

Protecting the Most Vulnerable: Humanitarian Needs in Afghanistan

A Paper for the 2014 London Conference on Afghanistan

Afghanaid



Executive Summary

Afghanistan is in the grip of a humanitarian crisis, with millions of Afghans in need of assistance.

The country's political, security and economic transitions this year are threatening to reverse hard-won gains in basic development. It is critical that the Government of Afghanistan and its international partners—including donors, UN agencies, and NGOs—commit to protecting and improving the lives of all Afghans.

To ensure that Afghanistan can meet its goals under the Tokyo Mutual Accountability Framework, the Government and its partners should prioritise: 1) responding and developing resilience to emergencies, and 2) promoting poverty-reduction and basic development, particularly among vulnerable groups.

Introduction

More than three decades of armed conflict in Afghanistan have contributed to the destruction of Afghanistan's economy, infrastructure and basic services, especially in rural areas, where 70 percent of the population lives.¹ Around 667,000 Afghans are displaced by ongoing conflict and Afghanistan's frequent environmental disasters—131,000 of them have been displaced in the past year alone.² Vulnerable groups, including displaced people, women, children and young people, suffer disproportionately from conflict and disaster-related shocks, poor access to basic services, and lack of job and education opportunities.



A girl washes her hands before heading to a community-based class in Kabul. Photo: The IRC

In the Tokyo Mutual Accountability Framework, the Government and its international partners recognised that addressing emergency and chronic needs was critical for achieving sustained progress for all Afghans.³ Two years later, the Government and its partners have made some progress in addressing these challenges—but safety and basic development remain out of reach for many Afghans.

The London Conference on Afghanistan is an important opportunity for the Government of Afghanistan to commit to protecting and improving the lives of its most vulnerable citizens. It also offers a chance for international partners to reaffirm their commitment to the people of Afghanistan.

The Situation in Afghanistan

Gains made at the community level

Afghans have seen real improvements in recent years. School enrolment in Afghanistan jumped from one to eight million between 2002 and 2013.⁴ The average life expectancy increased from 42 to 49 years.⁵ Maternal mortality dropped from 1,600 deaths per 100,000 births in 2001 to 327 deaths in 2010.⁶ Afghans now have better access to safe drinking water.⁷

Much of this success has been achieved through community-based programming. Through these programmes, Afghans have helped to design and carry out activities that meet their needs through interventions better adapted to local realities. Key examples of successful partnerships between donors, the Government, aid agencies and communities are the National Solidarity Programme,⁸ the Basic Package of Health Services (BPHS)⁹ and community-based education programmes.¹⁰ Many communities, through Community Development Councils established under the National Solidarity Programme,¹¹ have developed a real sense of ownership over development programmes. They are now able to successfully advocate independently for funding and are establishing associations and resources to maintain their hard-won gains.

An ongoing humanitarian emergency

These hard-won gains, however, are fragile. Ongoing conflict, natural disasters and large-scale displacement are undermining the progress that has been made in Afghanistan, and much of Afghanistan remains in the grip of a humanitarian emergency. At the beginning of this year, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs estimated that nine million Afghans would need humanitarian assistance in 2014, out of a population of only around 30 million people.¹² There are indications that the humanitarian situation this year is even worse than predicted. A recent national nutrition survey, for example, pointed to high levels of child malnutrition—one in ten Afghan children under the age of five is acutely malnourished.¹³

Afghanistan is prone to a range of recurrent environmental disasters—earthquakes, avalanches, drought and flooding.¹⁴ Droughts and floods are especially severe in northern provinces as a result of geography and environmental degradation. This year's floods were devastating, affecting 150,000 people.¹⁵

Additionally, violent conflict amidst security and political transitions has taken a heavy toll on Afghans. Civilian casualties have risen again this year, up 24 percent from the same period in 2013; the highest levels since 2001.¹⁶ Conflict continues to disrupt already limited health services and prevent civilians from safely reaching markets and schools.

