

Chronic Poverty Advisory Network

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Vulnerability in Afghanistan
before and during the shift in power

Working paper

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Acronyms

AWMS	Afghanistan Welfare Monitoring Survey
BPHS	Basic Public Health System
CPAN	Chronic Poverty Advisory Network
DFID	Department for International Development
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office
GNI	Gross National Income
HRW	Human Rights Watch
HSMP	Humanitarian Situation Monitoring Pilot
IE&LFS	Income, Expenditure, and Labour Force Survey
IPC	Integrated Phase Classification
KI	Key informant
LDC	Least Developed Countries
MEL	Monitoring and Evaluation Learning
MOLSAMD	Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs Martyr and Disabled
MPI	Multidimensional Poverty Index
MRGI	Minority Right Group International
NFE	Nonfarm enterprise
NSIA	National Statistics and Information Authority
OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
PLSA	Pre-Lean Season Assessment
UNDESA	United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNFPA	United National Population Fund
UNODC	United National Office for Drug Control
WB	World Bank
WDI	World Development Indicator
WHO	World Health Organization
WoAA	Whole of Afghanistan Assessment

Executive Summary

Afghanistan is experiencing contemporaneous crises including drought, floods, COVID-19, insecurity, political and economic crises, and displacement, all of which pose serious risks (Figure 1). This layering of crises heightens the probability of welfare loss, which has worsened since the transition of power, and the subsequent suspension of development aid. Though there has been an emergency response from the international community, the scale of macro-level challenges is considerable, and in turn may also compound vulnerabilities at the micro level for population subgroups, such as people in or near poverty, as well as certain groups like women and girls, persons with disabilities, and displaced populations. Though poverty is not synonymous with vulnerability, it is one of the factors that can heighten vulnerability. This brings up the question that if a large share or majority of the population is vulnerable, what is the value in identifying vulnerable groups? Are there degrees of vulnerability, or intersections of contexts and characteristics that may limit resilience capacities and amplify vulnerability that need to be considered?

This paper identifies vulnerable groups in Afghanistan and examines how they can be supported through humanitarian and wider assistance provided by the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO). It synthesises a range of quantitative and qualitative data sources from 2019 to 2022, spanning multiple household and settlement survey datasets and qualitative in-depth interviews with households and key informants to understand risks and resilience factors that could contribute to vulnerability reduction. This is complemented with a rapid literature review of vulnerability in Afghanistan based on journal articles and grey literature primarily over the last decade to offer a longer-term perspective. The study was commissioned by the FCDO's South Asia Research Hub to better understand who is most vulnerable in Afghanistan and how can they be supported through humanitarian and wider assistance provided by FCDO, especially since the August 2021 shift in power. Key findings of the analysis are presented below.

Identification, drivers and characteristics of vulnerability

Most Afghans were living either in or near extreme poverty in 2019/20, and some estimates even suggest that as much as 97% of the population could be in extreme poverty during 2022. Income decline into 2022 has primarily resulted from reduced employment opportunities and armed conflict. According to an International Labour Organization report, by end of January 2022, more than half a million people have lost their jobs and this number was estimated to reach 900,000 by mid-2022.¹ Alongside this, Integrated Phase Classification profiles point to 19.7 million people who faced high levels of acute food insecurity between March and May 2022 as a result of the pandemic, contracted gross domestic product and the wider economic crisis, drought, and high prices of food, fuel and fertiliser linked to the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

Factors that have guarded against poverty and welfare loss in Afghanistan based on analysis of 2019/20 survey data include higher asset value (e.g., of refrigerators, computers, tractors, cars, mobile phones, and other consumer assets), livestock, and electricity (for those who had access). The role of agriculture and non-farm enterprises in relation to poverty status is mixed, reflecting the risks as well as rewards associated with these occupations, particularly in the context of drought and the precarity of wage labour during the pandemic, respectively. Even so, the imperative of agriculture including for subsistence emerges from the qualitative data.

At the same time, extreme and food poverty were not the only features of poverty or vulnerability more broadly. There is a moderate correlation between multidimensional and monetary poverty, reflecting key deprivations that further compound vulnerability. For

¹ United Nation News, "Afghanistan: 500,000 Jobs Lost Since Taliban Takeover", <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/01/1110052>, 19 January 2022 (accessed 16 August 2022).

example, a range of barriers to human asset development was identified, including in education (linked to cost considerations, the need for labour, far distances from home, Taliban restrictions affecting older girls, and the absence of female teachers) and health (high cost of services and medicines which additionally put strain on the quality of existing health services, distance, and insufficient female medical staff). The prevalence of these barriers is particularly pronounced amongst groups facing intersecting inequalities, such as girls in poor households and in Kuchi areas, and women with lower levels of education. There is also historic marginalisation along religion, ethnicity, and other identity lines that continue to persist.

The vulnerability of the population is exacerbated due to economic, environmental and political shocks and stressors. Even pre-pandemic, economic shocks over the past decades have been a consistent feature of Afghanistan’s history. In recent years, the scaling back of troops and aid reduced revenue and also had major economic consequences. Then, into 2022, shocks related to food price, income, and employment were frequently reported. During the COVID-19 pandemic, these shocks were also typically associated with a higher probability of poverty, welfare loss and hunger. Aggravating the situation is a history of political fragmentation and, more recently, the shift in power which has heightened people’s vulnerabilities even further. Alongside this, some argue that the legacy of international aid has largely favoured technocratic solutions, with limited consideration of political dynamics and informal institutions. This operates, however, in a hugely challenging context, where needs are high and funding targets are not met, which means that donors face a lot of trade-offs and difficult decisions about the allocation of limited resources. The collective result has been limited impacts of aid on the welfare of Afghans.

Coping with vulnerability

Indeed, over the last 2 decades, there have been wide-ranging institutional constraints affecting vulnerability reduction (Figure 1). More recently, during COVID-19, the impact of implemented programmes have largely yet to be identified (also largely true for past programmes, where evidence is limited to specific public goods interventions). Constraints such as inadequacy of coverage or assistance value to fully meet needs at scale, and fragmentation between programmes, continue. This situation does not appear to have improved into early 2022. In the absence of effective institutional support, households are sometimes driven to erosive forms of coping. Since the political transition, this has included borrowing money for food, decreasing spending on health and education, and selling assets and spending savings. In this process, they render themselves less able to deal with future shocks. Moreover, many households were unable to rely on social capital, which several qualitative respondents felt had dried up during the pandemic when whole communities were affected by economic crises. Alongside limited economic opportunities more generally, this has contributed to a context of hopelessness, where people know what can improve their wellbeing but do not have the resources or support to implement these strategies.

Figure 1: Risks and Protective Institutions to Support Vulnerability Reduction



Targeting and monitoring vulnerable groups

What can be done in this context? Systems that provide basic human needs, especially around food security and livelihood support, should be strengthened as a priority. There is immense value in asking vulnerable groups what their priority needs are to enable identification of systems to improve, rehabilitate, or construct. Given that most of the Afghan population is 'vulnerable', some donors target through identification of the ultra-poor or those who face the most severe forms of hunger, followed by identity-based characteristics. Amidst widespread insecurity, renewed attention to addressing governance constraints is critical to ensure the sustainability of programme interventions.

Without explicit targeting of the furthest behind, interventions may not reach those most in need. People with intersecting inequalities may experience some of the most severe forms of vulnerability. People living in remote or hard-to-reach areas or the poorest regions, women, child labourers, minorities (religious, ethnic, and identity-related), people with disabilities, widows and women-headed households, and internally displaced persons and returnees all require attention. Across these groups, responses to vulnerability could also be more effectively disaggregated by targeting downward mobility across the system, and, in this process, distinguishing gradations of vulnerability. However, even where explicit targeting does occur, there may be wrongful exclusion, which can be overcome by real-time learning and adaptation. Account also needs to be taken of informal systems such as *Zakat*, *Khums* and *Usher* which are widespread and not necessarily exclusionary, and which could be built on.

