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STRATEGIC ANALYSIS OF AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT USING SWOT AND QSPM FRAMEWORKS: A CASE STUDY OF HERAT PROVINCE, AFGHANISTAN

Ahmad Fawad Entezari*, Shakila Mulavizadeh and Ramin Aryan Nazari

Department of Agricultural Economics and Extension, Faculty of Agriculture, Herat University, Afghanistan

ORCID iDs:	Ahmad Fawad Entezari	https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9680-2064
	Ramin Aryan Nazari	https://orcid.org/0009-0009-1422-050X

Abstract: For development initiatives to be effective and sustainable, an extensive strategic evaluation is essential, especially in sectors as important and complex as agriculture. This study analyses the agricultural sector in Herat Province, Afghanistan, a region with substantial agricultural potential that continues to face numerous challenges, using the SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) and quantitative strategic planning matrix (QSPM) frameworks. This research aims to identify and rank the most viable strategic choices for boosting agricultural growth. The Delphi technique and a questionnaire instrument were used to gather insights from experts in the field, with university lecturers representing a large spectrum, which was included in the research. The important findings of this research indicate that, among the four elements of the SWOT model, the most significant strength identified is the strategic position of Herat Province for the export of agricultural products. The most serious weakness is the lack of insurance services in the agricultural sector; the best opportunity is the utilisation of water from the Salma Dam for irrigating agricultural lands, and the most significant threat to agricultural development is the adverse impacts of insecurity. After evaluations, it has been observed that strengths and opportunities in this research are predominant. Therefore, utilising the strategic position and action evaluation (SPACE) matrix, the main strategy aligned with the designated aggressive position has been identified by merging strengths and opportunities. The findings will provide valuable insights for policymakers, development practitioners, and agricultural stakeholders seeking to unlock Herat's agricultural potential and contribute to Afghanistan's broader economic recovery.

Key words: strategic analysis, agricultural development, SWOT, QSPM, Herat, Afghanistan.

*Corresponding author: e-mail: fawad.entezari@gmail.com

Introduction

Agriculture is not merely a sector of Afghanistan's economy; it is the crucial lifeline that supports the majority of its population, especially in rural areas. It serves as the main source of livelihood for approximately 70% of the population and plays a significant role in the country's gross domestic product (GDP), contributing around 36% (World Bank Group, 2024). Beyond its economic importance, agriculture is deeply interwoven with Afghanistan's social structure, cultural heritage, and rural identity. For generations, Afghan communities have depended on agriculture for sustenance, employment, and social cohesion, shaping traditional practices, social structures, and cultural values. Despite its importance, the agricultural share of GDP from 2003 to 2023 shows a decreasing trend with marked fluctuations corresponding to the annual agricultural growth rate (Figure 1). Thus, understanding the dynamics and potential of Afghanistan's agricultural sector is essential for addressing food security, alleviating poverty, promoting economic growth, and enhancing social stability in the country.

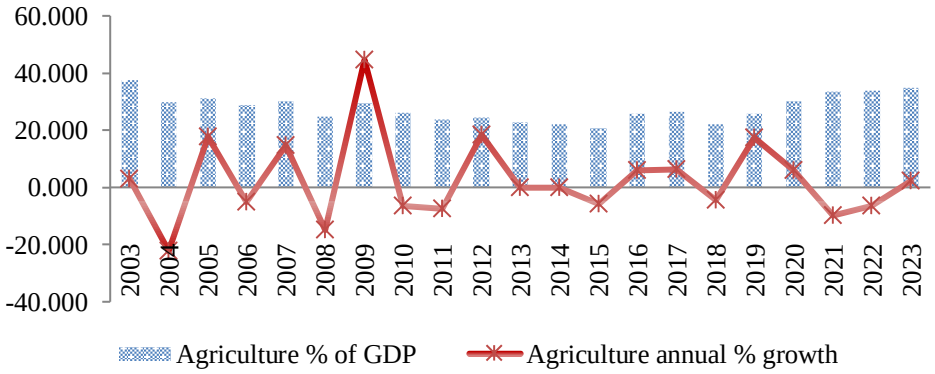


Figure 1. Afghanistan's share of agriculture in GDP (%) and agricultural GDP % growth, 2003-2023.
Source: World Bank's World Development Indicators (WDI), 2024.

Nevertheless, Afghanistan's agricultural sector has been severely hindered by a combination of factors, including decades of armed conflict, persistent droughts, limited access to irrigation and technology, inadequate infrastructure, and fluctuating market conditions. Prolonged conflict and instability have ravaged infrastructure, destroyed irrigation systems, disrupted agricultural production, displaced farming communities, and fostered an atmosphere of uncertainty that discourages investment and innovation (FAO, 2023). Climate change is

exacerbating these challenges, leading to more frequent and intense droughts, erratic rainfall patterns, and increased vulnerability to extreme weather events, which pose a significant threat to agriculture and livestock production. Figure 2 illustrates this issue by depicting the acute fluctuations in rainfall patterns and drastically increased CO_2 emissions (WDI, 2025). Moreover, inadequate access to essential resources, including modern technology, reliable irrigation systems, fertiliser, quality seeds, and access to credit, as well as the volatile market conditions, and limited access to market information, hinders Afghan farmers' ability to enhance their productivity and compete effectively in regional and global markets. These multifaceted challenges stress the immediate need for a strategic and targeted approach to unlock the untapped potential of Afghan agriculture.

