products – some 3,600 tonnes of opium and heroin – originate in Afghanistan, much of it in remote mountainous settlements along the Tajik border. In 2003, when wheat, the regional staple, fetched \$222 per hectare, opium poppy cultivation provided producers up to \$12,700 per hectare, or \$250 per kilogram (UNODC 2004:7). The disparity in potential income clearly illustrates challenges in identifying alternative products that will satisfy producers and make up for the short-term income loss.

According to the UNODC's *Afghanistan Farmers' Intentions Survey, 2003-4*, 31% of opium farmers interviewed claimed to grow the banned product to escape poverty; 33% suggested they would respect the poppy ban if provided adequate economic assistance or better market opportunities. The UNODC study observes, however, that economic assistance in the region thus far has made little statistical impact on the lives of opium-producing interviewees (UNODC 2004:6).

In 2004, after resolving security and strategic issues with the Russian Federation and the United States, the Tajik government pledged to deploy up to 30,000 newly trained Tajik soldiers to replace Russian-led security forces then guarding the 1,344-kilometre border by 2006. Guards are meant not only to prevent the smuggling of banned drugs across the Panj, but also to stop the infiltration of weapons and activists who intend to participate in insurgent attacks or embassy and market bombings like those which happened in Uzbekistan in 1999 and 2004. The training of security forces on livelihood issues would better benefit people along the border if such training came not only in the form of regional conferences for officers as it does now, but also if livelihood protection was a component of all levels of training, considering the urgency of hunger vulnerability.

The Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and the UK government have, nevertheless, financed an initiative called the Research in Alternative Livelihoods Fund (RALF) through the International Centre for Agricultural Research in Dry Areas (ICARDA) that is meant to determine what alternative industries wage-earners and producers can turn to once they have stopped trading illegal goods. Development actors like RALF suggest a number of alternative products championed by local experts, among them pistachios and other nuts, perfume oils and highly profitable saffron (Ibrahimi 2004a). If donors invest in programmes such as RALF and use them to bring about collective action and cross-border cooperation, the result could be that fewer narcotics reach the world market and poor farmers have a wider variety of sustainable opportunities for income (ICARDA 2004).

### ***Revitalising the cross-border economy***

The Panj Valley economy can be symbolised as a heart with highways and roads as its circulatory system; in its present state the system seems to have suffered clogged arteries due

to the many broken roads and roadblock checkpoints which have stood in the way of traders. Though growth for the large trading companies which now dominate the system will expand employment capacity, it is vital in terms of competitive efficiency and fair entitlement

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distribution that smaller traders get involved and that labourers have a variety of opportunities. Increased competition for sales, as well as for labour, could breathe new economic life into the region.

Toward the goal of cross-border economic growth, both Afghanistan and Tajikistan have joined the Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO) which links the governments of many Eurasian countries. In cooperation with the

FAO the ECO initiated a Regional Programme for Food Security. The ECO has set out to 'improve marketing and agro-processing facilities, including market information and early warning systems (and) harmonisation of agricultural and trade policies among the ECO member countries to enhance the sub-region's food security and agricultural intra-regional trade' (ECO 2004:3). The organisation's role is not only to provide a forum for discussing issues on the macro-level, but also to help governments network with donors like the Asian Development Bank, the Islamic Development Bank and the World Bank and investing companies like UNOCAL. Nevertheless, the volatility of the Panj Valley region leaves many pre-designed local infrastructure projects, like the half-completed Kunduz-Khanabad irrigation project, without adequate support. The killing of Chinese road workers near Kunduz mentioned above underlines this threat.

The U.S.-supported Grain Industries Alliance is an example of the growing networks of development actors channelling contracts to local NGOs like the Kunduz Rehabilitation Agency to provide agriculture-related services such as constructing farm service roads and grain storage silos, testing new agro-technologies and helping cross-border traders get to Tajikistan and other markets. Much of the success in development innovation and network building in Afghanistan, however, has been seen at the macro-level. Existing alliances have not yet substantially reduced corrupt practices by security and customs agents or deterred farmers substantially from opium poppy production. If such trade-focused networks are to solve economic circulatory problems, they will need to confront the security issues more closely at the local level, focusing particularly on how people address livelihood concerns.

### ***Providing means for families to address grievances***

If Panj-bridging development actors assist families not only by protecting their local income-generating options, but also by providing inputs to help stabilise prices and ensure access to a variety of nutritious foods, they will make greater progress reducing hunger vulnerability for the poor. Large-scale traders are more likely to build long-term relationships with local police and customs officials and can create mutually beneficial yet sometimes illicit agreements that small traders cannot afford. Scheduled pay-offs at checkpoints and borders enable syndicate truck drivers who are familiar to officials to breeze through posts at which other traders must submit to long searches and sometimes harassment and extortion.