Promisingly, a range of quantitative data is being collected by various actors in Afghanistan, which could benefit from stronger coordination to make use of synergies and limit duplication. This should extend to the humanitarian-development nexus, between international institutions, within development strategies, and bringing in local organisations and decision-makers more consistently to bridge capacity. In this process, there should be a focus on a mixed methods Monitoring and Evaluation Learning framework with real-time adaptation to respond to rapidly changing contexts. Most of this has been a challenge over the last decade and a familiar refrain. Even so, meaningful collaboration with local stakeholders (from government ministries to non-state actors) and between formal and informal institutions remains key to developing contextually relevant responses over the short to long term and supporting people's resilience in ways that can sustainably address the root causes of vulnerability.

1. Introduction

Afghanistan has experienced a range of shocks and stressors, such as insecurity and high displacement,² climate risks,³ growth volatility, emergency levels of food insecurity, and the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴ This has all occurred since 2020, though many of the stressors were in place for years and decades prior. The situation has been exacerbated following the political transition in August 2021 resulting in Taliban control of the country, the subsequent suspension of development aid, closure of the formal banking system due to sanctions and freezing of country's financial assets, compounding stark gaps in the provision of basic services. By the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) 2022 estimate, 97% of the population is estimated to be poor. Even if this high rate of poverty does not fully materialise, the situation remains that a large share of the population is either in poverty or near the poverty line. In this context, there is a huge international responsibility to act in ways that enhance the overall situation of the people, especially the most vulnerable groups and in a manner that minimises any disruption of useful sources of the resilience that people already have (such as education, diversified livelihoods, social networks) through their households, communities, and systems.

Already, there has been an emergency response from the international community. This includes exceptions to the relevant sanctions regimes and legislations re-enabling the delivery of aid. However, this is against a backdrop of a history of poor performance of aid interventions,⁵ which continues to challenge vulnerability reduction. Table 1 gives examples of the type and area of response by different organisations in Afghanistan post-August 2021. There are also the World Bank and Asian Development Bank Trust Funds, with a particular focus on basic service delivery. In addition, the United Kingdom (UK) co-hosted a high-level pledging summit at the United Nations (UN), alongside Germany and Qatar that helped raised \$2.4 billion toward the UN's Afghanistan appeal of £4.4 billion. Ahead of the summit, the Foreign Secretary announced the UK's additional pledge of £286 million of humanitarian aid to Afghanistan.⁶

Table 1: Examples of a Few Donors and Projects Providing Assistance, 2022

Organisation	Project
International Rescue Committee	Health, Water and Sanitation & informal learning
Islamic Relief	Humanitarian Crises Response
Norwegian Refugee Council	Education, Livelihood and Food Security, WASH and Shelter
Care International	Humanitarian Emergency Response, Agriculture, Food security, Development Aid Assistance
Action Aid Afghanistan	Emergency Response and Resilience, Livelihood
UNICEF	Education, Health, Child Protection,

² UNHCR, 2021. UNHCR Regional Bureau For Asia And Pacific (Rbap) Flash External Update: Afghanistan Situation #4 As Of 01 September 2021. <https://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/Afghanistan%20Situation%20Emergency%20Update%201%20September%202021.pdf>;

³ World Bank. (2021). *Afghanistan: Risk and Resilience Assessment*. The World Bank Group.; OCHA. 2018. Afghanistan Drought 2018-2019. <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/disaster/dr-2018-000052-afg> (accessed 19.01.2022);

IFRC, 2021. Afghanistan: Worst Drought and Hunger Crisis in Decades. <https://www.ifrc.org/press-release/afghanistan-worst-drought-and-hunger-crisis-decades> (20.02.2022)

⁴ UNDP. (2021a). *Policy Brief: The Afghani Banking and Financial System Situation Report*. New York: UNDP. <https://www.undp.org/afghanistan/publications/policy-brief-afghan-banking-and-financial-system-situation-report> (21.03.22)

⁵ J. Allouche, et al. *Needs and Vulnerability in Afghanistan*. (Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, 2022).

⁶ FCDO. (2022, March 30). UK pledges £286 million of lifesaving aid for Afghanistan. Press release. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-pledges-286-million-of-lifesaving-aid-for-afghanistan> (23.03.22)

WFP	Emergency Response, Resilience Building, Nutrition and Food system
WHO	Health service, capacity building, Higher Education, Health Emergency Response, Food security and WASH
Save the Children	Livelihood, Emergency Response
Relief Web International	Agriculture, Humanitarian Response, Food and Nutrition
IOM	Migration Management, Crisis Response
UNDP	Provision of essential services, community livelihoods, Disaster and climate resilient critical infrastructure Manages Special Trust Fund Afghanistan (STFA)

WFP = World Food Programme, UNICEF = United Nations International Children’s Fund, WHO = World health Organization, IOM = International Organization for Migration, UNDP = United Nations Development Programme. Note: The data in this table were obtained from key informant interviews (KIIs) and from official websites of the mentioned organisations. It is meant to provide examples of the types of support rather than a comprehensive overview of actors and projects.

Source: Authors.

Despite the action, the scale of need and macro-level challenges is considerable, and, in turn, may also compound vulnerabilities at the micro level for population subgroups, such as people in or near poverty, as well as certain groups like women and girls, persons with disabilities, and displaced populations. Though poverty is not synonymous with vulnerability, it is one of the factors that can heighten it. This brings up the question that if everyone is vulnerable, what is the value in identifying vulnerable groups? Are there degrees of vulnerability, or intersections of contexts and characteristics that need to be considered, which may limit resilience capacities that may be relevant in the context of Afghanistan, or that may amplify vulnerability?

This paper identifies vulnerable groups in Afghanistan and examines how they can be supported through humanitarian and wider assistance provided by the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO). It asks:

- Identification, drivers and characteristics: Who are the most vulnerable population groups in Afghanistan? What are the drivers, characteristics (risk and protective factors), and context of that vulnerability? How do those who are most vulnerable attempt to protect themselves from destitution or harm, through for example individual resilience capacities, social relationships, institutional support, and other sources of resilience?
- Change over time: How has vulnerability changed (if it has) since the political transition in August 2021?
- Targeting and monitoring: How can vulnerable groups be targeted by humanitarian and development assistance? How can we monitor and collect data on the vulnerable groups?

To answer these questions, the paper relies on secondary literature on vulnerability in Afghanistan primarily over the last 5-10 years, alongside new mixed methods analysis of a range of data sources from 2019 to 2022.

Section 2 next presents the conceptual framing of vulnerability used in this paper. Section 3 summarises the mixed methods approach and data sources underlying this analysis. Section 4 then presents study results, examining the monetary and multidimensional factors constraining and enabling vulnerability reduction, which is analytically embedded in the economic, environmental, and political and aid context that continues to affect the vulnerability of the Afghan population. Section 5 then assesses implications of the analysis for targeting and monitoring vulnerable groups. Section 6 concludes.

2. Conceptual Framing: Structural Vulnerability in Afghanistan

Vulnerability has a range of definitions, which makes its applications varied. At its core, however, it generally refers to the susceptibility to be harmed.⁷ Early definitions of the term equated it with a set of “complex characteristics produced by a combination of factors derived especially (but not entirely) from class, gender and ethnicity” (pp14-19),⁸ which affects the distribution of resources and power in society.⁹ Today, there is more consistent recognition that vulnerability is embedded in complex social relations and processes, which draws attention to its temporal dimensions. Indeed, many view vulnerability as a forward-looking concept.¹⁰ In these definitions of vulnerability, there is recognition that it encompasses complexity, dynamism, and the intersection of identity factors but also wider shocks and stressors.