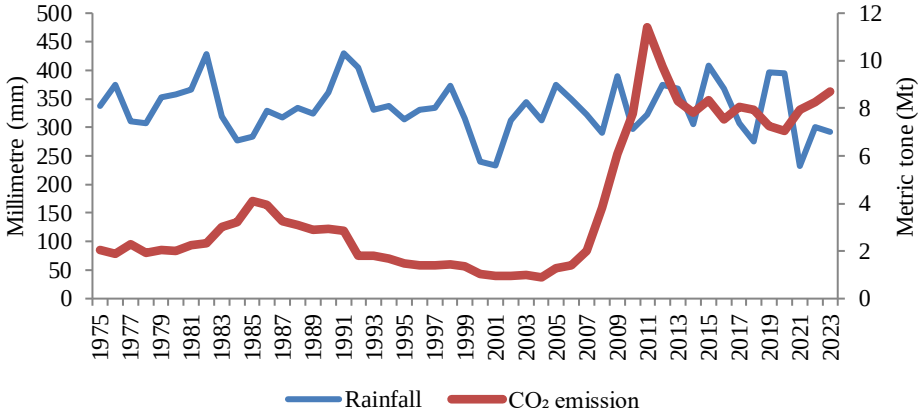


Figure 2. Afghanistan's carbon dioxide (CO_2) emissions and average rainfall (mm), 1975–2023.
Source: World Bank's Climate Change Knowledge Portal, 2024.

Within this complex and challenging national context, Herat Province stands out as a region of particular strategic importance with considerable agricultural potential. The province plays a vital role in Afghanistan's agricultural economy and has a long history of successful agricultural output, making it a significant contributor to trade and food security. As one of the most developed provinces, it is significant in the overall agricultural landscape. Its economic stability and agricultural viability ensure that it remains a trading point and a significant contributor to Afghanistan's overall GDP (Leslie, 2015). The province's strategic geographical location positions it as a key trading hub, linking Afghanistan with both regional and international markets. However, despite its inherent strengths, the province's agricultural sector still encounters various challenges, including

limited access to modern technology, water scarcity, soil degradation, and susceptibility to disruptions in cross-border trade, which require careful consideration (ADSP, 2019). Unlocking the agricultural potential of Herat requires a strategic approach that leverages its strengths, addresses its weaknesses, capitalises on emerging opportunities, and mitigates potential threats.

Despite the critical role of agriculture in Afghanistan's economy and the unique potential of Herat Province, there is a significant gap in the current literature concerning thorough strategic analyses of agricultural development in the area. Although numerous studies have addressed specific aspects of Afghan agriculture, including irrigation, crop production, or market access, very few have adopted a comprehensive strategic approach that examines the interaction of both internal and external factors influencing agricultural development. Furthermore, there is a scarcity of applications of established strategic planning frameworks, such as SWOT and QSPM, in analysing agricultural development in Afghanistan, resulting in a lack of evidence-based recommendations for policymakers and practitioners seeking to promote sustainable and inclusive agricultural growth.

To address this gap, the present study thoroughly examines agricultural development in Herat Province using the SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) framework alongside the quantitative strategic planning matrix (QSPM). The selection of the SWOT and QSPM frameworks is based on their suitability for a structured and systematic analysis of complex strategic issues (Fan et al., 2023; Ramaloo et al., 2018). According to Ramaloo et al. (2018), SWOT analysis provides a simple yet effective tool for systematically evaluating the internal and external factors essential to the success of an organisation or sector. This encourages a comprehensive approach that considers both positive and negative impacts that could influence strategic choices.

Attributed to Albert Humphrey and his colleagues at the Stanford Research Institute, SWOT analysis is designed to examine the internal resources and capabilities (strengths and weaknesses) as well as the external environment (opportunities and threats) that affect the entity under consideration (Benzaghta et al., 2021). By identifying internal and external factors that affect an organisation or sector, this analysis provides a qualitative foundation for strategic planning (Curry, 1996; Hill and Westbrook, 1997). According to Uztürk and Büyüközkan (2023), SWOT analysis, a key component of strategic management, offers a systematic and structured approach to assess the overall strategic position of the organisation or, in this case, the agricultural sector. In the context of agricultural development, this includes evaluating strengths such as fertile land and skilled labour; weaknesses including poor infrastructure, lack of modern agricultural mechanisation, and limited access to credit; opportunities such as natural resources and growing demand for food; and threats such as market instability, inflation, and climate change. Nevertheless, relying solely on SWOT analysis often results in insufficient

analytical rigour to prioritise these factors and assess alternative strategic options (Houben et al., 1999).

This limitation is addressed by the QSPM framework, which offers a quantitative method to assess and prioritise alternative strategies (Alizadeh et al., 2021). The QSPM is built on the SWOT analysis by assigning weights to identified factors according to their relative importance and then evaluating each strategy's attractiveness in light of these factors (Pazouki et al., 2017). The combined application of SWOT and QSPM provides a powerful and versatile approach to strategic planning in agricultural development. It uses SWOT's breadth and comprehensiveness to identify a wide range of relevant factors and then applies QSPM's rigour and objectivity to assess and prioritise alternative strategies. According to David (1986), this integration improves the quality of strategic decision-making and enhances the possibility of achieving desired results. The literature underscores that effective use of both frameworks requires stakeholder participation and a thorough contextual understanding.

SWOT analysis was first used in agriculture by Faesel and Hill (1995), and since then, many studies have employed SWOT analysis to guide the formulation of agricultural development plans at both national and regional levels, particularly in developing countries (Ali et al., 2021; Benzaghta et al., 2021; Brohi et al., 2020; GC and Ghimire, 2018; Kartika et al., 2024; Khan et al., 2022; Kurmanalina et al., 2020; Nosrati Nigjeh et al., 2023; Ommani, 2010; Ramaloo et al., 2018; Uztürk and Büyüközkan, 2023; Wegren et al., 2019). In addition to opportunities such as increasing production and exports, encouraging sustainable agricultural practices, and enhancing rural livelihoods, these analyses frequently highlight key constraints to agricultural development, for instance, inadequate infrastructure, limited access to credit, and lack of market information.

