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Livelihoods and Sustainable Land Management in the Mountainous North of Afghanistan

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Abstract

Life in the mountainous North of Afghanistan is exceptionally harsh. In a context of high fragility, deep poverty and severe land degradation questions to do with food security and livelihoods figure very prominently. Experiences from different parts of the world show that sustainable land management (SLM) practices may constitute a promising way forward. This study investigates people's livelihoods in a case study area in Northern Afghanistan. Based on that, it identifies potentials and limitations for the implementation of SLM practices that were recently introduced by a development project (terracing, gully treatment, pasture rehabilitation, grazing plan etc.). For this purpose, a survey was conducted in three villages with 121 women and men farmers, complemented with 24 key informant interviews and 26 focus group discussions. The analysis focuses on peoples' perceptions and whether and how these differ by gender, age, socio-economic position and village context. Findings suggest that agriculture is an important but not the only livelihood activity of local people. Local off-farm activities such as craft, small-scale trade, gold washing, and agricultural wage labour as well as labour migration to other villages, districts or countries (i.e. Iran) also play a crucial role. Especially part of the young generation aspires to new livelihoods and to an urban life. Many people mentioned conflicts, physical and mental illnesses and disabilities, a lack of resources and debts as major challenges. In addition, external constraints such as insecurity, lack of employment opportunities and missing infrastructure, schooling and health services were mentioned. All of the above absorbs attention, work force and money and seems to have implications on the diffusion of the newly introduced SLM practices: while people appreciate the project interventions and observe positive results, spontaneous replication is low or even absent. Potential hindering factors mentioned by farmers regarding the practices include high establishment and maintenance costs, heavy workload, required skills and coordination efforts. From the current perspective, external support seems thus to be necessary for the implementation of SLM practices at a larger scale. The manifold needs and aspirations of local people moreover suggest that further issues within and beyond agriculture require utmost attention.

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