Vulnerability theory is adapted as a lens through which our analysis is framed.¹¹ The theory views vulnerability as a universal constant, “an essential and inexorable aspect of the human condition”.¹² Once this is recognized, the task is then to “explore the strategies by which we can mitigate this vulnerability... The inequality of resilience is at the heart of vulnerability theory because it turns attention to society and social institutions. No one is born resilient. Rather, resilience is produced within and through institutions and relationships that confer privilege and power”.¹³ Vulnerability theory would thus prioritise the institutions (formal and informal) over identity categories in explaining its drivers.

In a context like Afghanistan where most people are estimated to live in poverty this year, and in recognition of poverty (monetary and multidimensional- see Box 1 for definitions) as one of the factors that can heighten vulnerability, we accept Fineman’s view of humans as inherently vulnerable. This moves us away from solely identity-based vulnerable groups to instead ensure that services and institutions more broadly develop in inclusive ways that can furthermore support social relationships and informal structures already in place. In our analysis, we thus draw attention to society and (formal and informal) institutions that affect the resilience capacities of individuals and social groups in ways that can mitigate vulnerability. At the same time, this does not mean forgoing consideration of unequal resilience capacities for specific groups and their social underpinning. Instead, we merge vulnerability theory’s focus on (formal and informal) institutions with a focus on intersecting inequalities.¹⁴ We do so in order to draw attention to experiences of unequal resilience capacities and multiple levels from systems down to the individuals that constrain transformational change.

Box 1: Definitions of Vulnerability, Poverty and Resilience Used in this Analysis

⁷ Adger, W.N., 1999. Social vulnerability to climate change and extremes in coastal Vietnam. *World Development* 27, 249-269.

⁸ Cannon, T. (1993), “A hazard need not a disaster make: vulnerability and the causes of ‘natural’ disasters”, in Merriman, P.A. and Browitt, C.W.A. (Eds), *Natural Disasters: Protecting Vulnerable Communities*, Thomas Telford, London, pp. 92-105.

⁹ Cardona, D.O. (2003) *The Need for Rethinking the Concepts of Vulnerability and Risk from a Holistic Perspective: A Necessary Review and Criticism for Effective Risk Management*. In: *Mapping Vulnerability: Disasters, Development and People*, Earthscan, London, 254.

¹⁰ Benson, C. (2004). Macro-economic concepts of vulnerability: dynamics, complexity and public policy. In G. Bankoff, G. Frerks and D. Hilhorst (Eds.) *Mapping Vulnerability*. New York: Routledge.

¹¹ Fineman, M. A. (2008). The vulnerable subject: anchoring equality in the human condition. *Yale Journal of Law & Feminism* 20(1).

¹² Fineman, M. A. (2021). What vulnerability theory is and is not. Emory Scholar blogs.

[https://scholarblogs.emory.edu/vulnerability/2021/02/01/is-and-is-not/#:~:text=Vulnerability%20theory%20recognizes%20that%20the,sexuality%2C%20disability%2C%20and%20class.\(25.04.22\)](https://scholarblogs.emory.edu/vulnerability/2021/02/01/is-and-is-not/#:~:text=Vulnerability%20theory%20recognizes%20that%20the,sexuality%2C%20disability%2C%20and%20class.(25.04.22))

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Kuran, C. H. A., Morsut, C., Kruke, B. I., Krüger, M., Segnestam, L., Orru, K., Nævestad, T. O., Airola, M., Keränen, J., Gabel, F., Hansson, S., & Torpan, S. (2020). Vulnerability and vulnerable groups from an intersectionality perspective. *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, 50, 101826.

- Vulnerability: refers to the susceptibility to be harmed, and is embedded in social relations and processes that encompass complexity, dynamism, the intersection of identity factors, and wider shocks and stressors. Vulnerability is a composite to an outcome, emerges from a variety of risk factors, and results because of an inability to cope.
- Monetary poverty: per capita expenditures of a household is below the poverty line. In our analysis, we rely on the national poverty line of AFN2,268 per month (equivalent to US\$29.21 per month) in 2019 rates, unless stated otherwise.
- Multidimensional poverty: Households that are deprived in a range of dimensions. Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative and UNDP's global Multidimensional Poverty Index focuses on health, education, and living standards dimensions. We rely in our analysis on the Afghanistan-specific Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI), which includes measures related to work, shocks and disaggregated education metrics beyond the global MPI.
- Resilience: In development, resilience is defined as “the capacity over time of a person, household, or other aggregate unit to avoid poverty” amidst shocks and stressors. Other definitions similarly recognise the ability to “mitigate, adapt to, and recovery from shocks and stresses in a manner that reduces chronic vulnerability.

Sources: Adger (2002); Barrett and Constanas (2014); USAID (2012).

Having nevertheless accepted that institutions remain central to our understanding of vulnerability, the contextual question emerges as to which institutions to draw attention to. Afghanistan faces severe structural constraints, with vulnerability at a national scale combined with idiosyncratic and covariant vulnerabilities at the individual, household and local level. Afghanistan has historically relied heavily on informal institutions, with some literature characterising the state as an “informal security regime”¹⁵ where security and welfare has been sought through personal relationships and social networks, making it difficult for external actors to engage.

We are thus interested in a framework that orients the focus to structural vulnerabilities while not losing sight of the ways in which this affects vulnerability at other levels. In this context, we frame our analysis within the “Least Development Country” (LDC) criteria, which draw attention to severe structural impediments to sustainable development and in this process also recognises vulnerability at a national scale.

Afghanistan is arguably one of the most extreme examples of an LDC due to its structural constraints. It experiences a range of economic, environmental, political, and socio-cultural sources of fragility that can influence the development of resilience capacities and exacerbate vulnerability. As Figure 2 indicates, Afghanistan performs weaker than the average amongst LDCs across category dimensions, with lower gross national income (GNI) per capita and human assets, and higher economic and environmental vulnerability. We structure our results according to issues reflected in the criteria of LDC graduation, where an understanding of these outcomes today can offer entry points for policy and programming action to reduce vulnerability going forward. This requires a sound understanding of the informal and formal institutions and processes that over time has contributed to these outcomes. Rather than rely on the specific set of indicators used in LDC scoring, we loosely draw attention to the focus areas of its criteria to offer a more holistic analysis of these dimensions, namely:

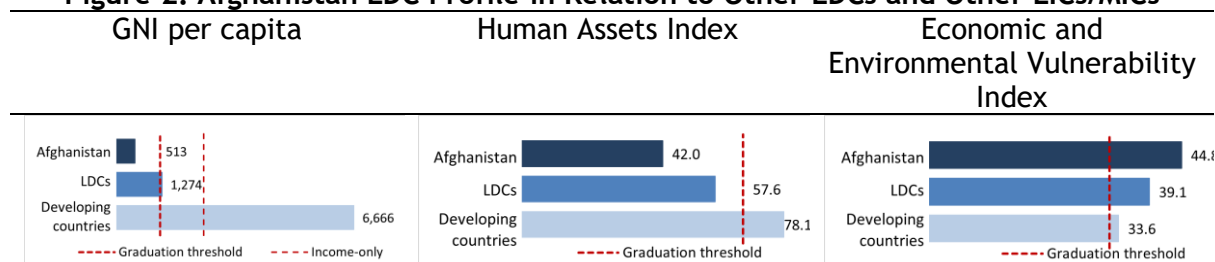
- 1) Income. We focus here on income per capita, poverty, and food insecurity in this section recognising to be key factors that relate to household resources. We also

¹⁵ Gough, I. and G. Wood, with A. Barrientos, P. Bevan, P. Davis and G. Room (2004) *Insecurity and Welfare Regimes in Asia, Africa and Latin America: Social Policy in Development Contexts* Cambridge: CUP.; Schutte, S. (2009). Informal (in)security in urban Afghanistan. *Iranian Studies* 42(3): 465-491.; Pain, A., and Levine, S. (2009).

draw attention to economic and livelihood correlates of poverty, income loss, and food insecurity.