Numerous scholars have highlighted the application of SWOT and QSPM in developing comprehensive agricultural policies (Abbasi et al., 2019; Abdolshah et al., 2018; Feili et al., 2018; Herdiansyah and Majesty, 2024; Mohebbi et al., 2022; Nourbakhsh et al., 2023; Pazouki et al., 2017). These studies have used the SWOT analysis to indicate the strategic situation of the sector, while QSPM has been used to develop and rank sub-strategies. For instance, Abbasi et al. (2019) used the SWOT and QSPM matrices to formulate strategies for farm advisory services in Valencia, Spain. The findings show that the aggressive strategy was the best and that four sub-strategies were developed using QSPM for the farm advisory services.

Many scholars have applied SWOT analysis and QSPM in developing comprehensive agricultural policies (Abbasi et al., 2019; Abdolshah et al., 2018; Feili et al., 2018; Herdiansyah and Majesty, 2024; Mohebbi et al., 2022; Nourbakhsh et al., 2023; Pazouki et al., 2017). Most studies have used SWOT to pinpoint the sector's strategic position, whereas QSPM is applied to generate and rank sub-strategies.

In Afghanistan, few studies have analysed the strategic situation of the agriculture sector. Nikzad et al. (2023) assessed the agriculture sector in Afghanistan using SWOT analysis and identified a conservative strategy as crucial for agricultural development. In another study, Omar Ali et al. (2024) analysed strategies for developing the saffron value chain in Herat Province and found a conservative strategy as appropriate for the saffron value chain in the province.

Prior studies on strategic analysis have predominantly focused on either the national agricultural sector as a whole or on specific commodities, which do not accurately reflect the distinctive conditions prevalent in individual provinces or regions. This is particularly important, given the variations across provinces, such as ecological and climatic factors, marketing practices, infrastructure, and trade dynamics. Therefore, the present study examines the strategic situation of the agricultural sector in Herat Province, a major agricultural hub in Afghanistan. By focusing specifically on Herat, this research aims to provide insights tailored to the local context and to address the distinct challenges and opportunities faced by its agricultural sector.

Consequently, the general objective of this study is to analyse the agricultural development in the Herat Province of Afghanistan, using the SWOT and QSPM frameworks. Specifically, this study aims to: identify and prioritise the key internal strengths and weaknesses of the agricultural sector, identify and evaluate the significant external opportunities and threats impacting agricultural development, develop a comprehensive SWOT matrix for the agricultural sector, and prioritise strategic alternatives for agricultural development using the QSPM matrix, in Herat Province, Afghanistan.

Material and Methods

This study employed a mixed-methods single-case study approach, focusing on the agricultural sector in Herat Province, Afghanistan. The Province was selected due to its significant contribution to the national economy, its diverse range of agricultural practices, distinct challenges with market access and water scarcity, and its relative stability compared to other regions in Afghanistan, which facilitates data collection. Moreover, its historical significance as an agricultural hub, its variety of products such as industrial crops, cereals, fruits, and livestock, its representation of the challenges and opportunities faced by many rural communities in the country, and the existence of research networks that facilitate data access were also considered.

A purposive sampling approach was used to select a group of 70 experts. The selection criteria included proven experience in agriculture, a focus on the situation in Herat province, and representation of stakeholder groups within the sector. Thirty-four university lecturers specialising in the agriculture sector were selected

from Herat University and the Herat Agricultural Institute. The remaining 36 were senior officials, programme managers, and experienced agricultural and extension workers from the Herat Provincial Department of Agriculture, Irrigation, and Livestock (DAIL), operating in diverse districts of Herat Province. Their selection was based on their involvement in agricultural programme implementation and their understanding of local agricultural challenges and opportunities.

In this study, a mixed-methods strategy integrating the Delphi technique and a questionnaire survey was used to gather both qualitative and quantitative data. The Delphi technique was employed to gather and synthesise expert insights (Hsu and Sandford, 2007), whereas the questionnaire survey was used to validate these insights and assess the perceptions of a broader range of stakeholders. Therefore, this technique systematically compiles and integrates expert perspectives on the key SWOT factors impacting agricultural development in Herat Province, and determines consensus-driven weights for these factors that reflect their perceived relative importance. This process ensures that the strategic analysis is based on the knowledge and experience of local experts.

The SWOT analysis will provide a thorough evaluation of the internal strengths and weaknesses of the agricultural sector in Herat, as well as the external opportunities and threats that could impact its growth. This analysis will serve as a vital initial step in understanding the current state of agricultural development in Herat, providing a basis for evidence-based decision-making and targeted interventions. Subsequently, building on the SWOT findings, the QSPM will assess and rank strategic alternatives according to their relative attractiveness and feasibility, offering actionable recommendations for policymakers, development organisations, and stakeholders.

A structured three-round Delphi process was carried out, using face-to-face interviews and/or online surveys administered remotely through Google Form, to facilitate participation and alleviate logistical challenges (Yousuf, 2007). In the initial round, an open-ended questionnaire was distributed to the panel, asking them to identify the most critical internal factors (strengths and weaknesses) and external factors (opportunities and threats) influencing agricultural development in Herat Province. The questionnaire included prompts to consider factors associated with agricultural production, such as innovation systems, infrastructure, market access, sustainability indicators, and the policy environment. In the second round, participants received a consolidated summary of the responses from round one, categorised into distinct SWOT factors, that is, evaluation of external and internal factors (EFE and IFE). Using a four-point Likert scale, with 1 representing “not at all important” and 4 representing “extremely important”, they were asked to rank the significance of each factor. The third phase involved the selection of an appropriate strategy. For this purpose, the SPACE matrix was employed to determine the orientation and select appropriate strategies. The SPACE matrix reveals the contrast

between the final weighted scores of all internal and external factors (Abbasi et al., 2019; Radder and Louw, 1998). Depending on the combination and predominance of factors, there are four main types of possible strategies: conservative (strengths and threats), aggressive (opportunities and strengths), competitive (weaknesses and opportunities), and defensive (threats and weaknesses).

