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Alternative Food Networks in Afghanistan: The Role of Collaborative Agribusiness in Food Security

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Abstract

Afghanistan has been an understudied country despite its current difficulties stemming from political conflict for decades and its adverse impact on the country and society, such as food security. This article presents firsthand findings on the potential of collaborative agribusiness initiatives as part of Afghanistan's food system to address food security challenges. These embody an emerging body of literature known as alternative food networks, as part of the Slow Food movement that prioritizes community wellbeing, as a solution to food security. Findings are drawn from selected interviewees who are key Afghan stakeholders, ranging from farmers to experts in the agribusiness sector, relating to collaborative agribusiness initiatives which play a crucial role in fostering food security in Afghanistan. Specifically, it argues that through collaborative initiatives among farmers and the integration of marginalized groups, agricultural productivity increases, which ultimately leads to better food security. Three components emerge – resilience, resource enhancement and revelation (3Rs) – as the conceptual contribution. This approach of alternative food network improves access to markets and resources, particularly for smallholder farmers in remote regions and provinces.

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Introduction

This article explores the importance of alternative food networks (AFNs, from hereon) as part of the Slow Food movement solution for global food security. In particular, it examines the role of collaborative agribusiness for the under-researched country context of Afghanistan. The term AFN has emerged from the 1990s as a counter-response to the unethical nature of industrial food systems, such as standardization and mass production (see Edwards, 2016). Its approach is varied, including a range of community supported agriculture to specialist methods of production involving a broad range of stakeholders, and is built around ethical principles of environmental sustainability and, more recently, 'food justice'. The approach is 'slow' because of the anti-mass production techniques involved, involving greater community embeddedness.

What makes food or food systems 'alternative' has been the subject of debate for some time. Specifically, Watts, Ilbery and Maye (2017) introduced the distinction between product-based alterity and distribution-channel-based alterity as possible routes. These were explored by Rosol (2020) as alternative economic practices and presented it as the third pillar of the alternative food systems. Yet, little is currently known about how they work for non-affluent countries, such as a war-torn country like Afghanistan. While there is evidence of a global emergence of AFNs like consumer cooperatives in Poland (Bilewicz and Spiewak, 2015) and farmer initiatives in China (Si *et al*., 2015), the importance of nuanced and country-specific approaches is crucial (Abrahams, 2007). For this reason, we fill the gap in the empirical literature by presenting the complex context of a conflict affected country that has otherwise been overlooked. Theoretically, we elucidate this third pillar, in particular, collaborative agribusiness, in the food system of Afghanistan. Thus, this research aims to explore the potential of collaborative agribusiness initiatives as part of Afghanistan food system to combat food security challenges. The objective of this research is therefore to find out whether collaborative agribusiness initiatives can help improve food production, support communities, and help vulnerable groups such as marginalized small-holder farmers. Collaborative agribusiness initiatives represent a novel approach that employs the power of partnerships between different stakeholders, including farmers, community members, businesses, government entities, non-profit organizations, and private businesses, and are therefore deserving of extensive research.

1. Agribusiness in Afghanistan

Afghanistan has been suffering from political conflict for decades, resulting in growth and stability difficulties. According to Islam *et al.* (2022), the country's infrastructure, irrigation system and agricultural practices have all been negatively impacted by the ongoing conflict, and the fall of Afghanistan's government by the Taliban in August 2021 has deteriorated this situation furthermore. Of utmost concern is food insecurity, calling for more innovative ways to address it. Conventional approaches to addressing food (in)security – such as conventional farming and irrigation – in Afghanistan have proven insufficient given the complex and volatile nature of the country's situation. Innovative solutions are necessary to tackle the root causes of food insecurity and build long-term resilience.

Afghanistan is a mountainous country situated at the juncture of Central and Southern Asia. Its total area is approximately 650,000 km^2 and the estimated population is 37 million (Samim *et al.*, 2020). Afghanistan's unique geopolitical and prolonged history of conflict set it apart as a distinctive context for understanding the challenges in less developed and conflict-affected countries. As more than half the population works in the agricultural sector, the lives of Afghans are highly dependent on agricultural products. Food security – defined as having access to sufficient nourishing food on both physical and financial levels (World Food Summit, 1996) – is very much the subject of today's ongoing debate among the grand challenges, such as those relating to the UN sustainable development goals (SDGs) as a guide and measure of progress towards a more socially, economically, and environmentally sustainable future. In the agri-food system, this calls for further discussion of alternative food networks and alternative economic practices within the alternative food system (Rosol, 2020).

