

Afghanistan: Pistachio, Not Poppy

Author: [IWPR](#)

New scheme aims to entice locals away from growing narcotics that help fuel insurgency.

Local authorities in the southern Afghan province of Helmand are hoping to provide local farmers with an alternative to growing poppy by rolling out a project to plant fruit and nut orchards.

Officials and farmers say that lucrative crops, especially the highly-valued pistachios, will help replace narcotics. Helmand province has long been Afghanistan's leading producer of drugs.

According to the provincial department of agriculture, irrigation and livestock, 150 pistachio orchards have been planted so far this year under a UN Alternative Development project. A further 400 orchards are planned.

Pistachios are particularly suited to Helmand's soil and hot, arid climate, and newly-planted saplings can be productive in three to four years.

The Alternative Development project is being implemented with the financial support of United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), and the technical assistance of Mercy Corps.

"We are confident that pistachio can replace narcotics because it has a high market price and a lot of pistachios can be produced from a small field," Helmand's agriculture director Ahmadshah Khairi said, explaining that half an acre could support between 60 and 80 pistachio saplings.

"There is no need to promote sales of pistachio because it already has market, both domestic and abroad, so the farmers can easily sell their crops as there's very high demand for them."

Khairi said that some local farmers had already received hands-on training on planting, field mapping and the design of pistachio orchards. They would also be supported with ongoing workshops on how to properly maintain their plots.

The department was also promoting the cultivation of other lucrative crops, he continued, with nearly 100 new fruit orchards planted under the auspices of the National Horticulture and Livestock Project (NHLP).

"As well as varieties of different, improved seeds, the department of agriculture is trying to develop orchards of pistachios, guavas, tangerines, and oranges," he said, noting that an area of two hectares in the capital Lashkar Gah had already been planted with citrus and guava to provide a source of saplings for elsewhere in the province.

The government of Afghanistan and its international allies have spent tens of millions of dollars in projects to encourage farmers to abandon poppy growing, although with limited success.

According to the UN, estimated annual opium production in Afghanistan reached a record high of some 9,000 metric tonnes in 2017.

Earlier this year UN officials, warning that the government's weakening grip on security in Helmand was hampering counter-narcotic efforts, noted that opium production had risen by 87 per cent from 2016.

This latest initiative is predicated on the hope that truly profitable fruit and nut orchards can provide a viable alternative to drugs.

"The farmers who cultivate narcotics give most of its benefits to powerful smugglers," said Omar Zwak, spokesman to Helmand's governor. "Instead, they should cultivate something that benefits them alone."

Zwak said that research had shown that Helmand had the perfect climate to support pistachio farming.

"The governor's office has stepped up its efforts to create more orchards in the coming years, and this will be very effective in the prevention of drug cultivation," he continued, calling on Kabul to invest further in agricultural projects for Helmand.

The provincial director of counter-narcotics, Sayed Ahmad Wror, said that it was his department that had come up with the idea, inspired by the efforts of a local farmer.

"A resident of Nadali district had created his own pistachio orchard, which was very successful. So we shared the idea with the capital Kabul and the UN. They then considered the initiative and released funding for such a project."

He said that although there were no exact statistics for the number of drug users in Helmand, he believed that based on figures from healthcare institutions there were around 100,000 addicts in the province. The fact that drugs were produced locally was a factor in the rate of addiction, he continued.

“When something is produced in large quantities, its cost decreases and access to it increases. These gardens will help reduce the cultivation of narcotics as well as providing employment opportunities. We hope the process will have positive results,” he said.

Security officials say that drug cultivation and smuggling has long been a key factor in the ongoing insurgency. The US military estimates the Taliban earns between 300 and 400 million dollars a year from drug production, including around 200 million dollars from heroin.

Helmand police press officer Mohammad Zaman Hamdard agreed, adding, “Narcotics are the insurgents’ biggest source of income. They benefit from it and buy weapons to then fight the government. If the farmers stop growing narcotics and find an alternative, this will have a great impact on the current war in Helmand.”

Civil society activist Abdulhaq Zwakman said that a counter-narcotics strategy based on force and punishment had little value.

“If the government wants to completely stop the cultivation of drugs, it should support the farmers by providing farming facilities such as crop-processing equipment and cold storage for fresh fruit, as well as find a market for their products both inside the country and abroad,” he continued, adding that pistachio farming was a perfect example of positive inducement.

Farmers participating in the scheme say that they are happy with its progress.

Mohammad has planted more than 5,000 pistachio seedlings in his plot on the border of Marjah and Nadali districts.

“Some of the pistachio seedlings were given to me by the department of agriculture, while others I obtained myself,” he said. “People now understand that pistachio trees grow well here, and also can produce a high income.”

“I have learned some farming techniques from the department of agriculture which has helped me,” Mohammad continued. “From time to time, I still receive consultations from this department.”

For many farmers, the decision whether to grow poppy or not comes down to their ability to how best make a living and support their families.

Abdul Muqem grows grapes in Nadali district and says that they have proved a more lucrative crop than poppy. Previously, he had grown poppy on four acres of land and sold his crop for 2,000 US dollars. Now, selling the grapes he grew on a one and-a-half acre plot had netted him 4,400 dollars.

“I didn’t cultivate narcotics this year because it was not that lucrative,” he said. “I will also plant grapes and other fruit trees on the remaining part of my land, because I know I can earn more from them than narcotics.”

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