The Delphi data were used to identify and weight the essential SWOT factors (EFE and IFE), whereas the questionnaire data were used to validate these factors and evaluate stakeholder perceptions concerning their significance and the desirability of strategic alternatives. Descriptive statistics such as the mean, median, and interquartile range (IQR) were computed for each SWOT factor in each round of the Delphi process to monitor the convergence of expert opinions. However, content analysis was conducted on the open-ended responses and justifications submitted by the experts to obtain a deeper understanding of the reasoning behind their ratings and to identify any emerging themes or insights.

Based on the final list of SWOT factors identified through the Delphi process and validated by the questionnaire data, a comprehensive SWOT matrix was developed. Then, using SWOT analysis, a literature review, and input from experts, a set of strategic alternatives (in this case, four strategies from the aggressive typology) was generated. These options were designed to build strengths, reduce weaknesses, take advantage of opportunities, and address threats in Herat Province's agriculture sector (Pazouki et al., 2017). However, while producing such strategies is important, prioritising them is equally critical. Therefore, the QSPM matrix was employed to rank the strategic alternatives (David, 1986) using the internal and external feasibility factors (IEF and EFE, respectively) and their corresponding weights, which were derived from stakeholder preferences and expert opinions.

Eventually, in the QSPM matrix, strategies are ranked by multiplying each strategy's attractiveness coefficient by the weights assigned to the relevant factors. Each strategy's attractiveness is evaluated by comparing it with the others using these factors. The assessment scale generally ranges from 1 (not attractive) to 4 (very attractive). The total weighted attractiveness score is then calculated for each strategy. This total reflects the strategy's relative appeal, incorporating the effects of internal and external factors. Strategies with higher weighted attractiveness scores suggest greater strategy attractiveness (David et al., 2017; Feili et al., 2018).

Results and Discussion

The demographic characteristics of the respondents are presented in Table 1. The results indicate that the majority of participants are male, comprising 62 individuals who account for 86% of the sample. In contrast, females represent a significantly smaller portion with only 8 respondents (11.4%). This highlights a predominantly male sample. The age distribution shows that a significant portion of respondents are within the 18–35 age group, comprising 68.6%. The 35–50 age

group comprises 28.6%, while only 2 participants (2.9%) are over the age of 50. This indicates that the sample is primarily composed of young adults. Additionally, educational attainment among the respondents indicates that the largest educational category is those holding a bachelor's degree (55.7%), while 35.7% have a master's degree, and the smallest group (8.6%) consists of PhD holders. Overall, the majority of respondents possess higher education. Respondents held diverse positions within their respective fields; nearly half of the participants (48.6%) are university educators. The remaining respondents include office workers (18.6%), experts (15.7%), and managers (17.1%).

Table 1. The socio-demographic characteristics of study participants.

Factors	Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	62	88.6
	Female	8	11.4
Age	18–35	48	68.6
	35–50	20	28.6
	>50	2	2.9
Education	Bachelor's degree	39	55.7
	Master's degree	25	35.7
	PhD	6	8.6
Position	University teacher	34	48.6
	Office worker	13	18.6
	Expert	11	15.7
	Manager	12	17.1

Source: Authors' calculations.

In the SWOT analysis, internal factors, which encompass strengths and weaknesses, constitute elements that can be controlled and influenced. In the internal factor evaluation (IFE) matrix within the framework of the SWOT analysis, seven strengths and twenty weaknesses have been identified for the agricultural sector of Herat (Table 2). Strengths are positive internal attributes that contribute to effective performance. The strategic location of Herat Province was identified as the most significant strength, with a weight score of 0.138, indicating Herat's importance for Afghanistan's agricultural export activities. The availability of adequate and suitable agricultural land and diverse ecological and climatic conditions for the province's agricultural production ranked second and third, respectively, further reinforcing its status as an important agricultural region within Afghanistan.

Table 2. Internal factor evaluation (IFE) of the agriculture sector.

	Internal factors	Weighted score	Mean AS	Weight	Rank
	Strengths of the agriculture sector				
S5	The strategic position of Herat Province for exporting of agricultural production	0.040	3.443	0.138	1
S3	The existence of suitable agricultural land for sustainable agricultural production	0.038	3.214	0.121	2
S1	Suitable ecological and climatic diversity for agricultural activities in Herat Province	0.037	3.129	0.115	3
S2	Access to the agricultural labour for substantial agricultural production in agricultural and rural areas	0.036	3.057	0.109	4
S6	The existence of conditions and potential for developing greenhouse crops in order to reduce water consumption	0.035	3.000	0.105	5
S4	The existence of vast and diverse areas of agricultural and horticultural production in Herat Province	0.034	2.900	0.098	6
S7	Availability of agricultural specialists in Herat Province	0.033	2.786	0.091	7
	Sum total of strengths	0.252		0.777	
	Weaknesses of the agriculture sector				
W17	Absence of insurance services in the agriculture sector	0.042	3.557	0.148	1
W3	Waste of water resources due to traditional irrigation	0.040	3.414	0.136	2
W20	Lack of farmers' access to storage facilities, such as cold storage, silos, and warehouses	0.040	3.400	0.135	3
W5	Lack of standard markets and problems with roads connecting villages to cities	0.039	3.371	0.133	4
W12	Traditional methods of packaging, preserving, and storing agricultural products, and weaknesses in the marketing of agricultural products	0.039	3.371	0.133	5
W4	Lack of agriculture mechanisation and low income of farmers	0.039	3.357	0.132	6
W13	Lack of proper infrastructure for transporting agricultural products outside Herat Province	0.039	3.314	0.128	7
W9	Inappropriate selection of suitable products for climatic and geographical conditions due to the lack of knowledge among farmers	0.038	3.271	0.125	8
W11	Poor knowledge levels among farmers in the agriculture sector	0.038	3.257	0.124	9
W8	Traditional agricultural production methods due to the prevalence of a subsistence and conservative economy among households in rural areas	0.038	3.243	0.123	10
W1	High agricultural waste due to inappropriate modern agricultural production methods	0.037	3.200	0.120	11

Table 2. Continuation.