Afghanistan has a long history of farming traditions (Khan *et al.*, 2021) that are part of its cultural identity. The Slow Food movement emphasizes the promotion of local, traditional, and sustainable food production methods (Voinea, 2019; Doppler, 2020), which aligns with Afghanistan's rich farming traditions and cultural identity. However, ongoing conflict has put these traditions at risk. It is important to preserve and revive these traditional farming methods to connect people with their cultural heritage and to help build a more sustainable food system. Ensuring food sufficiency in the country for the long-term means thinking about farming in ways that do not harm the environment and ensuring equality among marginalized groups. The World Bank (2019) projected that the country's food security was to exacerbate. Alternative economic practices such as collaborative agribusiness initiatives can help preserve farming traditions which can in turn improve food security in Afghanistan. Integrating Slow Food principles, such as

traditional food support (Munjal *et al.*, 2016), into the food system can strengthen the food networks. Collaborative agribusiness partnerships can provide small-scale farmers with access to resources and markets.

2. Need for Alternative Food Networks

The Slow Food movement, with its core principles of promoting good, clean, and fair food, has gained significant attention in the area environmental sustainability. This movement emphasizes the importance of sustainable agriculture, biodiversity, and traditional food practices, aligning closely with the values of alternative food networks that prioritize local, organic, and ethically produced food. By advocating for the preservation of food traditions, supporting small-scale producers, and improving community connections through food, slow food embodies a holistic approach to food consumption that goes beyond just food (Sobreira, 2022). The movement aims not only to ensure the environmental sustainability of food production but also preserve cultural heritage and promote social equity (Uzel, 2020). Heritage, whether cultural or culinary, plays a significant role in shaping food traditions and practices within communities. The movement, with its emphasis on "good, clean, and fair" food, seeks to protect and celebrate culinary heritage by promoting local and traditional food products. By advocating for the preservation of traditional farming methods and indigenous ingredients, Slow Food contributes to the conservation of culinary heritage and supports small-scale producers who are often the guardians of these traditions (Nassen, 2017).

Alternative food networks (AFNs), meanwhile, offer a decentralized and community-based approach to food production and distribution. These networks often prioritize local sourcing, organic farming practices, and direct relationships between producers and consumers. By incorporating elements of heritage preservation and sustainability, AFNs align with the values of the Slow Food movement. They provide a platform for small-scale farmers and artisanal producers to showcase their heritage crops and traditional food products, creating a market for culturally significant foods that may otherwise be marginalized in mainstream food systems. However, the literature on AFNs is somewhat disjointed and varied. AFNs can be country specific, which varies between the choices available between European approaches that focus on a decentralized approach to avoid safety concerns and disease outbreak (Goodman *et al.*, 2011) from American ones that are characterized by a civic-led approach that recognizes the 'back-to-land' principle relating closely to organic approaches (Guthman, 2004). Neither of these recognize or build in specifically the constraints faced by those faced by Afghanistan.

Nonetheless, the quality turn has at least recognized such uniform terms as 'short food supply chains', or 'product in place' and 'process in place' to symbolize the importance of improving environmental friendliness (Renting *et al.*, 2003). This is similar to the scale benefits of 'embeddedness' – both vertical and horizontal – as part of the supply chain (Sonnino and Marsden, 2006).

Barbara and Dagnes (2016) characterized AFNs as being self-organized from the bottom-up (involving farmers, rather than policy makers), involving local individuals and a meagre involvement in institutions. The outcome of which is accessibility, sustainability and quality. Accessibility refers to AFNs being located in areas where locals can become part of the process (Grasseni, 2013); sustainability refers to achieving zero-miles (Schlich and Fleissner 2005) – notwithstanding the 'local trap' of multiple territorial production which counters ecological scale (Born and Purcell, 2006); and quality refers to both hard standards about the supply chain and soft standards on the traditions and trust relationships (Murdock, 2000).