The conflict and violence also impacts the communities' access to assistance. Afghanistan continues to record the highest numbers of dead, injured and abducted humanitarian workers globally.¹⁷ The practical impact on humanitarian assistance is that aid workers sometimes cannot work where they are needed most.

Despite the large scale of ongoing emergencies in Afghanistan, international support for the humanitarian response is declining. This year the UN lowered its humanitarian appeal by 14 percent despite acknowledging a worsening humanitarian situation, recognising that donors were not likely to provide adequate funding for a larger appeal. Even more concerning, the appeal remains only 55 percent funded. The United States, by far Afghanistan's biggest donor, has slashed its total assistance to Afghanistan (including non-humanitarian funding) from \$4 billion in 2010 to \$2 billion this year, with most of the funding for large-scale development projects rather than community-based development or humanitarian assistance.¹⁸ Despite the deteriorating situation the European Commission's Directorate-General for Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection (ECHO) cut its budget this year.¹⁹

Chronic need

Afghanistan's decades of conflict and frequent natural disasters have created chronic problems as well as dynamic, new ones. Despite significant improvements in recent years, Afghanistan remains one of the least developed countries in the world. Afghans are highly dependent on agriculture, but

irrigated land is scarce, leaving many Afghans without access to productive farmland.²⁰ Eight million Afghans are food insecure, meaning they have a calorie intake that is insufficient to sustain a healthy and active life; a further 2.2 million are very severely food insecure.²¹ More than a third of Afghans live below the poverty line, with high rates of under- and unemployment.²² Poverty is significantly worse among Afghans living in rural areas.²³ Although the number of girls enrolled in school has significantly increased in the last few years, approximately 60 percent of them remain out of school.²⁴ Fewer than a third of all Afghans are literate, with only 17 percent of women able to read and write.²⁵ There are not enough schools, especially in rural areas, where only 43 percent of households have access to a boys' primary school and 36 percent to a girls' school.²⁶

The security transition of 2014 is threatening to slow Afghanistan's development further. After years of growth, Afghanistan's economy has hit a downturn. With the exit of international forces, tens of thousands of jobs are leaving the country.²⁷ Job competition can be expected to increase dramatically as a rapidly growing young population also tries to join the labour market.

Afghans lack adequate access to basic services, particularly in rural areas. There is just one doctor, nurse or midwife on average for every 10,000 Afghans. Access to health services remains even more challenging in the provinces and districts where it is needed most.²⁸

In recent years, aid agencies, donors and the Government have improved their ability to coordinate in responding to these long-term crises. However, without a comprehensive plan to coordinate humanitarian and development programming, aid providers still cannot ensure that local people are getting the lifesaving and life-building assistance they need.

Vulnerable groups affected by emergencies and chronic poverty

Displaced people, women, children and young people suffer disproportionately from emergencies and chronic poverty in Afghanistan. Over 30 years of conflict and recurrent natural disasters have created one of the world's largest protracted displacement crises, with 667,000 Afghans displaced inside the country. As conflict between Afghan security forces and non-state armed groups has increased, so too have levels of forced displacement.²⁹ Millions of Afghans remain refugees in neighbouring Iran and Pakistan. While 5.8 million Afghans have voluntarily returned to Afghanistan from other countries since 2002,³⁰ this has presented huge challenges for Afghanistan's absorption capacity and hampered development efforts.³¹

Eastern Afghanistan is currently coping with an influx of refugees from Pakistan. As a result of recent conflict in North Waziristan, more than 95,000 people have fled to the Afghan province of Khost and another 17,000 to neighbouring Paktika province.³² Most of these refugees are living alongside local families, putting strain on the limited resources of host communities.

Within Afghanistan's fragile context, internally displaced people (IDPs) and returnees are doubly disadvantaged, experiencing both the challenges affecting the entire country and the acute issues that accompany migration including: limited access to land to settle, safe drinking water, basic sanitation, shelter, land for grazing, basic services, and job opportunities.³³ This is particularly true for those who may have been displaced multiple times.