	Internal factors Strengths of the agriculture sector	Weighted score	Mean AS	Weight	Rank
W10	Lack of coherence in the production-to-consumption chain of agricultural products in Herat Province	0.037	3.171	0.118	12
W6	Insufficient suitable job opportunities for the people in the rural areas due to the gradual destruction of the agriculture sector	0.036	3.114	0.113	13
W14	Weak relationship between the agriculture and industrial sectors in Herat Province	0.036	3.129	0.113	14
W15	Lack of directional and agricultural extension mechanisms for the annual planting programme	0.036	3.086	0.111	15
W2	Inadequate agricultural productivity	0.036	3.085	0.111	16
W18	Low export value of agricultural products	0.035	2.971	0.103	17
W16	Insufficient scientific, research, extension, and study facilities for the growth and development of the agrarian sector	0.035	2.957	0.102	18
W19	Low agricultural productivity relative to the amount of water consumption in this sector	0.034	2.914	0.099	19
W7	The tendency of the agriculture sector to produce irrigated and horticultural products	0.033	2.857	0.095	20
	Sum total of weaknesses	0.748		2.403	
	The sum total of strengths and weaknesses	1.000		3.181	

Note: S = strength, W = weakness, and Mean AS = mean of attractiveness score.
Source: Authors' calculations.

On the other hand, weaknesses are internal factors or attributes that impede the performance of an organisation or project, thereby placing it at a competitive disadvantage. With the highest weight score of 0.148, the absence of insurance services in Herat's agricultural sector has been identified as the key weakness, highlighting the detrimental impact of inadequate insurance coverage on the growth of agriculture in Herat Province. Moreover, the ineffective management of water resources, stemming from traditional irrigation methods, was assessed as the second most critical weakness. This is a common situation in developing nations and is mostly caused by inadequate infrastructure and the underuse of contemporary agricultural knowledge. The third major weakness was found to be the lack of storage facilities, such as warehouses, silos, and cold storage.

The cumulative weight for strengths was calculated as 0.777, while the total weight for weaknesses was 2.403. The overall IFE score of 3.181 exceeds the neutral benchmark of 2.5, indicating the predominance of strengths over weaknesses. It also indicates that, despite the key internal weaknesses that significantly hinder development, the agriculture sector in Herat has a net favourable internal position, and its high-value strengths offer a strong basis for national economic growth and

export. Thus, addressing these weaknesses will allow the province to leverage its strengths more effectively and improve sector performance.

In the context of the external evaluation factor (EEF) matrix, ten opportunities and eleven threats encompassing 21 external factors, were identified as influencing Herat's agricultural sector (Table 3). Opportunities, understood as favourable external conditions that can be leveraged to achieve positive outcomes, were analysed. With the highest weight score of 0.140, the Salma Dam's significance for irrigating agricultural fields was deemed the most important opportunity for agricultural development in Herat Province. Subsequently, the increasing demand for Herat's agricultural products as a result of population growth, with a weighted score of 0.129, ranked second, indicating a positive relationship between population increase and demand for agricultural outputs. Moreover, with a weight score of 0.105, hiring agriculture graduates from Herat University was ranked as the third most important opportunity, indicating the existence of a readily available pool of qualified experts who can actively contribute to improvements in the sector. Therefore, the examination of external potential for the agricultural sector in Herat Province suggests a path towards self-reliant and sustainable agricultural growth, prioritising internal resources and local skills. Herat Province can strengthen its agricultural sector and ensure long-term development by optimising the benefits of existing resources, investing in local talent, and strategically engaging with external markets.

On the other hand, threats, which represent external factors in SWOT analysis that impede goal achievement, were also evaluated. The analysis shows that, with the highest weight score of 0.207, insecurity poses a significant threat to agricultural development in Herat Province. This result highlights the vital role of security as a key indicator of social welfare and economic growth. Additionally, farmers' susceptibility to persistent inflation was identified as the second major threat (weighted score of 0.190).

However, temporal and spatial climatic adversities, land salinisation and desertification, and the exponential decline in soil fertility were deemed the three least significant threats to Herat's agricultural development. These results imply that government interventions should prioritise societal management, with particular emphasis on security improvement, price stabilization, and efficient market regulation.

According to Table 2, the total weight for the opportunities is calculated as 1.021, whereas the overall weight of the threats is 1.812. The total EFE score of 2.833 (> 2.5) indicates a predominance of opportunities over threats in Herat's agriculture sector. Furthermore, it indicates that, although external threats remain critical constraints, a favourable external environment for Herat's agricultural sector exists, with strong opportunities that can be leveraged for growth.

Table 3. External factor evaluation (EFE) of the agriculture sector.

	External factors	Weighted score	Mean AS	Weight	Rank
	Opportunities of the agriculture sector				
O10	Importance of the Salma Dam for the irrigation of agricultural land	0.049	2.857	0.140	1
O6	Increased demand for Herat agricultural products due to the population growth	0.047	2.743	0.129	2
O7	Hiring graduate agriculture students from Herat University in the agriculture sector	0.042	2.471	0.105	3
O2	Capacity to implement new projects and agricultural mechanisation to increase production and productivity	0.042	2.457	0.103	4
O9	Cooperation of agricultural organisations in the growth and development of the agriculture sector	0.042	2.443	0.102	5
O4	Ability to attract private sector investment with the participation of specialised companies	0.040	2.357	0.095	6
O3	Ability to accept foreign investment in planning and implementing support programmes for the farmers	0.040	2.314	0.092	7
O5	Access to international and regional agricultural markets	0.039	2.286	0.090	8
O1	Foreign investment for the development of processing, production and packaging industries for agricultural products	0.038	2.214	0.084	9
O8	Controlling and properly managing agricultural water and groundwater resources in Herat province	0.037	2.171	0.081	10
	Sum total of opportunities	0.417		1.021	
	Threats of the agriculture sector				
T10	The effects of insecurity on agricultural development	0.060	3.471	0.207	1
T7	Farmers' vulnerability to persistent inflation	0.057	3.329	0.190	2
T6	Lack of government attention and insufficient investment in the agricultural sector of Herat Province	0.056	3.257	0.182	3
T9	Severe fluctuations in the agricultural input market	0.056	3.257	0.182	4
T5	Drought and lack of precipitation (rain and snow)	0.055	3.186	0.174	5
T11	The effects of internal and external migration on the backwardness and regression of agriculture in Herat Province	0.053	3.114	0.166	6
T1	Insufficient water for agricultural irrigation in the Herat Province	0.051	3.000	0.154	7
T2	Gradual soil erosion and the destruction of remaining water due to the unprincipled development of agricultural land	0.051	3.000	0.154	8
T4	Temporal and spatial climatic adversities	0.049	2.829	0.137	9
T8	Land salinisation and desertification in Herat Province	0.048	2.814	0.136	10
T3	Exponential decline in soil fertility	0.047	2.743	0.129	11
	Sum total of threats	0.583		1.812	
	The sum total of opportunities and threats	1.000		2.833	