With these in mind, more recently Lin (2020) emphasized how grassroots initiatives such as the Slow Food Movement and Low-Carbon Food Movement play a crucial role in promoting local food systems and sustainable culinary practices. These movements not only advocate for the consumption of local food but also challenge conventional industrial food systems, emphasizing the importance of community engagement and responsible consumption. The Slow Food movement can be seen as a specific type of AFN that focuses on celebrating local food traditions, supporting small-scale producers, and promoting food that is good, clean and fair. By engaging in activities such as farmers' markets, community-supported agriculture (CSA), and direct sales, Slow Food initiatives contribute to the development of more resilient and equitable food systems. Overall, the relationship between the Slow Food movement and AFNs is characterized by a shared commitment to transforming the food system towards greater sustainability, social responsibility, and cultural appreciation. Both movements play a vital role in raising awareness about the importance of conscious food choices, supporting small-scale producers, and fostering connections between producers and consumers (Michel-Villarreal *et al.*, 2019).

As people face difficulty balancing the profit they gain and their ability to care for the people, alternative economic practices are gaining growing attention among economic geographers (Gibson-Graham *et al.*, 2019). Michel-Villarreal (2019) identified the lack of frameworks based on measurements and indicators for assessing the three dimensions of sustainability in AFNs. A common language of sustainability in AFN research called for standardized assessment frameworks, even though most people believed that AFNs were more sustainable than traditional food systems. The current

frameworks can be modified for supply chains and agricultural systems to fit the context of AFNs (Michel-Villarreal, 2019). Le Heron (2009) identifies AFNs as one of the most important economic geographical research areas within agri-food studies. Yet, to better understand these networks, we must first understand alterity. This could be alterity based on the product, which is food based on its distribution channel or based on economic practices as introduced by Rosol (2019) as a third pillar in alternative food systems.

Based on debates in economic geography, Watts *et al.* (2005) outlined the difference between alternative food and alternative networks. Watts *et al.* (2017) went further with the concept of weaker and stronger alternative food systems through this distinction. Weaker alternative food systems relate to product and the quality of the product, while stronger alternative food systems shift the emphasis from food to food-distribution-channels. The review is geographically delimited to Western Europe and North America and focuses more on the material aspect of food production rather than the activities that underpin this variation. However, by understanding the alterity in alternative food networks along with economic practices, researchers and policymakers can gain a deeper understanding of sustainable alternative economic practices as part of the alternative food system, geographical variations, and different dimensions of alternative food systems. Distinguishing between alterity based on the product which is food and alterity based on distribution channel is not sufficient anymore. To elucidate this, there needs to be a shift of focus from AFNs to alternative economic practices as proposed by Rosol (2020). These alternative practices within AFNs transcend mere product or distribution attributes, offering a unique perspective on economic relations, spatial dynamics, and socio-environmental considerations within the food sector which will be the focus of this study.

However, in the context of Afghanistan and its unique challenges related to food security, there is a knowledge gap in understanding how collaborative agribusiness initiatives as part of an alternative food system can integrate with the principles of the Slow Food movement to strengthen alternative food networks and enhance food security outcomes which are using collaborative initiatives to ensure food security. There is also a need to assess how these principles can be adapted and scaled in a country like Afghanistan, where access to resources and infrastructure is limited. By bridging the gap between producers and consumers, these networks facilitate the exchange of knowledge, resources, and values that are essential for building resilient and equitable food systems. There is a critical need to investigate the potential of collaborative agribusiness initiatives in supporting local farmers, improving access to nutritious food, and fostering innovation in agricultural practices in regions affected by food insecurity.

3. Methodology

Research Design

AFNs in Afghanistan were researched using an inductive approach that required a strong closeness with the research subjects at hand – which were the key stakeholders within the local community involved in the AFN. This context was then treated as a 'case' for methodological purposes (Yin, 2003) and all issues of AFN were focused around the Afghanistan context only. Thus, a check-list involving all the key issues about the characteristics, operational practices and concerns of AFNs described in the previous section of this article was initially compiled. This then was expanded into a more comprehensive interview guide which was later used with interviewees.

