

TERRA INSTITUTE'S ACTIVITIES: RURAL LAND IN AFGHANISTAN

Terra Institute based in Mt. Horeb, Wisconsin has embarked on a project with Asian Development Bank and British Government funding and in association with a Danish company, Scanagri, to help bring stability to rural land relations in Afghanistan.

The fall of the Taliban regime in late 2001 brought a new opportunity for Afghanistan to end years of conflict and embark on a comprehensive program of nation building and peaceful development.

Since about 70% of Afghan families live in rural areas, the development of the country requires that rural communities have a stable social environment free of coercive elements in which to work and one that will attract or motivate people to invest.

Over the past two decades, there has been a significant fall in the quality of life among a large section of the rural population with insecurity of land tenure is one of its basic causes. Conflicting claims to land have increased and so has the tendency to solve land disputes by force, falsified documents and other corrupt practices. All of these factors are creating social tensions which militate against efforts to promote national unity. There is an urgent need to agree on a land tenure regularization process which will be seen to be fair, free of coercive elements and which will provide solutions that the vast majority of the rural population can accept.

Rural land is extremely varied ecologically and socially. Villages in the arid climate of Afghanistan are generally located along rivers or near to other water sources. The limited amount of cultivated land with access to water is highly valued. At the same time, most of the land area of the country is not so well located, meaning that people have to use that land much less intensively, usually as pastures for sheep and goats. The darker green agricultural land in this photo contrast sharply with the surrounding arid hills and valleys at least partly used as pastures.



The areas of land used for pasture are so large and deficient in grasses, that individuals have not claimed them as private property. Rather, State agencies, communities, families, clans, and nomadic tribes have traditionally organized their use.

At the local level, families, clans, and tribes send their representatives to Village Councils, or *shuras*, to discuss who will have access to such lands during what months of the year.



In the past, the agreements reached in such meetings were verbal, but with the passage of time and with migrations of families, memories of past agreements fade and their effectiveness decline. Terra and Scanagri are working with an Afghan NGO, “Cooperation for the Reconstruction of Afghanistan” using satellite images in consultations with community *shuras* to delineate the boundaries of pastures and re-establish agreements about their use.

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