Note: O = opportunity, T = threat, and Mean AS = mean of attractiveness score.
Source: Authors' calculations.

The combined IFE (3.181) and EFE (2.833) scores, presented in Figure 3, indicate a favourable strategic position for Herat's agricultural sector. The strengths dominate the internal space, and opportunities have a higher share in the external space. This supports pursuing growth-oriented strategies to capitalise on opportunities, while simultaneously addressing priority weaknesses and threats to sustain long-term development. Therefore, prioritising security, and market stabilisation, followed by medium-term investments in infrastructure, insurance mechanisms, and human capital, will enable the province to capitalise on its strengths and opportunities for sustainable agricultural development.

In order to determine the strategic position of Herat's agricultural sector, the SPACE matrix, which shows the state of the internal and external factors (IEFs) in the SWOT matrix, is presented in Figure 3. The final weight of the internal-external matrix for Herat's agricultural sector shows the aggressive (developmental) strategy. Thus, this strategy demonstrates how to leverage the current strengths of the system to maximise the exploitation of environmental opportunities.

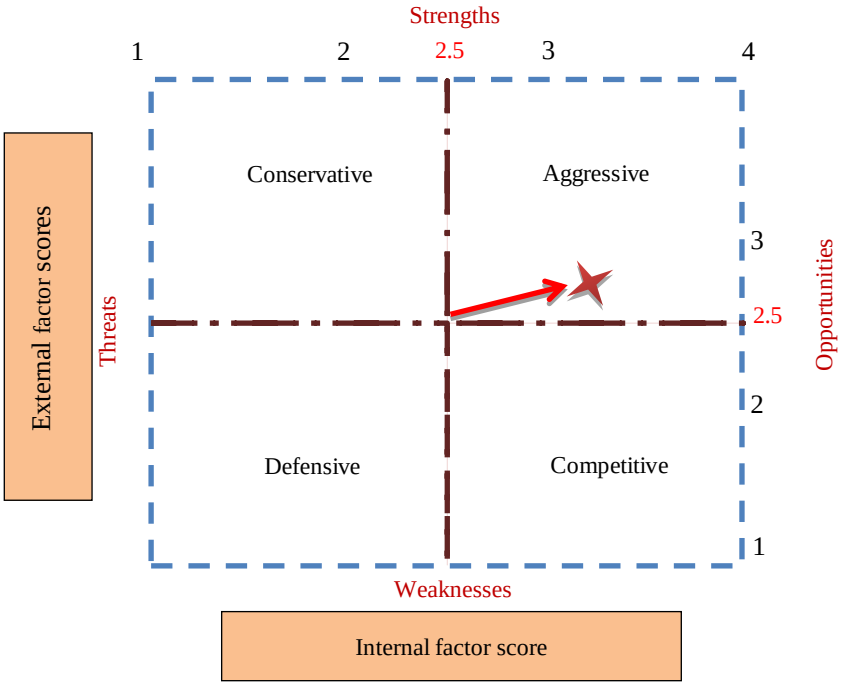


Figure 3. Strategic position and action evaluation (SPACE) matrix.
Source: Authors' compilation.

Following the SWOT analysis and the resulting development strategy for Herat's agricultural sector, Table 4 outlines specific sub-strategies developed by comparing key internal strengths with salient external opportunities.

Table 4. Aggressive strategies in the development of Herat's agricultural sector.

Symbol	SO Strategy	Time schedule
SO1	Develop and invest in transmission and water supply infrastructure by attracting international support in order to increase productivity and exports of agricultural products to potential export target markets.	Long-term
SO2	Mobilise local talent to facilitate the transfer of agricultural technical knowledge by deploying agricultural institution graduates into extension services, agribusiness start-ups, and applied research and development (R&D) for high-value crops and business skills.	Medium- and long-term
SO3	Establish blended finance windows, concessional finance, and targeted incentives to attract private investment into processing, storage infrastructure, and agricultural mechanisation.	Long-term
SO4	Develop the production of diverse organic products with natural quality by utilising all agricultural, livestock, and horticultural production capacities, in accordance with the climatic and ecological conditions of the region, to align crop selection and production with rising regional demand.	Medium-term

Note: SO = strength and opportunity (aggressive strategy).
Source: Authors' compilation.

In the final section of this study, the quantitative strategic planning matrix (QSPM) method, as detailed in the research methodology, is applied to prioritise the strategies identified for the aggressive strategy in the development of Herat's agricultural sector (Table 5). The results indicate that the third strategy, which is the establishment of blended finance windows and incentives to attract private investment into processing, storage infrastructure, and agricultural mechanisation, with a total weight score of 6.119, offers the greatest advantage for the province and has been given priority. This could be due to the lack of adequate processing facilities and modern storage, which prevents the province from adding value to its agricultural output and preserving perishable goods. Similarly, limited access to advanced mechanisation restricts overall productivity and efficiency. The proposed strategy of blended finance and incentives is designed to address these critical gaps by leveraging private sector expertise and capital. This approach is particularly relevant in Herat, given the potential for increased private sector engagement when suitable financial mechanisms and risk mitigation tools are in place.