As development actors reduce barriers and build governance structures aimed at protecting local rights, large-scale traders, particularly those smuggling narcotics and weapons and

those with armed protection, may resort to violence to resist competition. For this reason development actors may need not only to partner with national security actors, but also to incorporate peacebuilding specifically into the collective development strategy itself. Sarah Collinson makes this key point on how warring groups affect livelihoods:

Understanding the nature and extent of communities' vulnerability to predation and asset-stripping by warring groups – and thus designing effective protection and prevention measures – depends on understanding the significance of these violent activities for the groups concerned. Enlisting in militia bands may for many represent a livelihood strategy. Reducing the vulnerability of rural communities to predation may therefore depend more on finding suitable livelihood options and alternatives for those involved in banditry than it will on any peace deals (Collinson 2003:17).

In remote Panj Valley settlements where people have not seen the kinds of benefits of political transition as in the capitals, it is no surprise that there is acute distrust of the central governments, international agencies and the military. But when wage earners depend on the government directly for income or entitlements and that income is delayed, collective angst can manifest as rioting or people can choose to join anti-government forces. As the primary guarantors of rights, obliged by the international law agreements they have signed, national governments need to take responsibility for protecting citizens when economic systems fail to. The primary obligation for national governments is to protect livelihoods by regulating local markets which have been negatively influenced by hoarders, corruption or isolation. Second, national governments are obliged to ensure families know how to address their grievances appropriately and that their petitions will be heard. Otherwise, vulnerable groups will sense they are labouring for and paying into a system that does not give an equal return and may switch their loyalties.

If development actors assist poor households and small traders as they build a united front when addressing grievances with local councils, and apply consistent but persuasive pressure, then the councils will be more disposed to address the grievances than if individuals or families lacking social capital approach them singly. If a grievance raises complex issues local councils may even feel compelled to bring it before district councils or national assemblies. For households in impoverished, isolated communities such as those in the Panj Valley to engage successfully in the public sphere they need access to information, and the councils, assemblies, and ministries need to be capable and responsive. International donors and aid agencies, for their part, would provide more benefits to their participants by building the capacity of local organisations to provide opportunities for employment, for revitalising agriculture and markets and for security system management.

Although the discussion has focused on small traders, labourers and the poor, there is a critical role for large-scale traders and producers as well. Development actors should distinguish legitimate large-scale traders that pay workers fair wages and benefits from those which exploit their labourers' vulnerabilities or trade illegal goods. Large-scale traders that succeed, specialise and branch out to lead economic growth. Such companies will employ more and more people and become integral in the health of the local economy. However, poor-friendly growth requires a certain amount of governmental – if not aid agency – intervention to prevent exploitation, market intimidation, predatory pricing and monopolisation. Those large-scale traders which control whole sectors of the market – in some cases all the trade in a given region – may resist regulation, reform and development. Development actors and security actors must find where sensitive points are. If monopolists and militia leaders, who may lose power in an economic transformation

which favours the poor, understand that they have options such as political lobbying and the prospect of making legitimate profits, they may be less likely to resort to violence to defend their turf.

Throughout the Panj Valley families are struggling to make ends meet. Many of these families are actively searching for means to address their problems, but either lack

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**If stakeholders in the cross-border development partnership help families to overcome livelihood barriers while creating opportunities for local leaders to mitigate the loss of power caused by poor-friendly development, then the Afghan-Tajik livelihood strategy could also pay dividends in the creation of a sustainable local peace.**

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access to information or are physically blocked by those who aim to preserve power. If stakeholders in the cross-border development partnership help families to overcome livelihood barriers while creating opportunities for local leaders to mitigate the loss of power caused by poor-friendly development, then the Afghan-Tajik livelihood strategy could also pay dividends in the creation of a sustainable local peace. Bridging the

Panj will take more than steel and concrete. It will require the transformation of a regional economy whose actors may not yet realise how much their personal success depends on growth for the community as a whole.

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**DANIEL J. GERSTLE** served as a Julie J. Kidd Research Fellow at Columbia University while researching food security and livelihoods in Central Asia. He has also written about and worked to assist conflict-affected people in the Balkans, the Caucasus, and Somalia. He now serves the International Medical Corps in southern Russia.

## Endnote

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