The choice of interviewees spanned farmers, non-governmental organizations, agricultural entrepreneurs, experts, and community members. This choice was believed to be both highly representative and comprehensive because farmers offer first-hand knowledge of the agricultural industry representing the bottom of the pyramid for a country, NGOs present viewpoints on intervention tactics, agricultural entrepreneurs present creative ideas, experts offer theoretical and practical expertise, and community members represent the interests of the final beneficiaries. These took place in the summer of 2023 in north-west Afghanistan, which is a highly representative area affected by conflict and community farming. The direct contact by one of the authors who was familiar with the area promoted open-ended discussions and allowed participants to trust and therefore share more freely their personal experiences; this enabled more accurate and in-depth observations.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews with 28 participants were the main data collection technique used in this study (see Ng and Coakes, 2013). The number was considered sufficient when the broad range of stakeholders within the research design was reached and when it was felt information saturation was reached – the point at which the research team believed no new information would be gained by any additional interview. Each interview lasted about 25 minutes, and was carried out using telephone and simple conferencing software (eg. Skype). Indeed, this meant there was the likelihood of a selection bias of that included only those who were more technologically enabled. However, as the country was still politically unstable, this represented the safest and most direct way to access the

key participants. The closeness was at least facilitated by the use of the local language Dari as the medium of communication for the interviews. Hence, there involved translation of the technical concepts from western literature about AFN into Dari, recording the conversation in Dari, and direct translation of this into English before the data analysis. This was carried out by one of the article's authors, who was fluent in the language (Rolland *et al.*, 2019).

While the research design did indeed ensure a prior list of key stakeholders representing different importance, the exact engagement involved a non-probability snowball sample (Parker *et al.*, 2019). It began with some initial contacts known to the researcher (referred to 'seeds' within the technique), who were recruited to participate in the research because they meet the 'case' requirements as per Yin (2003). The willing participants were then requested to suggest further contacts who meet the research criteria and were willing to participate, who in turn suggested additional possible participants because we were limited by the number of participants initially. The exact interviewees are listed in Table 1.

Table 1 - Interviewee Profiles

Interviewee #	Role	Industry/sector	Years of service	Sex
01	Local Community Member	–	25	M
02	Farmer	Agriculture	15	M
03	Expert	Agriculture	3	M
04	Communication Officer	NGO	13	M
05	Farmer	Agriculture	18	M
06	Agricultural Entrepreneur	Food processing	8	M
07	Agricultural Entrepreneur	Agriculture	5	M
08	Agricultural Entrepreneur	Agriculture	5	M
09	Local Community Member	–	25	M
10	Local Community Member	–	18	M
11	Agricultural Entrepreneur	Agriculture	9	M
12	Expert	Agriculture	10	M
13	Farmer	Agriculture	15	M
14	Farmer	Agriculture	20	M
15	Local Community Member	–	18	M

16	Agricultural Entrepreneur	Agriculture	7	M
17	Agricultural Entrepreneur	Agriculture	7	F
18	Farmer	Agriculture	20	F
19	Expert	Education	8	–
20	Local Community Member	–	23	F
21	Agricultural Entrepreneur	–	6	–
22	Project Manager	NGO	22	F
23	Government Official	Government	4	M
24	Local Community Member	–	–	F
25	Project Manager	NGO	21	F
26	Farmer	Agriculture	13	M
27	Expert	Agribusiness	8	M
28	Program Manager	NGO	15	M

Data Analysis

The interview transcripts were verbatim to ensure accurate analysis of the data. This also ensured that the standard thematic data analysis technique could be applied, which was considered most suitable because it ensured issues of the literature could be accurately followed up in the empirical research, and extended to the context of Afghanistan. Each step in the data analysis process helped to clarify the overall meaning of the research findings (Vears, 2022). Specifically, these were:

- Step One: Reading and rereading the transcriptions.
- Step Two: Categorization and grouping the coded segments into groups or categories. This process made it easier to organize and synthesize the material, allowing for a thorough analysis of the themes and subjects that came up throughout the interviews.
- Step Three: Creation of a coding tree, using standard sub-codes for issues, such as A1.1.2 to concern issues within AFN (eg. quality-community-labour).
- Step Four: Code the interview transcripts.
- Step Five: Capture frequencies of the codes.
- Step Six: Identify patterns in the frequencies.
- Step Seven: Conceptualize, and write up these empirical findings.