- 2) Human assets. We focus especially on service delivery to recognise the institutions necessary to support development of human assets, also consider legal support for human rights, and acknowledge limited voice and accountability that can perpetuate vulnerability.
- 3) Economic and environmental vulnerability. We broaden this focus on the environment to capture both the human (peace/conflict and governance) and physical environment, further recognising the role of formal and informal governance structures and social networks in affecting the economic and environmental context.

Figure 2: Afghanistan LDC Profile in Relation to Other LDCs and Other LICs/MICs



LIC = low income country, LDC = least developed country, MIC = multiple indicator cluster, GNI = gross national income, GDP = gross domestic product.

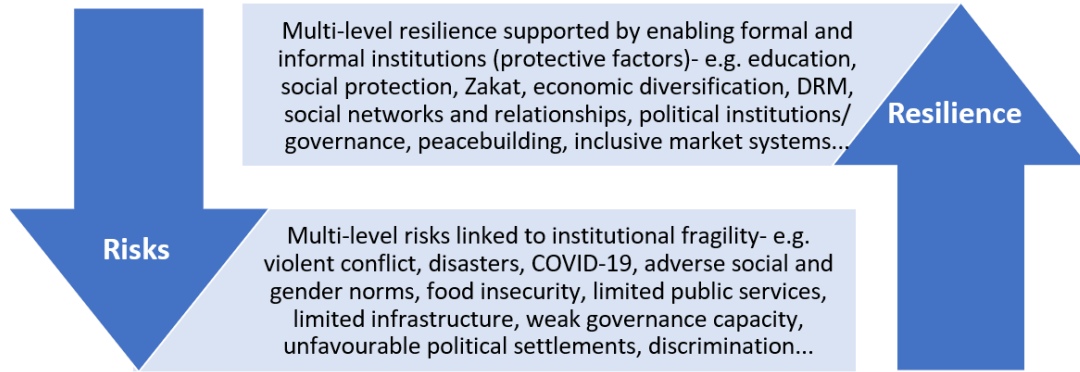
Note: Income is defined by its GNI per capita; the human assets index is constituted from the under-5 mortality rate, prevalence of stunting, maternal mortality rate, gross secondary school enrolment ratio, adult literacy rate, and gender parity index for gross secondary school enrolment; and the economic and environmental vulnerability index is constituted based on the share of agriculture, forestry and fishing in GDP, remoteness and landlocked-ness, merchandise export concentration, share of population in low elevated coastal zones, share of population living in drylands, and instability of agricultural production.

Source: UNDESA (2021).

While the LDC model emphasises outcomes and deficits, this may on its own provide little understanding of how Afghanistan actually works. For example, it may encourage bias towards the formal neglect of the informal structures that affect Afghan lives and welfare. Our attempt to broaden the scope of the economic and environmental dimension to also focus on the political and aid context is one way to mitigate some of these concerns, alongside a stronger focus on the formal and informal institutions that may affect people's income and human development, differentially across vulnerable groups.

The research examines the drivers, characteristics, and coping responses to vulnerability just before and since the political transition in August 2021. To mitigate real dangers due to historical myopia, however, it attempts to ground this in an understanding of how drivers over the last decade may have affected vulnerability today. It draws some attention to the ultra and extreme poor at risk of transitioning to humanitarian need or destitution, as well as groups who risk being attacked, harmed, or facing systematic discrimination and marginalisation. We recognise that vulnerable groups are heterogenous and face a range of risks with differential ability to cope and be resilient. Figure 3 outlines some of these risks and protective factors associated with vulnerability that will be investigated in this proposed research.

Figure 3: Risks and Protective Institutions to Support Vulnerability Reduction



DRM = disaster risk management.

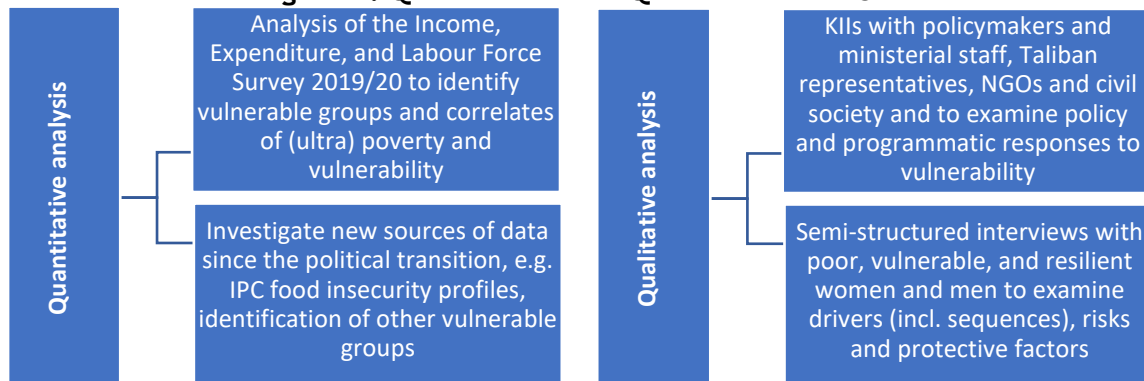
Source: Authors.

3. Data and Methods

3.1 Data

This study brings together a range of primary and secondary data. It draws on a rapid review both of international peer-reviewed and grey literature since 2010 where there is a clear research approach and methodology followed to tracking outcomes, and policy analysis and literature on social policy in Afghanistan. This is complemented with analysis of quantitative and qualitative data, outlined in Figure 4 and detailed in the text that follows.

Figure 4: Quantitative and Qualitative Data Sources



KII = key informant interview, IPC = integrated phase classification, NGO = nongovernmental organisation.

Source: Authors.

The quantitative analysis relies on a series of datasets to capture changing profiles over time. There is an attempt in this analysis to understand changes after 15 August to draw out characteristics, risks, and protective factors to vulnerability. For this, we rely on:

- The nationally representative Income, Expenditure, and Labour Force Survey (IE&LFS) 2019/20 micro dataset to analyse correlates of poverty, income loss, and food insecurity. The dataset is also used to examine an Afghanistan-specific Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI), which includes measures related to work, shocks and disaggregated education metrics beyond the global version.¹⁶

¹⁶ NSIA, 2021. Estimated Population of Afghanistan 2021-2022. Published by National Statistic and Information Authority (NISA), <https://www.nsia.gov.af:8080/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Estimated-Population-of-Afghanistan1-1400.pdf> (PDF.)

- Summary statistics from round 1 of the World Bank’s Afghanistan Welfare Monitoring Survey (AWMS) (Oct-Dec 2021) to assess changes in basic living conditions since the political transition, especially on employment, safety nets, and access to services.
- Microdata from the Humanitarian Situation Monitoring Pilot (HSMP) (December 2021-January 2022), an extension of the Whole of Afghanistan Assessment (WoAA), and tabulated statistics from the mid-year WoAA 2022. The HSMP is administered to key informant interviews in 31 out of 34 provinces. The mid-year WoAA covers 34 provinces with results representative at national level for host communities, internally displaced persons (IDPs) and cross-border returnees, refugees, and IDP returnees, and at province level for displaced, non-displaced, and IDP returnees. These surveys are analysed to determine pre-existing vulnerabilities, coping strategies, and sectoral needs in a range of settlements across the country to inform the geographical and sectoral prioritisation of responses.
- Nationally representative statistics on food security and coping strategies from the Pre-Lean Season Assessment (PLSA) (Jan-Feb 2022), from which integrated phase classification (IPC) province-level food insecurity is derived (March-May 2022). We make use of tabulated statistics at the country and province levels on food insecurity and coping strategies, which were shared in advance of the public release of the microdata.