Canal-lining project Nangarhar province, National Solidarity Program. Photo: The IRC

In addition, many returnees have become secondarily displaced upon return due to insecurity, disaster and lack of services and opportunity, adding to the humanitarian caseload. Poor conditions in settlements and reintegration sites often force returnees to go back to Pakistan or Iran or to migrate to Afghan urban areas, where they typically have poor infrastructure, lack access to drinking water, healthcare and other basic services and have few opportunities to support themselves.³⁴ This places even greater pressure on already stretched resources in the cities and contributes to rising urban poverty and unemployment. Nearly 40 percent of IDPs live in overcrowded poor quality shelters or shacks, are at risk of eviction and frequently lack access to basic services.³⁵

Women, girls and young people are also particularly vulnerable to crises and poverty. Sixty-three percent of the population of Afghanistan is under the age of 24.³⁶ The labour market and education system do not have the capacity to absorb so many young people.³⁷ This increases the risk of young people adopting negative coping strategies such as turning to crime, drugs and gangs within urban settings.³⁸ Across Afghanistan, women and girls face disproportionate protection risks like sexual exploitation, early marriage and domestic violence—and are limited in their ability to work or obtain education, a situation that is compounded if they are displaced.³⁹ Almost two in five women cannot find enough work, and families of female-headed households are worse off than those with men.⁴⁰ Among displaced Afghans, women and children face enormous risks. Only one out of 100 female heads of households or spouses in IDP households is literate.⁴¹ Children from displaced families “are often forced into child labour to support their families, preventing them from attending school and putting them at risk of child recruitment” into armed groups.⁴²

What the Government and International Partners Can Do

The Government of Afghanistan is coping with the result of three decades of conflict and frequent environmental disasters. It needs the continued assistance of international donors and other partners to respond to such an immense and multi-dimensional crisis. With support from the international community, the Government also needs to focus its resources on protecting and empowering the most vulnerable Afghans.

Prioritise humanitarian response needs and community resilience

More resources are needed to provide life-saving interventions in communities affected by conflict and disaster. International donors should ensure that the UN appeal for Afghanistan is fully funded. In some areas, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) will be best placed to carry out emergency response; donors and the UN should ensure that they have access to pooled funding and any additional resources needed to scale up services. Partners can also continue to help the Government develop its own capacity to manage emergency response. With sustained donor support, the Government should invest in strong capacity development for the Afghanistan Natural Disaster Management Authority (ANDMA).

The Government of Afghanistan and its partners should be ready to respond to emergencies in all areas of Afghanistan, including those affected by conflict. This will require engagement with all parties to the conflict, at all levels, to negotiate humanitarian access. International donors should not compromise the impartiality of aid agencies who are working in conflict-affected areas, for example through partner vetting requirements. These vetting requirements can create additional and significant security risks for staff. Donors should also support context-appropriate monitoring mechanisms.

The Government of Afghanistan and donors should also take steps to strengthen the coping mechanisms of Afghan communities in the face of recurrent conflict and environmental disaster, particularly in the North where communities are vulnerable to chronic drought and flooding. While not all disasters are preventable, Afghans can become more able to cope with their effects. The international community and Government of Afghanistan should invest in disaster risk reduction, natural resource management, emergency preparedness, livelihood support and social protection to help them better withstand these shocks.

As the Government continues to build capacity, international donors should also support NGOs that can help fill gaps and reach vulnerable communities in hard-to-reach areas of the country.

Tackle poverty and promote basic development, particularly among vulnerable groups

The Government and its international partners should tackle the underlying causes of chronic need in Afghanistan, combating poverty and promoting basic development. They should continue to invest in community-based programmes that have improved Afghans' access to healthcare, education and

livelihood opportunities. These efforts should target vulnerable groups, including women and girls and young people.

The Government has adopted a National IDP Policy, which is intended to reinforce the Government's responsibility to prevent situations leading to displacement and support efforts to mitigate and resolve its adverse effects.⁴³ With the support of international partners, the National IDP Policy now needs to be implemented and resourced.

