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Reports from the Field: **Beyond Poppy Cultivation in Afghanistan**

By William Bradley IDSC/MA '05



Jurm, Badakhshan: March 11, 2006

I am sitting here listening to Kabul Radio in a town named Jurm (Poppy) in the Northern Province of Badakhshan, Afghanistan. Nearly a year ago, I had been dispatched to the frontline in the Taliban stronghold of Uruzgan. After working to find a new way to build peace between Special Forces and the people in this remote area, I was put on a new assignment in Panjshir Valley. Panjshir is the home of the Great Massoud, the Northern Alliance leader who fought the Russians and then the Taliban with the Americans. My assignment was to help establish a reconstruction team that would be more civilian and less military.

I forged a strong partnership with our military partners and we made important linkages with the people of Panjshir, working cooperatively with our AID Implementing Partners. We employed a light footprint, leaving the big guns back home, understanding that we needed to rely on the local people for protection. This has been a huge success and I am proud to have played a part in helping sustain a partnership between the United States and the people of Panjshir. There is now a civilian leader of the organization and we are thinking of ways to bring development to the area without an overt military presence. I guess I didn't write about this earlier because it had been a work in progress, changing daily in the field. Now we are committed in the region and the groundwork is laid for my replacement. I also have had a hard time in Bagram Airfield. It was a heavy militaristic and stressful environment with many rules and an unseen disrespect for civilians. It is also the center of the command for all U.S. forces in Afghanistan. I was relatively unhappy with the position in the field office. It is a program run by people who know less about USAID than I do. Frustrating, to say the least.

I am currently in a new position as the field program manager of Alternative Livelihoods/North. I am the CTO for a \$60 million program aimed at fostering areabased economic development as an alternative to poppy cultivation. There are strong parallels between finding alternatives to poppy and working to promote diversification in the cotton belt of West Africa. I am very happy to be working back in a technical office of USAID and out of the ambiguous zone of "field program officer," a position with no authority and much responsibility.

Now, although I have more responsibility, I actually have influence over the performance of the work. My first official day on the job, I saved the people of Badakhshan from a terrible USDA-nominated project to line the soon-to-be paved road with trees. My colleague, Nazir, and I empowered the Afghan Department of Agriculture to take the lead and follow a more community-based approach than the NGOs. I have learned more in the last month about the top-down nature of NGO work than I ever had before. My job now is to develop viable alternatives to poppy cultivation. This means off-farm labor and increasing the competitiveness of Afghan products in regional, national and international markets. This is only achievable through value-added industrial development. I am in no way saying it will work, but I am going to do my best to make a difference and help the farmers better cope as the poppy business becomes more risky. We aren't the law enforcement end of the thing, but we try to develop alternative ways of making a living. To be quite honest, I can understand why these guys cultivate poppy. Imagine trying to grow something in Nevada.

I am living at a camp with Germans, Czechs, Danish, Belgians, Croatians and one Swiss. I am the only American. Let me say first that the food is much better and healthier, but in addition to the food, the mood and environment is much mellower than in our American forces camps. The soldiers are older and there is a bar with a two-beer limit. I can go over and shoot the breeze with my colleagues over a good German Hefewiezen. In addition, we are able to move around much more because of the very permissive environment. It is a little like driving around Montana or Idaho. Although this area was on the frontlines and occupied by the Soviets, the Taliban never made it up here, so there are far less land mines around. So, I think I will get a snowboard for the winter and hike around a little in my free time.

Over and out,

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