Table 5. Quantitative strategic planning matrix (QSPM) of the Herat's agricultural development.

Factors	Weights	Strategy 1		Strategy 2		Strategy 3		Strategy 4	
		AS	TW	AS	TW	AS	TW	AS	TW
S1	0.037	1	0.037	1	0.037	2	0.073	3	0.110
S2	0.036	3	0.107	3	0.107	1	0.036	4	0.143
S3	0.038	2	0.075	2	0.075	2	0.075	2	0.075
S4	0.034	3	0.102	3	0.102	3	0.102	3	0.102
S5	0.040	4	0.161	4	0.161	4	0.161	4	0.161
S6	0.035	4	0.140	1	0.035	4	0.140	2	0.070
S7	0.033	3	0.098	4	0.130	4	0.130	2	0.065
Total strengths	0.252	20	0.720	18	0.647	20	0.717	20	0.726
W1	0.037	3	0.112	4	0.150	4	0.150	2	0.075
W2	0.036	4	0.144	4	0.144	4	0.144	4	0.144
W3	0.040	4	0.160	3	0.120	4	0.120	1	0.040
W4	0.039	2	0.078	3	0.118	4	0.118	3	0.118
W5	0.039	1	0.039	3	0.118	2	0.118	3	0.118
W6	0.036	2	0.073	3	0.109	4	0.109	3	0.109
W7	0.033	4	0.134	3	0.100	3	0.100	1	0.033
W8	0.038	1	0.038	3	0.114	4	0.114	3	0.114
W9	0.038	1	0.038	4	0.153	3	0.153	1	0.038
W10	0.037	1	0.037	3	0.111	3	0.111	2	0.074
W11	0.038	2	0.076	4	0.152	2	0.152	3	0.114
W12	0.039	1	0.039	3	0.118	4	0.118	2	0.079
W13	0.039	1	0.039	2	0.074	1	0.077	2	0.077
W14	0.036	1	0.037	4	0.146	3	0.146	2	0.073
W15	0.036	1	0.036	3	0.108	2	0.108	1	0.036
W16	0.035	3	0.104	4	0.138	3	0.138	2	0.069
W17	0.042	1	0.042	2	0.083	1	0.083	4	0.166
W18	0.035	3	0.104	3	0.104	4	0.104	4	0.139
W19	0.034	4	0.136	2	0.068	3	0.068	3	0.102
W20	0.040	1	0.040	2	0.079	4	0.079	2	0.079
Total weaknesses	0.748	41	1.811	62	2.310	62	2.312	48	1.800
O1	0.038	1	0.038	3	0.114	4	0.152	2	0.076
O2	0.042	4	0.168	3	0.126	4	0.168	1	0.042
O3	0.040	3	0.119	2	0.079	2	0.079	4	0.158
O4	0.040	2	0.081	1	0.040	4	0.162	3	0.121
O5	0.039	3	0.118	4	0.157	4	0.157	2	0.078
O6	0.047	4	0.188	3	0.141	4	0.188	2	0.094
O7	0.042	2	0.085	4	0.170	4	0.170	1	0.042
O8	0.037	4	0.149	3	0.112	4	0.149	2	0.074
O9	0.042	3	0.126	3	0.126	2	0.084	3	0.126
O10	0.049	4	0.196	2	0.098	2	0.098	1	0.049

Table 5. Continuation.

Total opportunities	0.417	30	1.267	28	1.163	34	1.406	21	0.858
T1	0.051	4	0.206	2	0.103	3	0.154	3	0.154
T2	0.051	4	0.206	3	0.154	4	0.206	4	0.206
T3	0.047	4	0.188	3	0.141	4	0.188	1	0.047
T4	0.049	4	0.194	2	0.097	3	0.146	4	0.194
T5	0.055	4	0.218	3	0.164	3	0.164	4	0.218
T6	0.056	2	0.112	3	0.168	3	0.168	4	0.224
T7	0.057	3	0.171	2	0.114	3	0.171	4	0.228
T8	0.048	4	0.193	3	0.145	2	0.097	4	0.193
T9	0.056	1	0.056	3	0.168	4	0.224	4	0.224
T10	0.060	1	0.060	3	0.179	1	0.060	3	0.179
T11	0.053	4	0.214	3	0.160	2	0.107	4	0.214
Total threats	0.583	35	1.817	30	1.592	32	1.683	39	2.080
Sum total		5.615		5.714		6.119		5.464	
Strategy prioritisation		3		2		1		4	

Note: S = strength, W = weakness, O = opportunity, T = threat, AS = attractiveness score, and TW = total weight.
Source: Authors' calculations.

By focusing on these foundational elements of the agricultural value chain, this strategy is poised to have a cascading positive effect on productivity, export capacity and, ultimately, the economic development of the province's agricultural sector. The second strategy, which is the mobilisation of local talent to transfer the agricultural technical knowledge for high-value crops and business skills, with a total weight score of 5.714, has been identified as the second most important advantage. This strategy stands out because it directly addresses the unique socio-economic fabric of the study area, leveraging the existing community trust and cultural familiarity of local farmers to ensure that agricultural techniques are adapted to the specific soil, climate, and cultural practices of the area. Moreover, this strategy is highly feasible because it relies on human capital that is already present and motivated. Thus, by embedding business skills and technical knowledge within the local population, the strategy fosters long-term sustainability. Following that, the first strategy, investment attraction to increase productivity and export of agricultural products to potential export target markets, with a total weight score of 5.615, has gained the third priority. This strategy directly addresses that bottleneck by attracting capital not just for expansion, but specifically for upgrading processing facilities and logistics to meet international export certifications. Unlike generic investment models, this approach targets the region's unique high-value crops that are currently under-utilised. By aligning investor interests with local agricultural strengths, the strategy ensures that foreign capital translates into tangible productivity gains rather than speculative ventures. Finally,

the last strategy with the total weighted score of 5.464 has obtained the lowest priority, indicating that increasing the productivity of diverse organic products by utilising all production capacities in accordance with the region's climatic and ecological conditions to fully meet demand offers fewer advantages for the development of Herat's agricultural sector.

Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive strategic evaluation of the agricultural sector in Herat Province, Afghanistan, to delineate viable pathways for sustainable development. To achieve this, the Delphi technique and a questionnaire were used to identify the key strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats that shape the agricultural landscape in the region. Using SWOT analysis, the key internal and external factors were ranked, and suitable strategies were identified. Subsequently, the SPACE matrix was applied to determine the strategic position of the sector. Finally, employing the QSPM framework, the research systematically identified and ranked viable strategic options aimed at enhancing agricultural growth in the region. The findings highlight that Herat's strategic geographical position for exporting agricultural products stands out as its paramount strength, while the lack of insurance services emerges as a critical weakness. Furthermore, leveraging the Salma Dam for irrigation is highlighted as a key opportunity, juxtaposed with the threats posed by insecurity.

With strengths and opportunities demonstrably dominant, this research advocates an aggressive (SO) strategy that capitalises on the identified strengths and opportunities, thereby positioning Herat's agricultural sector for transformative growth. The prioritised sub-strategies, namely, utilising production capacities, enhancing agricultural literacy, effective water management, and investing in agricultural infrastructure are crucial steps towards sustainable development in the sector and provide valuable insights for policymakers, development practitioners, and agricultural stakeholders.

In conclusion, the findings of this study indicate that strategically targeted investment in agro-processing facilities, logistics infrastructure, and high-value agricultural commodities can advance the agricultural sector. By addressing major structural challenges, including inadequate processing capacity, weak supply-chain networks, and limited market access, such investments can significantly improve agricultural productivity and value addition. Moreover, strengthening agro-processing and logistics systems strengthens producers' capacity to meet domestic and international market requirements, thereby creating greater opportunities for export expansion and increased agricultural revenues.

The findings also underscore the importance of aligning investment initiatives with the region's inherent comparative advantages in high-value agricultural

production. This approach promotes the efficient use of financial resources while supporting the development of integrated and competitive agricultural value chains. As productivity and export performance improve, the agricultural sector can generate broader socio-economic benefits, including employment creation, income growth and better livelihoods for rural communities.

Overall, the research underscores that investment-led agricultural development represents a viable approach toward achieving sustainable sectoral growth. By modernising agricultural systems, strengthening value-chain linkages, and enhancing market competitiveness, this strategy can contribute substantially to long-term agricultural sustainability and broader economic development. Therefore, policymakers, development practitioners, and private-sector stakeholders should prioritise investment frameworks that support infrastructure development, technological advancement, and market integration to fully realise the potential of the agricultural sector.

A notable limitation of this study was its reliance on expert opinions gathered through the Delphi technique and questionnaires. While valuable, this method can be susceptible to participant biases and may not fully capture the diverse, on-the-ground realities of the agricultural sector. For future research, it would be beneficial to incorporate a wider range of data collection methods, such as field surveys with farmers and local communities, to triangulate findings and gain a more comprehensive understanding. Expanding the scope to include other Afghan provinces could also provide a broader national perspective.

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STRATEŠKA ANALIZA RAZVOJA POLJOPRIVREDE PRIMENOM SWOT ANALIZE I QSPM MATRICE: STUDIJA SLUČAJA PROVINCIJE HERAT, AVGANISTAN

Ahmad Fawad Entezari*, Shakila Mulavizadeh i Ramin Aryan Nazari

Department of Agricultural Economics and Extension, Faculty of Agriculture, Herat University, Afghanistan

R e z i m e

Da bi razvojne inicijative bile efikasne i održive, neophodna je sveobuhvatna strateška analiza, naročito u sektorima od posebnog značaja i složenosti, kao što je poljoprivreda. U ovom radu analiziran je sektor poljoprivrede u provinciji Herat u Avganistanu, koji predstavlja područje sa značajnim poljoprivrednim potencijalom, ali i brojnim izazovima, primenom SWOT analize (engl. *Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats*) i QSPM matrice (engl. *Quantitative Strategic Planning Matrix*). Cilj istraživanja bio je da se identifikuju i rangiraju najperspektivnije strateške opcije za razvoj poljoprivrede. Za prikupljanje mišljenja stručnjaka korišćeni su anketni upitnik i Delfi tehnika, pri čemu su značajan deo ispitanika činili univerzitetski nastavnici. Rezultati istraživanja pokazali su da je najznačajnija identifikovana snaga, među elementima SWOT analize, strateški položaj provincije Herat za izvoz poljoprivrednih proizvoda. Kao najizraženija slabost izdvojen je nedostatak usluga osiguranja u poljoprivredi, najznačajnija prilika je korišćenje vode iz brane Salma za navodnjavanje poljoprivrednog zemljišta, dok najveću pretnju razvoju poljoprivrede predstavljaju posledice nesigurnosti. Nakon sprovedene evaluacije utvrđeno je da snage i prilike imaju dominantan uticaj. Stoga je primenom SPACE matrice (engl. *Strategic Position and Action Evaluation*) identifikovana agresivna strategija razvoja zasnovana na povezivanju snaga i prilika. Dobijeni rezultati pružaju korisne smernice kreatorima politika, stručnjacima za razvoj i drugim akterima u poljoprivredi koji nastoje da iskoriste poljoprivredni potencijal provincije Herat i doprinesu širem ekonomskom oporavku Avganistana.

Ključne reči: strateška analiza, razvoj poljoprivrede, SWOT, QSPM, Herat, Avganistan.

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*Autor za kontakt: e-mail: fawad.entezari@gmail.com