This technique was carried out manually by the research team in the absence of any computer-assisted software, for the reason of the

manageability of the sample size and for the advantage of being closely attached to the data for greater familiarization. At each stage of the research, accurate notes were kept in a separate note-book to refer back to as a way to minimize bias as a form of reliability and validity check.

4. Findings

The empirical investigation unfolded the following key findings about AFNs in Afghanistan.

Finding 1: Naturally limited resources

The most important impact that AFNs have is the support of small enterprises and boosting food security through creating a strong and efficient relationship between producers and consumers. On the other hand, AFNs can be adversely influenced by the lack of resources. The development of AFNs can be hindered and the support to local producers can disappear. Hence, one of the main challenges that farmers and agricultural business people encounter in Afghanistan is the lack of sufficient resources and the unequal distribution of these resources. While farmers expect the government to provide them with better services and resources, they struggle to enhance their profits with existing resources. Consequently, many farmers decide to migrate to cities and desert farming if they get a chance. The absence or inaccessibility of resources and poor infrastructure result in the insufficient contribution of agribusiness to food security.

The lack of water resources has a large adverse impact on agribusiness. Being a landlocked country, Afghanistan's maximum water supply is groundwater that is lifted to the ground through deep wells. While there are many watery crops cultivated in Afghanistan, it is of great importance to access sufficient water supplies. For example, rice is a commonplace crop in Afghanistan which requires a large amount of water supply to be cultivated, particularly with the traditional method of cultivation that is utilized in Afghanistan. However, groundwater supplies have severely decreased in recent years, and it has led to water scarcity and expensiveness. An entrepreneur commented that:

> In Gozareh district, where I have established an agricultural enterprise with my family, there is very little water resources. Landlords who have dug deep wells sell water expensively. Last year, we decided to cultivate rice because its price was increasing. But unfortunately, we had to pay a lot of money on water which caused the loss of our business (Interviewee #11).

The absence of strict rules on well digging adds to this problem and causes underground water levels to diminish even further.

In addition, the inaccessibility of electricity in rural areas makes it challenging for business people to use an eco-friendly and cheaper source. For example, another agricultural businessman shared, "I use machinery that can be operated by both electricity and gas. I know that electricity is eco-friendly, but we don't have access to electricity all the time, so I have to use the ones operated by gas" (Interviewee #17). Business people have to raise their productivity and maintain their success, and in order to do so, they are forced to use gas-operated or other less eco-friendly facilities due to inaccessibility to modern technology and infrastructural limitations. The usage of fossil fuels and inaccessibility of electricity not only result in cost deficiency but also degrade the environment.

Furthermore, the lack of awareness of new sustainable methods causes the waste of large amounts of valuable resources. This lack of awareness is more prevalent among farmers' communities. For example, a farmer added:

> It has been a few years that we have not had good water resources. However, there are many modern agricultural methods that can avoid the waste of resources, like dropping irrigation but the farmers here are not acquainted with such methods. If we knew the new and useful ways of practicing agriculture, we would be able to use our limited resources more carefully and refrain from their waste (Interviewee #18).

As a result, the amount of resources will keep decreasing and the success of agribusiness is highly endangered.

Moreover, the nonexistence of an effective transportation system and geographical constraints irritate agricultural enterprises and add to their previously mentioned issues. Farmers who practice agriculture in remote areas find it very difficult to transfer their products to city markets effectively. As a farmer commented:

> Although we have a lot of potential for practicing agriculture in the country, do you know why we are not happy with what we are doing? It's because we are very far from the cities and there's no easy and convenient way to transfer our products to cities, so we have to sell our products at a lower price in the village on the spot. No one listens to our pain (Interviewee #5).

Until the transportation system is not amended and reaching markets is not eased, it will exert further strain, specifically for those enterprises that have been established further from the city centers, to sell their products and crops directly to the main markets in the city.