Alongside the quantitative data, we also rely on a series of qualitative interviews that were undertaken in 2021 and 2022. All interviews and names presented in this report have been anonymised. The interviews comprise:

- 18 key informant interviews (KIIs) with policymakers and actors delivering public authority as well as other relevant stakeholders in Afghanistan conducted in 2021 before and after the political transition. A subset of these interviews was with nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) and ministerial staff in the country to understand what has been happening in terms of hunger relief, the rollout of existing programmes (e.g., cash and in-kind support), and challenges and opportunities in this process over the last year, in two separate studies. In addition, we conducted a limited number of new KIIs to fill gaps in the literature and data, where, for example, certain groups may not be well represented or little is understood about the factors underlying their vulnerability and appropriate programmatic and policy responses.
- 30-40 participants of two reference groups, comprising members from international and national organisations, private sector, individual researchers, and ministerial staff conducted in early and mid-2022.
- 27 longitudinal semi-structured interviews of women and men in the poor, vulnerable and resilient categories, including returnees and IDPs. Interviews were conducted in 2021, and a follow up of 4-5 sentinel households through remote interviews were undertaken to understand how COVID-19 and other shocks and stressors over the last 2 years affected livelihood and coping responses. Interviews were conducted in selected rural and urban settings in Kandahar and Herat, with sites selected for convenience, accessibility, and to offer a time-dimension. In particular, these sites represent those where respondents were already interviewed in past Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit studies, thus enabling comparisons to be drawn over time since 2015.¹⁷

3.2 Mixed methods analysis

The quantitative analysis included a description of monetary poverty and near-poverty status, as well as multidimensional deprivations. These datasets examined which are the most vulnerable population groups in Afghanistan (e.g., based on ultra-poverty, extreme poverty, near poverty lines,¹⁸ and other characteristics), where are they located, what are

¹⁷ Further details on site selection are available in Nemat, O., Diwakar, V., Ghafoori, I., and Azadmanesh, S. (2022). Livelihoods and welfare amidst layered crises in Afghanistan. *IDS Bulletin* 53(3).

¹⁸ In 2020, the extreme poverty line was AFS2,268 per person per month, equivalent to US\$0.94 per person per day. The ultra or food poverty line was AFS1,330 per person per month. Based on this, we calculate near

characteristics of their vulnerability, and their coping responses. Subpopulation wellbeing is also drawn out, such as by gender, age, disability, area of residence (urban, rural, or Kuchi households), displacement status, and migration, including the intersections of these factors.

Alongside the descriptive assessment, we rely on regression-based analyses using the IE&LFS 2019/20 dataset to understand correlates of welfare as identified by different levels of poverty (food poverty, national poverty, 1.5x poverty line, and 2x poverty line). In the main logistic model:

$$Pr(\beta, v_i) = F(\beta_0 + \beta_1 Head_i + \beta_2 Region_i + \beta_3 H_i)$$

for $v_i = (1, Head_i, Region_i, H_i)$ we have

$Poverty_i$ as the probability of the household i being in ultra poverty, extreme poverty, and near the poverty line,

$Head$ is a vector of variables defining the characteristics of the household head,

$Region$ is a set of dummy variables stating in which province the household resides and whether it is in an urban or rural area, and

H is a vector of household specific controls.

Qualitative data (semi-structured interviews and KIIs) collected in 2021 and 2022 were also analysed to understand multi-level risks as well as resilience factors, and the sequences and pathways over time that households have experienced, including what was responsible for changes in wellbeing and what factors have enabled households to cope with vulnerability. In addition, a limited number of new KIIs were undertaken where there was a need based on gaps in the literature and data, including around potential changes since the political transition. Together, this set of data will also be used to understand how vulnerable groups can be better targeted by humanitarian and development assistance.

In a few instances, such as around access to health and education, and layering of crises, new issues raised through the qualitative analysis was probed in additional quantitative analysis. This approach allows us to iteratively undertake data integration and triangulation of mixed methods data to balance breadth with depth and assess vulnerable groups' responses to acute and chronic need, in a way that can offer useful policy and programming insights to improve welfare outcomes. This analytical approach develops an integrated narrative based on the areas of agreement and complementarity between the two streams of research, and an exploration of any significant areas of disagreement or differences of emphasis. It can also offer a basis for articulating a more comprehensive process to monitor and collect data on vulnerable groups, as we undertake in Section 5.

There are a range of limitations to this analysis. Though the IE&LFS 2019/20 dataset is nationally representative, there has been a range of developments, including the political transition that has succeeded the period of data collection. More recent phone survey data, such as the AWMS, suffers from high attrition that may limit the ability to focus more closely on people in and near poverty, and itself does not estimate poverty incidence. The HSMP dataset, though wide-ranging in its issues covered, is based on insights from key informants which may not always reflect realities experienced by vulnerable households. Moreover, the 2022 pilot covers 31 out of the 34 provinces. The PLSA 2022 survey seems to have a good coverage of data on wellbeing, though with limited intra-household understanding and with the microdata not yet publicly available to enable cross-tabulations. Finally, the qualitative data collected in Kandahar and Herat as part of a separate study and re-analysed for this paper is not representative but instead meant to provide a more in-depth understanding of perceptions, as well as processes and sequences to aid our temporal understanding of vulnerability. Even so, the methods of analysis of quantitative and qualitative data in this paper continue to be defined dominantly in income poverty terms and multidimensional

poverty lines equal to 1.5x the extreme poverty line (AFS3,402 per person per month) and 2x the extreme poverty line (AFS4,536 per person per month); World Bank (2021).

deprivations, though there are a variety of ways in which vulnerability can be understood and monitored, as discussed in section 5.

4. Dimensions and Responses to Vulnerability

Given a context where most people are vulnerable, rather than identifying the most vulnerable groups, we focus on institutions and drivers that give rise to or amplify vulnerability. As noted earlier, we structure this loosely according to issues related to LDC graduation criteria, namely factors related to: 1) income, 2) human development including upholding human rights necessary to realise this, and 3) economic and environmental vulnerability, the latter broadly conceived as encompassing both the natural (e.g., disasters) and human (e.g., conflict, insecurity and political instability) context, and consideration of both formal and informal institutions to better reflect the Afghan context as outlined in Section 2. This is followed by examination of coping responses to these dimensions of vulnerability.

4.1 Dimensions and drivers of vulnerability

4.1.1 Income-driven vulnerability

Key messages

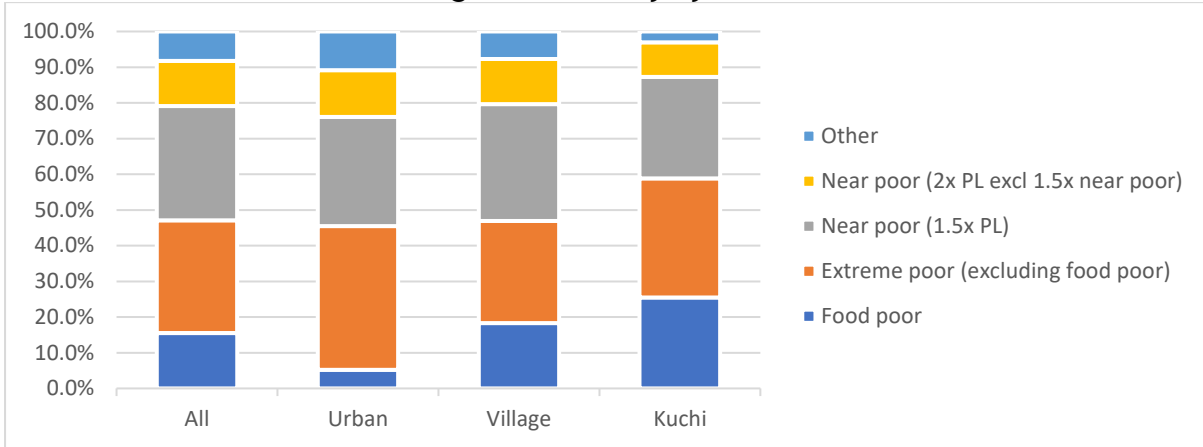
- Most Afghans were living either in or near extreme poverty in 2019/20, and some estimates even suggest that as much as 97% of the population could be in extreme poverty during 2022. Income declines into 2022 have primarily resulted from reduced employment opportunities and armed conflict. A majority of women lost jobs by early 2022 due to restrictions imposed since the shift in power.
- IPC profiles point to 19.7 million people facing high levels of acute food insecurity between March and May 2022 because of the pandemic, contracted GDP, drought, and high prices of food, fuel and fertiliser linked to the Russia-Ukraine conflict.
- Risks and resilience factors can affect poverty and hunger. The role of agriculture is mixed: though cultivation of farmland is associated with a lower probability of poverty and hunger, engagement of the household head in agriculture (self-employment or wage) has the opposite relationship, likely on account of agriculture being a mainstay of people in poverty, but also perhaps reflecting the precarity of wage labour during COVID-19. Non-farm enterprises (NFEs) also have mixed results given inherent risks in spite of diversification potential. Protective factors that guard against poverty and welfare loss include higher asset value, livestock, and electricity.