With sustainable reintegration prospects for refugee returnees remaining weak, the Government needs to give greater attention to coordinating with regional governments and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR), a regional response framework between Pakistan, Iran, Afghanistan and the UNHCR, outlines necessary community-based humanitarian and development interventions to better support returnees in achieving sustainable reintegration. In addition to funding the Government-prioritised projects identified in the Afghanistan project portfolio of the SSAR, international partners also need to help Pakistan and Iran shoulder some of the burden of hosting refugees by supporting projects targeting Afghan refugees and host communities. International governments also need to expand their resettlement quota providing asylum and resettlement for the most vulnerable Afghan refugees and demonstrating solidarity with countries hosting large numbers of them.

To promote basic development among displaced people, the Government and its partners should work to improve their access to basic services like water and sanitation. It should work with partners to increase and diversify livelihood opportunities for the most vulnerable displaced people and host community members, particularly women and girls. It should also support community-based protection mechanisms for the most vulnerable displaced people, returnees and host community members.

Recommendations

To the Government of Afghanistan:

- Develop a National Implementation Plan to realise the National IDP Policy, and ensure that all levels of government understand the IDP Policy's requirements for assisting and protecting IDPs.
- Scale up the capacity of the Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation to lead national efforts in support of implementing the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees.
- Improve inter-ministry coordination to ensure that sustainable return and reintegration of IDPs and refugee returnees is a central objective and mainstreamed into all existing and new national development plans and programmes.
- Take proactive measures to review and amend current land and housing policies to facilitate conditions for the local integration of IDPs and reintegration of refugee returnees by guaranteeing their right to adequate housing and security of tenure.
- Invest in the development, expansion and long term sustainability of national disaster management capabilities at central and local levels.
- Safeguard humanitarian principles and guarantee access by affected populations to humanitarian assistance.

To International Partners:

- Fully fund the UN humanitarian appeal for Afghanistan and ensure that NGOs can access pooled funding. Immediately scale up emergency assistance to correspond with increasing needs in Afghanistan, particularly in hard-to-reach areas.
- Invest in programmes to promote resilience to man-made and environmental disaster: disaster risk reduction, emergency preparedness, livelihood support, social protection and natural resource management.
- Invest in community-based programmes that improve basic services, support protection mechanisms, and increase Afghans' access to healthcare, education and job opportunities.

Ensure that these programmes target vulnerable groups like women and girls and the displaced, and that they focus on areas of high return for displaced people.

- Provide technical assistance to the Government of Afghanistan to support effective implementation of the National IDP Policy and mobilise resources to fund all partners to the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees.
- Support programming that is context sensitive, eliminating partner vetting requirements and incorporating flexibility in project monitoring.
- Support NGOs that can help fill gaps and reach vulnerable communities in all areas of the country as the Government builds capacity.
- Provide asylum and resettlement for the most vulnerable Afghan refugees.

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¹ "Environment and Energy," UNDP Afghanistan, last accessed September 10, 2014, <http://www.undp.org.af/WhatWeDo/ee.htm>.

² United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [hereinafter OCHA], 30 *Afghanistan Humanitarian Bulletin*, Issue 30, 5 (July 31, 2014). This figure is widely accepted to underreport the true scale of internal displacement, however, as it does not include data from large swathes of the country which are not accessible.

³ Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Ministry of Finance, Tokyo Mutual Accountability Framework, Senior Officials Meeting Joint Report, para 6. (July 3, 2013).

⁴ "An Afghan community comes together to ensure girls' education," UNICEF, last modified October 8, 2013, http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/afghanistan_70611.html.

⁵ Brookings Institution, *Afghanistan Index* (2014), 23; OCHA, 2014 *Humanitarian Needs Overview: Afghanistan* 3 (2013).

⁶ Afghan Public Health Institute et al., *Afghanistan Mortality Survey 2010* 128 (2011); "Afghan Government highlights progress made in maternal health and girls education," United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, March 5, 2013, <http://unama.unmissions.org/Default.aspx?ctl=Details&tabid=12254&mid=15756&ItemID=36518>.