In summary, the limitation of resources causes many constraints and adversely affects the success of agribusinesses. In the agricultural sector,

what obstructs the development of ventures are the lack of awareness of sustainable agriculture, resource limitations and inaccessibility, and infrastructural constraints. It is evident from this concern that there is no short distribution channel known as AFN in Afghanistan, and it is not the distribution chain that defines alterity in the Afghan food system. However, alterity can be defined by the economic activities that keep the food system running.

Finding 2: Collaborative agribusiness that goes beyond the plough

The agribusiness sector in Afghanistan is replete with difficulties and challenges. The limitation of different types of resources which were elaborated in the first finding makes it very unexpected for agribusinesses to maintain success. In other words, it is almost impossible to expect many agricultural enterprises in Afghanistan to prosper due to the restrictions and limitations that stand in the way of agribusiness. As one expert noted:

> It is quite amazing to see how long-lasting some small agricultural enterprises become while encountering so many challenges. To put it straight, on paper, most of these small agribusinesses in Afghanistan should fail but they usually last longer than expected (Interviewee #8).

Nonetheless, despite all the hardships and arduousness threatening agribusinesses in Afghanistan, they can still survive and continue to exist. The number of people living under the poverty line is also less than expected. The most fundamental factors behind these bewildering facts are the religion and culture in Afghanistan.

Firstly, Afghanistan is a deeply religious society. Most Afghans are strictly religious and believe that all worldly activities are of no use if they contradict their spiritual beliefs. Relevantly, they are very cooperative with each other, and it is rooted in their religious matters. Referring to the prophet Muhammad, "A Muslim is the brother of a fellow-Muslim. He should neither commit oppression upon him nor ruin him, and he who meets the needs of a brother, Allah will meet his big needs" (Sahih Muslim, 2580). Therefore, Afghans see this as a holy duty to be helping hands to their relatives and neighbors. This explains why many farmers help each other when they are in desperate need of resources. Thus, one villager explained:

> Our religion commands us to be kind and helpful to each other. Whenever one of our villagers is in trouble, everybody is going to help as far as they can. People here are very religious. They pray every single day and I believe one of the main

reasons that can describe the fact behind the friendliness and closeness of these people is that they all follow the same religion and accept each other without trouble (Interviewee #20).

In addition, Afghans are culturally sympathetic and affectionate people. In Afghanistan, it is quite conventional and customary to participate in ceremonies held by relatives, friends, and even neighbors. In most ceremonies, either celebratory or saddening ones, hundreds of people attend and try to show their sense of sociability and care. This strong bond of care and attention influences the workplace as well. Farmers, in particular, have a strong sense of sociability and take this as their responsibility to help their neighboring farmers if they can. There is even a custom among farmers called 'Hashar' which eases the drudgery at the time of harvesting. Hashar happens when farmers want to harvest their crops. Several farmers assemble and work together on the field of one farmer among them. After it is completed, they continue harvesting other farmers' fields so that everyone will have their crops harvested with each other's help and without paying any extra money for labor. Stating this point firmly, a community member noted:

My father always grows wheat and so does two of our neighbors. Their fields are set adjacent to each other and when it is time to harvest, we always Hashar. This way, we avoid paying extra money for labor and at the same time, get our own crops effortlessly (Interviewee #23).

Customs like Hashar help many small businesses survive by considerably reducing expenses.

Furthermore, agribusiness in Afghanistan is held and organized by people in the countryside and rural residents generally tend to be more supportive of each other than that of city people. Life in villages is particularly different in terms of sociability. A small number of people rarely exceed one thousand, live in each village and because of this, and most villagers from one area usually know each other well. Villagers' unique social customs, unfamiliarity with technology and separation from cities are reasons that construe why country people still maintain their old customs. One good old custom still prevalent among them is supporting each other's backs as well as possible. Farmers in villages lend each other property, finance, and other resources. A farmer explains:

If one year, one farmer faces loss, the others can help him by lending him some money or other resources. I was taught this by my father when I was a little child, and he was taught this by his father when he was a kid. That is how we live in the countryside (Interviewee #13).

This explains another significant factor behind small agricultural enterprises' survival.