Poverty and food insecurity

A key criterion for LDC graduation is its GNI per capita, which reflects the income status and resources available to a country. In Afghanistan, per capita expenditures per month on average stood at AFN2,571 in 2019/2020. This was just marginally higher than the national poverty line of AFN2,268 (equivalent to US\$0.94 per day), in 2019 rates. Relatedly, in 2019/20, almost half (47.1%) of Afghans lived under this poverty line (Figure 5), while another 44.6% of the population were non-poor but with incomes less than two times the poverty line. There has been a volatile trend to poverty, starting from a lower base in 2007/08 when 33.7% of households were living under the poverty line, up to 54.5% of the population by 2016/17 before reducing slightly by 2019/20. The depth and severity of poverty has also been increasing between 2007/08 and 2019/20.¹⁹

¹⁹ NSIA, 2021. Estimated Population of Afghanistan 2021-2022. Published by National Statistic and Information Authority (NISA), <https://www.nsia.gov.af:8080/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Estimated-Population-of-Afghanistan1-1400.pdf> (PDF.)

Figure 5: Poverty by Level

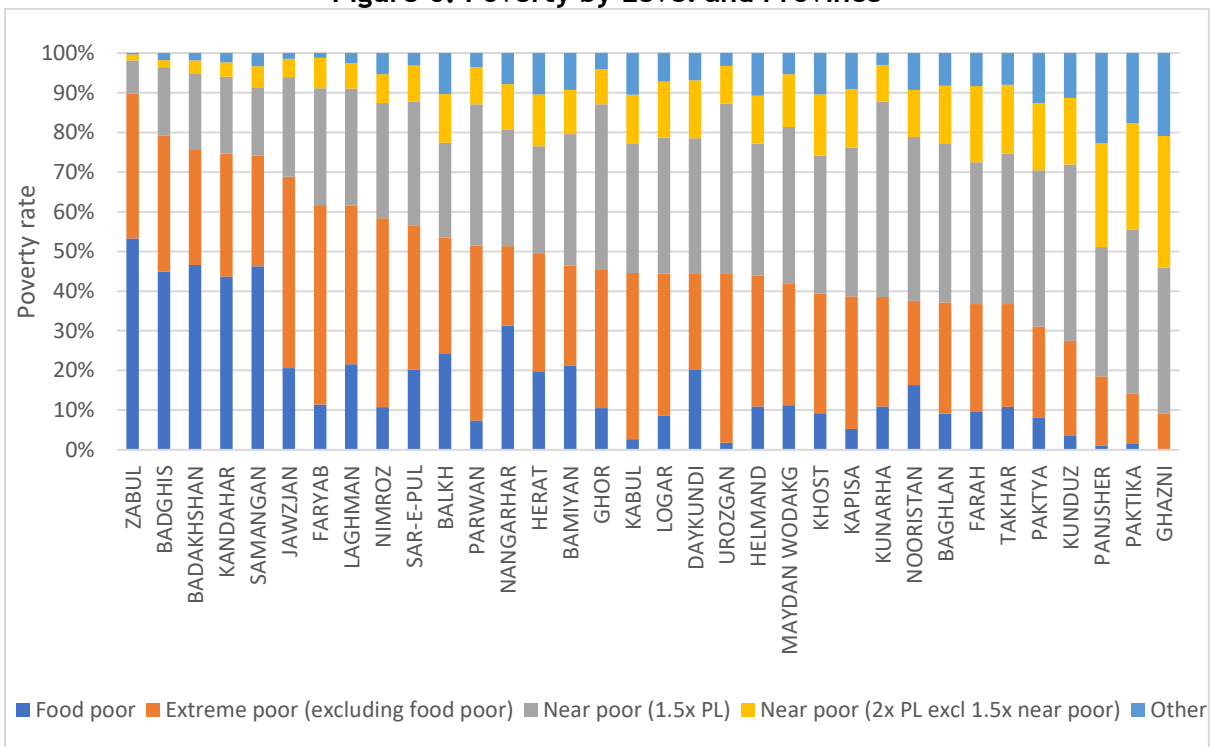


PL = poverty level.

Source: Analysis of IE&LFS 2019/20 data.

Of those in poverty, almost a third had per capita welfare less than the national food poverty line. Across these thresholds, household size was a significant correlate of poverty (Table A2), suggesting that even though fertility may have declined, it has been insufficient to make an impact on per capita income in the absence of an enabling environment. Moreover, the UNDP (2022) predicts that as many as 97% of Afghans could be under the poverty line by mid-2022 as a result of the current political and economic crises.²⁰ Even if this high rate of poverty does not materialise, the situation remains that a large share of the population is either in poverty or near the poverty line.

Figure 6: Poverty by Level and Province

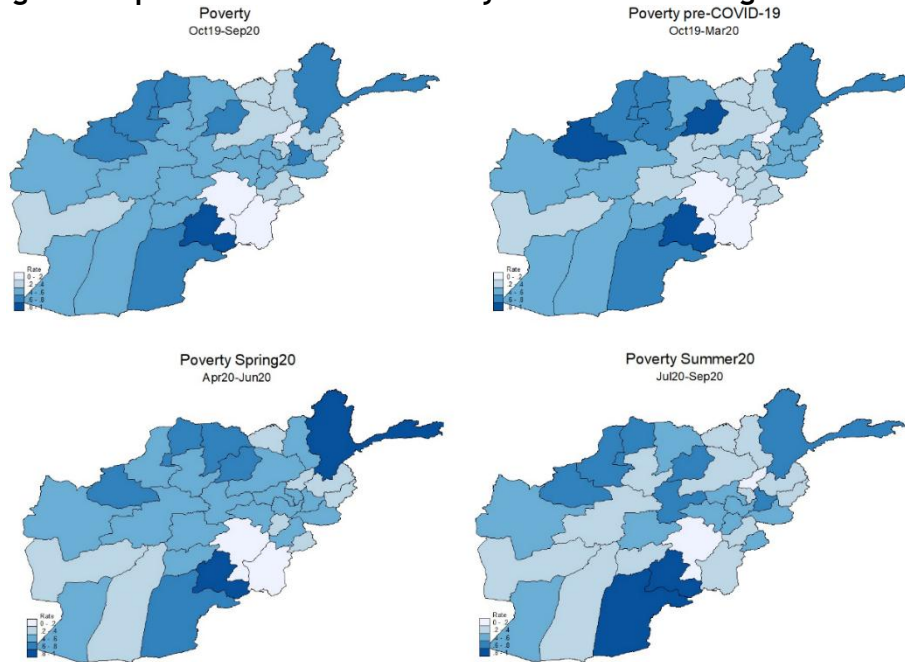


PL = poverty level.