⁷ Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Center Statistics Organization [hereinafter CSO], *National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment 2011-12: Afghanistan Living Conditions Survey xvii* (2014).

⁸ The National Solidarity Programme has increased access to basic utilities and livelihood opportunities and increased male acceptance of female participation in public life. See Andrew Beath et al., *Randomized Impact Evaluation of Afghanistan's National Solidarity Programme* xi (2013); InterAction, *Investing in a Decade of Transformation: Statement for the Tokyo Conference on Afghanistan* (2012); "IDA at Work: Afghanistan, Promoting Community-based Development," World Bank, last modified July 2009, <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/EXTABOUTUS/0,,contentMDK:21296643~menuPK:4752068~pagePK:51236175~piPK:K:437394~theSitePK:73154,00.html>.

⁹ The Basic Package for Health Services has resulted in dramatic improvements in healthcare by, for example, increasing the number of locally trained midwives. See Transitional Islamic Government of Afghanistan Ministry of Health, *A Basic Package of Health Services For Afghanistan* 45 (2003); "Better Access to Health Care Saves Lives," World Bank, last modified February 28, 2013, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2013/02/28/afghanistan-better-access-to-health-care-saves-lives>.

¹⁰ Community-based education (CBE) has been shown to increase educational opportunities for girls and provide children with more opportunities to enroll in the formal school system in the future. See "Project profile: BEACON: Increasing Access to Quality Basic Education," Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development Canada, last modified March 13, 2014, <http://www.acdi-cida.gc.ca/cidaweb%5Ccpo.nsf/projEn/A035398001>; Department for International Development, *DFID Afghanistan One-Year Update on Agreed and Partially-Agreed Recommendations from 2013 IDC Report 8* (2014); Dana Burde and Leigh L. Linden, "Bringing Education to Afghan Girls: A Randomized Controlled Trial of Village-Based Schools," 5 *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics* 27 (2013); "A Community Approach to Schooling in Afghanistan," Canada's Engagement in Afghanistan, last modified March 31, 2011, http://www.afghanistan.gc.ca/cana-da-afghanistan/stories-reportages/2011_02_22b.aspx?lang=eng..

¹¹ The government, NGOs, and donors work together through the NSP to establish Community Development Councils in rural Afghanistan. These CDCs are based on Afghan traditions of grassroots governance, CDCs identify the needs in the community and work with partners – mostly international or national NGOs – to carry out development projects. By late 2013, the NSP had established 32,000 CDCs across 361 districts in all of Afghanistan's 34 provinces. "NSP Basic Introduction," Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development, last modified September 23, 2013, <http://www.nspafghanistan.org/default.aspx?sel=109>.

¹² Including 5.4 million in urgent need of access to health services. 2.2 million Afghans were estimated to be severely food insecure, and 1.5 million in need of protection from violence and other forms of abuse. OCHA, 2014 *Humanitarian Needs Overview: Afghanistan*, supra note 5, at 1.

¹³ OCHA, *Afghanistan Humanitarian Bulletin*, supra note 2, at 1.

¹⁴ OCHA, Press Release, "Afghanistan: Great need for disaster preparedness and risk reduction," May 5, 2014, <http://www.unocha.org/top-stories/all-stories/afghanistan-great-need-disaster-preparedness-and-risk-reduction>.

¹⁵ European Commission, Press Release, "EU steps up humanitarian aid to victims of displacement and floods in Afghanistan and Pakistan," August 13, 2014, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-14-928_en.htm.

¹⁶ OCHA, *Afghanistan Common Humanitarian Action Plan Mid-Year Review* (2013), 1. Norwegian Refugee Council/Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre [hereinafter NRC/IDMC], *Global Overview 2014: people internally displaced by conflict and violence – Afghanistan*, May 14, 2014, <http://www.refworld.org/publisher,IDMC,ANNUALREPORT,AFG,5374748fd,0.html>.

¹⁷ OCHA, Press Release, "Danger levels spike for aid workers: increasing numbers killed, kidnapped or injured," August 19, 2014, http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/WHD_20140820_EN_doc.pdf.