To sum up, Afghanistan's agricultural enterprises are not normally expected to be continuous due to the restrictions and constraints that lie in their way, notably resource limitations and lack of sufficient government support. Meanwhile, more people were expected to live under the poverty line by taking this disadvantageous condition into account. Nonetheless, despite all the miseries and difficulties, people are still believed to be doing fairly well. This research found this unforeseen result is caused by collaborative initiatives in Afghan agri-business which are known as alternative economic practices underpinning the whole food system in the country. These alternative economic practices are mainly affected by two main pillars of religion and culture in the country.

Finding 3: The Absence of Formal AFNs in Afghanistan

Developed nations boast a diverse array of AFNs, including short distribution channels, farmers' markets, community-supported agriculture, specialist food retailers, and fair-trade initiatives. In contrast, Afghanistan appears to lack these formal structures, raising questions about the resilience and sustainability of its food system. An expert commented:

> A great concern in Afghanistan that hinders the development of the agriculture sector and farmers' further profit is the absence of formal channels that can link farmers to markets. Farmers here sell their yield with the lowest cost to dealers, and they can never risk stockpiling their crops due to lack of ice houses and other facilities (Interviewee #4)

In Western countries, short distribution channels thrive as a means to connect consumers directly with producers, fostering transparency and reducing the distance between farm and table. Farmers' markets provide vibrant spaces for local producers to showcase and sell their goods directly to consumers, promoting a sense of community and supporting small-scale agriculture. The absence of these channels in Afghanistan suggests a potential gap in direct consumer-producer interactions and the local food movement, which has proven beneficial in other contexts.

Moreover, the absenteeism of community-supported agriculture (CSA) in Afghanistan is noteworthy. CSAs establish a direct relationship between consumers and farmers, often involving upfront financial support from consumers in exchange for a share of the harvest. This model promotes sustainability, community engagement, and shared risks and rewards. The

lack of CSA initiatives in Afghanistan underscores a missed opportunity for building closer ties between farmers and consumers and fostering a more sustainable and supportive local food system. A farmer described:

> When it is time to harvest, I sell one kilogram of apricots in exchange for ten Afghanis. However, the dealer who buys my yield sells one kilogram of grapes in exchange for twenty Afghanis. If I had transportation facilities and knew the market, I could sell them myself and would make a much greater profit. I expect the government to buy our products at a stable cost from villages so that we do not end up making losses each year (Interviewee #22).

Specialist food retailers and Fairtrade initiatives, prevalent in developed countries, play a pivotal role in offering consumers access to ethically sourced and unique products. These channels support both local and international producers, emphasizing fair compensation and sustainable practices. The absence of such specialized outlets in Afghanistan raises concerns about the limited availability of diverse and ethically sourced food options for consumers, potentially limiting choices and impacting the livelihoods of producers. Collaborative agribusiness is a resilient force in the absence of formal alternatives. The deep-rooted religious and cultural values, along with the close-knit nature of rural communities, foster a spirit of collaboration among farmers, enabling them to navigate challenges collectively. As noted:

> Despite all the problems that villagers face, they still love the affectionate bonds they make with each other and the assistance they provide each other with when in need. When we ask about the problems regarding the lack of food networks, farmers usually say that they rely on Allah and that He will hopefully solve their problems. These are reasons that make them keep up (Interviewee #25)

Collaborative agribusiness, exemplified by practices like Hashar, demonstrates the capacity of local communities to support each other, share resources, and overcome obstacles. This informal yet effective approach challenges conventional notions of alternative food networks by highlighting the role of communal bonds, trust, and shared values as alternative economic practices in sustaining the food system. As Afghanistan progresses, understanding and harnessing the strengths of these alternative practices will be crucial for fostering a resilient and locally rooted food system, even in the absence of formalized alternative food networks seen in developed countries.

4. Discussion

The above research findings have identified three key variations about AFNs specific to the Afghan context of conflict: operation under limited resources, the dominance of collaborative agreements, and the absence of formal AFNs. These in essence raise three corresponding fundamental questions, which this section will discuss: (1) are AFNs naturally suitable for Afghanistan and therefore represent a natural solution that is already set in stone?; (2) if collaborative agreements are extensive and Afghanistan is ostensibly performing better than global aid institutions expect, is there resilience in AFNs not previously noted in the extant literature?; and (3) is there an invisible and informal hand that is supporting the absence of formal AFN networks?