Source: Analysis of IE&LFS 2019/20 data.

²⁰ Such predictions, however, some argue should be “treated with caution... as the quality of the data and (basic) methodology could not be established” (Allouche et al., 2022).

Figure 7: Spatial Variation of Poverty Before and During the Pandemic



Source: Author's visualisation of IE&LFS 2019/20 data, presented in Diwakar (2022).

Poverty has a spatial dimension (Figures 5 and 6). By area of residence, there were large variations in poverty in 2019/20. A majority of the Kuchi (nomadic) population (who represent 4.7% of the Afghan total) were living in extreme poverty. The Kuchi population also had the highest rate of food poverty, though these rates were also high in rural areas. Perhaps on account of its low food poverty rate, urban areas instead saw a higher share of people in extreme poverty. There were further differentiators by province: food poverty rates were highest in Zabul, where the extreme poverty rate was also considerably higher than other provinces. Twenty of Afghanistan's 34 provinces also had poverty rates higher than the national average. Moreover, many areas with high poverty rates are concentrated in the northern and southwestern provinces. Finally, during the onset of COVID-19, poverty increased considerably, especially in the Central and Southern regions, while into the summer of 2020 it continued to increase in the Central and South/Southwestern regions (Figure 7).

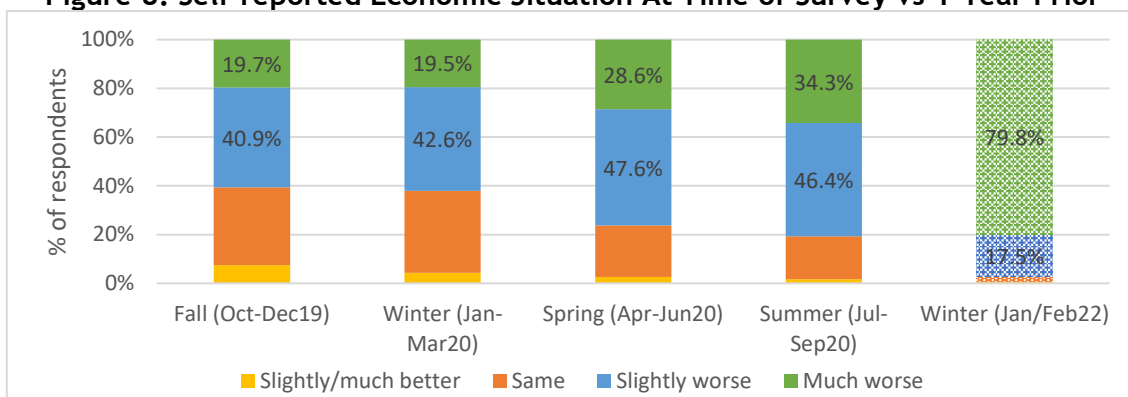
People who experienced food poverty, hence amongst the poorest of the poor, also commonly experienced other forms of disadvantages. For example, based on our descriptive analysis of the IE&LFS 2019/20, of almost 5 million people living in food poverty, 85% resided in rural areas, compared to 64% of the 15 million people in extreme poverty who lived in rural areas. In addition, even amongst people in rural areas, people living in food poverty on average lived slightly farther away from key services in health and primary education. They were also much less likely to have household heads that had completed lower secondary education.

The recent situation marked by COVID-19 and insecurity has contributed to a rise in households reporting income loss and a deterioration in their economic situation. This was particularly pronounced into the pandemic months, which also coincided with mounting insecurity. The loss in income then further continued into the post-August period (Figure 8). This was accompanied by rising unemployment in urban areas by October-December 2021 compared to two years prior, a declining share of public sector employment, and declining labour earnings.²¹ Into 2022, most households, especially in urban areas, were likely to

²¹ World Bank. (2022). Afghanistan Welfare Monitoring Survey, Round 1. <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/138d0857c9a66e7e2a963a1a6137860e-0310062022/original/Afghanistan-Welfare-Monitoring-Survey.pdf> (25.05.22)

report that their income had decreased significantly compared to a year earlier. The main reason that households reported declining income was on account of reduced employment opportunities (58.2%), slightly higher in urban areas (68.4%, compared to 54.6% in rural areas), followed by armed conflict (22.2%) instead slightly higher in rural areas (23.6% in rural areas, compared to 18.3% in urban areas).²² Of women engaged in income generating activities, 60.9% lost their livelihoods in the preceding six months (71% in urban areas, compared to 55.4% in rural areas),²³ often due to restrictions since the shift in power.²⁴

Figure 8: Self-reported Economic Situation At Time of Survey vs 1-Year Prior



Note: Checkered last column refers to self-reported “income” change of individuals, compared to the first four columns which ask specifically about the self-reported “economic situation” of households, so are not strictly comparable.

Source: Diwakar (2022) based on IE&LFS 2019/20 data; and PLSA (2022) data.

In the qualitative data, households engaging in non-farm activities and wage labour were particularly hard struck, as a result of market closures, high costs of doing business, border closures, and lost jobs in wage labour as well as salaried employment:

I lost my job and salary. I was contracted to be a schoolteacher. I don’t get a salary anymore since schools are off due to corona. (Life history interview with Kubra, Herat, July 2021)

When people migrated to Iran previously, they were migrating alone. Now, many people migrate to Iran with their families.... There are two reasons, first is insecurity but the most important reason is economic hardship in Afghanistan; this hardship obliged people to migrate to Iran with their families. (KII, July 2021)

The context of income loss and limited resources (in terms of savings and assets) also contributed to food insecurity and hunger (Figure 9).²⁵ This has worsened since the transition in August 2021. The UN humanitarian coordination unit has warned that, following 15 August, the crisis of food security increased considerably. Between May and October-December 2021, the share of households reporting that they were unable to cover even food needs rose from 16% to 37%.²⁶ The number of people who cannot secure their basic food has

²² Analysis of WFP. (2022) Pre-Lean Season Assessment survey dataset.

²³ Ibid.

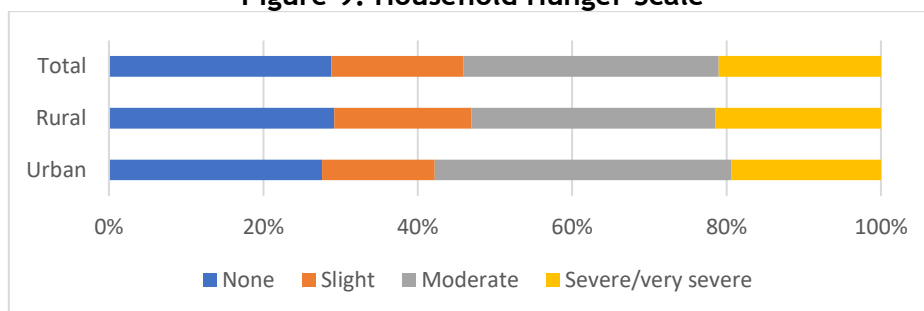
²⁴ R. Kumar, and H. Noori, (2022, May 16). “We are worse off’: Afghanistan further impoverished as women vanish from workforce.” *The Guardian*: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/may/16/afghanistan-further-impoverished-as-women-vanish-from-workforce-taliban>

²⁵ However, the prevalence of hunger considerably varies over time and depending on the module specification from which the Household Hunger Scale was calculated (e.g., 1% of the population experienced severe hunger according to the mid-2022 WoAA, compared to 21% experiencing severe or very severe hunger according to the December 21/January 2022 PLSA).

