



# SMALL WARS JOURNAL

---

smallwarsjournal.com

## Poppy is Not the Most Profitable Crop, It's the Only Crop

Allison Brown

If poppy were really the most profitable crop in Afghanistan, farmers would be growing it year-round. They're not, nor are they growing all that much of it outside 4 provinces in the south. How can this be if poppy is such an economic slam dunk?

It is no lie that poppy has advantages. Poppy fits a special niche in the agriculture calendar, the winter season when very few valuable crops can grow. The harvested opium gum is imperishable and easily transportable and it increases in value with age, serving as a home-grown, interest bearing bank account. And the opium can be used as a pain killer where there are no doctors. The disadvantages of poppy – that it is illegal, haram (forbidden), and a management nightmare – are overshadowed by farmers' need to survive. But the notion that opium is the most profitable crop is a myth.

Poppy is the most profitable crop when there is little else to sell. That is, growing poppy is the most profitable option for farmers who are too far from a marketplace, farmers who have no access to modern technologies and reliable farm supplies, and farmers who live where gangsters rule – a gun at your head is a compelling inducement to do most anything.

Poppy in southern Afghanistan is a winter-season monoculture and farmers are mere contract growers. The gangsters provide a full agriculture extension package – seeds, fertilizer, pesticides, labor management and immediate payment for the product at the farmgate. The rest of the year the Afghan government, with the help of international aid programs, struggles to promote other crops.

*What do the Afghans need if they to disrupt this system?*

*First*, local peace and personal security. Poppy cultivation is almost gone from areas where there is no fighting. But in the southern provinces, the area under government authority is small – sometimes not even as far as the city limits. Outside this small radius, chaos reigns. No one will farm or trade in perilous conditions, and there are no markets where brigands extort road-use fees, rob traders, and routinely scare the hell out of people.

*Second*, a focus on building a diversified agriculture base. Development programs have been promoting export crops such as pomegranate or raisins to build foreign exchange, but the vast majority of farmers cannot participate in these programs. These farmers need nearby markets for

small-volume high-value products such as milk, vegetables, flowers, medicinal plants, meat animals, skins, and wool.

*Third*, a focus on agriculture infrastructure such as check dams, small weirs, and roads. In some locations these will increase poppy production but these increases will be short-lived if diversified markets are developed.

*Fourth*, expansion of market infrastructure. Currently most farmers carry non-poppy products to a central market for sale. Using the example of development projects in Nepal, a system of collection points, holding sheds and organized market days can be developed fairly quickly along existing transport routes and impressive income increases seen within a few years.

*Fifth*, introduction of commercial crops that occupy the same land and the same labor force that support poppy. Today this is winter wheat and perennial orchards, but there are other crops that would grow and be profitable if the markets were functioning. For the most spectacular results these should be ultra-high value crops such as medicinal plants and out of season vegetables. Again, Nepal provides a model.

*Or better yet*, subsidize factories that pay weekly wages to absorb poppy workers. Who would choose stoop labor in distant poppy fields over comfortable conditions working alongside friends and family members? What does it matter, really, if there is nothing that the Afghans can make that anyone wants? Subsidizing make-work is cheaper monetarily and politically than fighting and over time builds a skilled workforce.

The biggest need is to stop developing Counter Narcotics programs with an eye towards headline grabbing instead of basing them on good agriculture science and on good commercial models.

*Allison Brown has over twenty-five years professional experience providing business development services to urban and rural development projects in developing economies. She is also a technical specialist on the use of agriculture and economic interventions in Counter Narcotics programs. Ms Brown in 2008 worked as the Counter Narcotics Advisor for the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock, Government of Afghanistan. In 2004-5 she was Team Leader of a worldwide impact evaluation of Alternative Development practices against drug crops for the UN Office on Drugs and Crime. Ms Brown served as a USAID staff officer in Sri Lanka from 1987-1990 the height of the civil war. She maintains links to several academic institutions and regularly publishes scholarly papers on small business development in specialty agriculture, especially farmers markets and small volume auctions. Ms Brown is a past Vice President of the American Society for Horticultural Science.*

This is a single article excerpt of material published in Small Wars Journal.  
Published by and COPYRIGHT © 2009, Small Wars Foundation.

Permission is granted to print single copies for personal, non-commercial use. Select non-commercial use is licensed via a Creative Commons BY-NC-SA 3.0 license and per our Terms of Use. We are in this together.



No FACTUAL STATEMENT should be relied upon without further investigation on your part sufficient to satisfy you in your independent judgment that it is true.

Contact: [comment@smallwarsjournal.com](mailto:comment@smallwarsjournal.com)

Visit [www.smallwarsjournal.com](http://www.smallwarsjournal.com)

Cover Price: Your call. [Support SWJ here.](#)