(1) *AFNs a natural solution?* The extant literature on AFNs, particularly that from America had argued for the luxury of organic practices that may be more abundant of resources (Guthman, 2004) and the focus on localness (Lin, 2020). This is perhaps a difficult concept to reason with when Afghan agribusiness people are constrained by poor infrastructure and naturally poor resources. They desire more support from the government and the returns of working without agricultural technology is not only uneconomical but also counter to environmental gains. Thus, in the case of Afghanistan, the 'return to land' principle is already in place, without choice. The solution called for by local farmers is to gain resource enhancement as a priority.
(2) *Resilience in AFNs?* The research has identified the unlikelihood of agribusiness success, and yet business is motivated other factors, such as religion. It is not clear how Islamic principles, such as Hashar, form an exact causal and scientific link to agribusiness survival other than the resilience of Afghans, not to give up, and the support of one-another. The idea that AFNs can be self-organized (Barbara and Dagnes, 2016) and local embeddedness (Grasseni, 2013) may support this claim.
(3) *An invisible and informal hand (revelation)?* The absence of any formal AFN in Afghanistan (eg. CSAs, or Fairtrade agreements), against AFN literature that defines it as an explicit application within Slow Food (see Edwards, 2016), suggests the impossibility of AFNs working and yet we have witnessed at least some survival. Thus, instead of the formal mechanisms that exist in developed country AFNs, there seems to be the presence of an invisible and 'informal' hand – some form of revelation – in support of how the difficult markets have operated.

Conceptualizing these three discussion points above, we can summarize that three components (beginning with the letter R – resilience, resource

enhancement and revelation) represent how collaborative agribusiness helps to facilitate food security and explicates the AFNs in Afghanistan (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 - Components of AFNs in Afghanistan

Conclusion

In exploring the dynamics of agribusiness in Afghanistan, two key operational points have surfaced. Resource limitations including water scarcity, energy inaccessibility, awareness of sustainable methods, and transportation constraints highlight the multifaceted nature of obstacles that obstruct the success of agribusinesses in Afghanistan. Insufficient water resources, reliance on non-eco-friendly energy sources, lack of awareness about modern farming techniques, and transportation bottlenecks collectively contribute to the struggle faced by farmers in the pursuit of sustainable and profitable agriculture.

From a policy perspective, the findings highlight the interconnectivity of these challenges, creating a complex landscape that demands comprehensive solutions. The responsibility falls on the government and stakeholders to address infrastructural limitations, ensure fair resource distribution, and promote sustainable agricultural practices. What makes it interesting is that, despite all these difficulties and challenges, the food security situation in Afghanistan is better than expected by FAO reports. Thus, the research found that there are no short supply chains in the country and alterity in the Afghan food system is defined based on alternative economic practices

such as collaborative agribusiness. Moreover, despite the overwhelming challenges, agribusinesses in Afghanistan exhibit an unexpected tenacity, sustained by the pillars of collaboration affected by religion, culture, and the sense of community inherent in the community, highlighting support and collaboration, cultural practices such as communal ceremonies, and the tradition of Hashar, and the strong bonds formed in rural communities. These findings collectively suggest that collaborative agribusiness plays a crucial role in mitigating the adverse effects of resource limitations and government support gaps. The study also acknowledges that the resilience observed in Afghan agribusinesses is intricately tied to religious values, cultural practices, and the close-knit nature of rural communities, which presents the attitude of care which is one of the main principles of the Slow Food movement. This unexpected resilience challenges conventional expectations and invites further research into the specific impacts of religion, culture, and rurality on sustainable economic practices, particularly in the context of collaborative agribusiness.

From these findings, we argue that the role of collaborative agribusiness in food security, in the context of Afghanistan, is driven by the 3Rs conceptualization – resilience, resource enhancement and revelation. Indeed, this simple argument is not without its limitations. We acknowledge the research was carried out mostly in one part of Afghanistan, despite being representative, cannot speak for all persons and all stakeholders. Given the political insecurities taking place at the time of the research, there may have been biases and reluctance in the interviewees opening up fully. Nonetheless, we believe these insights will at least augment and bring to the contemporary research agenda an understanding of AFNs that has not until now been explored for the remarkable context of Afghanistan.

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