¹⁸ For total United States Government foreign assistance to Afghanistan, see "Afghanistan," ForeignAssistance.Gov, http://www.foreignassistance.gov/web/OU.aspx?OID=166&FY=2014&AgencyID=0&budTab=tab_Bud_Planned#ObjAnchor, last accessed September 4, 2014. Humanitarian assistance is \$162 million as of June 27, 2014 for Fiscal Year 2014. USAID, "Fact Sheet #3, Fiscal Year (FY) 2014," *Afghanistan – Complex Emergency*, 1 (July 27, 2014).

¹⁹ "As humanitarian space shrinks, IDP policy must be implemented," Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, June 19, 2014, <http://www.internal-displacement.org/south-and-south-east-asia/afghanistan/2014/as-humanitarian-space-shrinks-idp-policy-must-be-implemented>.

²⁰ CSO, *supra* note 7, at xvii.

²¹ OCHA, *2014 Humanitarian Needs Overview: Afghanistan*, *supra* note 5, at 1. A very severely food insecure person has a diet of less than 1,500 Kcal per day. *Id.* at 17.

²² CSO, *supra* note 7, at xix, xvii.

²³ *Id.* at xix.

²⁴ "Afghanistan: Basic Education," Education System Profiles, UNESCO Bangkok, last accessed September 9, 2014, <http://www.unescobkk.org/education/resources/resources/education-system-profiles/afghanistan/basic-education/>.

²⁵ CSO, *supra* note 7, at iii.

²⁶ *Id.* at iii.

²⁷ Khaled Koser, "Afghanistan 2014: Preparing for the humanitarian transition," *Up Front*, August 28, 2013, <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/up-front/posts/2013/08/28-afghanistan-humanitarian-koser>; International Organisation for Migration, *Transition, Crisis and Mobility in Afghanistan: Rhetoric and Reality* 15 (2014).

²⁸ OCHA, *2014 Humanitarian Needs Overview: Afghanistan*, *supra* note 5, at 11. See also Médecins Sans Frontières, *Between Rhetoric and Reality: The Ongoing Struggle to Access Healthcare in Afghanistan* (2014).

²⁹ Susanne Schmeidl, "Heeding the Warning Signs: Further Displacement Predicted for Afghanistan," 46 *Forced Migration Review* 41 (2014).

³⁰ As a result of the increasingly unpredictable security situation, fewer refugees have returned to Afghanistan recently. Fewer than 39,000 Afghans returned from Pakistan and Iran in 2013, a 59 percent decrease from 2012. UNHCR, *VolRep and Border Monitoring Monthly Update* 1 (December 2013).

³¹ Schmeidl, *supra* note 29, at 42.

³² International Rescue Committee, Press Release, "Thousands of new Pakistani refugees in Afghanistan are desperate for shelter and clean water," July 29, 2014, <http://www.rescue.org/blog/thousands-new-pakistani-refugees-afghanistan-are-desperate-shelter-and-clean-water>.

³³ See Paula Kantor and Adam Pain, "Running Out of Options: Tracing Rural Afghan Livelihoods," Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit Synthesis Paper Series (2011).

³⁴ Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, *supra* note 19.

³⁵ NRC/IDMC, *supra* note 16.

³⁶ Samuel Hall Consulting et al., "Afghanistan's Future in Transition: A Participatory Assessment of the Afghan Youth" 7, 11 (2013).

³⁷ CSO, *supra* note 7, at xvii.

³⁸ Civil Military Fusion Center (CIMIC), *The Youth Bulge in Afghanistan: Challenges and Opportunities* (2011).

³⁹ Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, *supra* note 19.

⁴⁰ CSO, *supra* note 7, at xviii.

⁴¹ World Bank & United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Research Study on IDPs in Urban Settings - Afghanistan* 7 (2011).

⁴² Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, *supra* note 19.

⁴³ See Laurie S Wiseberg, "An IDP Policy for Afghanistan: from Draft to Reality," 46 *Forced Migration Review* 10 (2014).