²⁶ World Bank. (2022). Afghanistan Welfare Monitoring Survey, Round 1. <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/138d0857c9a66e7e2a963a1a6137860e-0310062022/original/Afghanistan-Welfare-Monitoring-Survey.pdf> (25.05.22)

more generally doubled since 2021.²⁷ In September and October 2021, around 19 million Afghans faced high levels of acute food insecurity, with the estimates in the following months from November 2021 to March 2022 comprising 22.8 million people. Between March and May 2022, 19.7 million people (47% of the population) continue to face high levels of acute food insecurity as a result of expected contraction of GDP and the wider economic crisis, lack of development projects, supply chain disruptions, drought, and increases in the price of food, fuel, and fertiliser linked to the Russia-Ukraine conflict.²⁸ More than half of the children under age 5 face extreme malnutrition, and one in three people do not have enough food to eat.²⁹

Figure 9: Household Hunger Scale



Note: The Household Hunger Scale is used to measure household hunger within food-insecure areas.

Source: WFP (2019); PLSA (2022).

Livelihood-based risks and protective factors for poverty and food insecurity

In the qualitative data, characteristics associated with vulnerability was typically attributed to limited livelihoods and assets, with recognition of social harms linked to this, and also their exacerbation in contexts of multiple crises. Dawood (M, Herat, April 2022) suggested as examples:

- “Those who do not have breadwinners, who don’t have male members in the family to work for them because nowadays the women cannot work.
- Those who don’t have any income.
- Those have borrowed a lot of money and there is no source to repay.
- Disasters, like drought, flood and hail, war and insecurity.
- Those have lost their husbands and do not have male members but have a lot of children.
- Those who don’t have land and farm or garden and are not able to work.
- Those who are addicted to drugs. Unemployment and being jobless. These issues increase vulnerabilities, and these are the characteristics” (Dawood, M, Herat, April 2022).

Other examples from the qualitative data draw attention to women who have become more dependent on men in a context of reduced mobility and freedom, youth especially on account of joblessness, girls and women-headed households, and households headed by children or disabilities as other vulnerable groups.

In the quantitative data, correlates of poverty, welfare loss, and food insecurity are also all factors relating to vulnerability. In terms of economic correlates based on regression

²⁷ World Bank. *Afghanistan: Risk and Resilience Assessment*.

²⁸ IPC. (2022). Afghanistan: IPC acute food insecurity analysis, March-November 2022, issued in May 2022. https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/IPC_Afghanistan_AcuteFoodInsec_2022Mar_2022Nov_report_0.pdf

²⁹ GPC. (2021). Afghanistan protection analysis update. Global Protection Cluster. https://www.globalprotectioncluster.org/wp-content/uploads/AFG_Protection-Analysis-Update_Q3_Final-2.pdf

analysis, the engagement of the household head in agriculture is associated with a higher probability of poverty (extreme or food poverty) and hunger in the country, likely reflecting the location of most people in poverty in rural areas where agriculture is the main occupation. Even so, cultivation of farmland itself is associated with a lower probability of welfare loss and of hunger. This potentially reflects the benefits of land in guarding against income loss in an otherwise volatile economic context, and providing respite for the most severe forms of food insecurity. As a life history interviewee notes:

Land is good for two reasons. First that we ourselves work on lands and get its products. So there is nothing to lose because we are not doing business to be worried about its loss, drown or to catch fire... [Secondly] the price of land increases, if we sell our land we will lose the land. We may not be able to buy or get it back. (Zar, M, Herat, July 2021)

At the same time, cultivation of farmland is not a significant correlate of poverty in the regression results. These findings together might reflect the high levels of rural landlessness or near landlessness, and a context where only a minority of households have grain surplus. As such, the significance of land and agriculture more broadly face constraints in the current context that limit its potential as a viable pathway out of poverty.

Interestingly, engagement in NFEs³⁰ is also associated with a higher probability of food poverty, though NFEs are still associated with a lower probability of extreme poverty and hunger. This could reflect the rewards as well as risks that may exist to NFEs in volatile economic contexts. On the one hand, engagement in NFEs may enable some households to diversify risks, depending on the nature of the risk pool and interaction with markets, which may, in some contexts, be regulated by social institutions rather than price. Even so, NFEs are regularly observed as an important pathway out of poverty in rural areas in many low-income countries and multiple indicator clusters.³¹ Even so, during COVID-19, because of the government lockdown between March and May 2020, many shops had closed for two months during the day, which imposed significant constraints on shopkeepers, according to the qualitative data. Others regularly gave items on credit and thus themselves experienced loss when buyers were unable to meet their debt obligations. One KI (Herat, July 2021) noted the multiplier effects experienced during the pandemic:

In the time of lockdown, people were not able to do their business. Those people who start new business, they bankrupted. Those who had the intention of starting a new business; did not start their business. Shopkeepers were complaining about the high tax rate, and their imports has reduced. As a result of high tax rates and reduce imports, the trader has increased the prices... Therefore, people in our community could not want to spend money and buy more food items.

Instead, protective livelihood and economic factors to poverty and welfare loss include higher asset value, livestock, and electricity. These tangible assets then appear to be key factors with the potential to guard against certain forms of vulnerability. Higher asset value (e.g., of refrigerators, computers, tractors, cars, mobile phones, and other consumer assets) also helps households guard against hunger, which may simply reflect the better of situation of households that do have these assets. The role of electricity³² here is often recognised for its transformative potential including through for example enhancing productivity of

³⁰ This is derived based on a question in the IE&LFS 2019/20 survey which asks whether anyone in the household did “any non-agricultural work, on own account or in a business that belongs to this household, or one of the household members... e.g., in trading, running a shop, driving a taxi, tailoring, carpentry, carpet weaving, making handicrafts, etc.”

³¹ Diwakar, V., and Shepherd, A. (2022). Sustaining escapes from poverty. *World Development* 151: 105611.

³² Defined as households that had electricity at any time in the month preceding the survey, from at least one of: electric grid, government/ community/ private generator or private/community dynamo.

NFEs and through irrigation on farms. However, while most urban households had electricity, this drops to just one in four rural households with access to electricity, and just 16% when focusing on rural households that had electricity from either the electric grid or government generator. Livestock can help households smooth consumption during times of distress, and also act as an investment and store of value. Zarafshan (F, Herat, July 2021) reflects on the importance of stronger breeds to ensure longevity:

Now we have cows with good breeds, which imported from Iran, and Russia grew up here. These cows give 25 kg of milk per day. We take 5 kg for home consumption and sell the remaining 20 kg to the market. If we don't have this income, there is no means of income generation at the moment. This cow is the best income for us and for other families, otherwise the whole family would have nothing to eat. All the neighbours took cows or calves from the same generation to feed their livelihoods.

4.1.2 Human assets and socio-cultural dimensions

Key messages

- There is a moderate correlation between multidimensional and monetary poverty.
- Key barriers for children to enrol in school is the need for labour (linked also to cost concerns), distance of home from school, and, for girls, Taliban restrictions at secondary level and the absence of female teachers alongside the closure of schools. As a result, education access suffers, even more so for children at the intersections: girls in poor households, girls with disabilities, and girls in Kuchi areas less likely to have ever attended school compared to their male comparator groups.
- Key barriers in access to health services are high cost of services and medicines, quality of healthcare, lack of transport, and insufficient female medical staff. Limited services and ill health have driven impoverishment. Persons with disabilities, pregnant and lactating women, and women with lower levels of education are particularly vulnerable as a result.
- Certain groups experienced historic and/or persistent marginalisation, including religious and ethnic minorities, the Kuchi population, and others of certain minority identities. Women-headed households were also at a higher risk of poverty and hunger in 2019/20. Women today more generally continue to experience violence as well as increasing restrictions on their lives since the shift in power.

As noted in Section 2, another key characteristic of vulnerability is limited human capital, which can be aggravated through the absence of associated social services. In the wider literature, deprivation in education, health, employment, social participation, and physical safety are all observed dimensions of multidimensional poverty in Afghanistan.³³ Moreover, “nearly all Afghan adults are deprived in at least one dimension and those residing in rural areas, from minority ethnic groups, women, elderly people and persons disabled at birth or of an unknown cause are the poorest of the poor”.³⁴

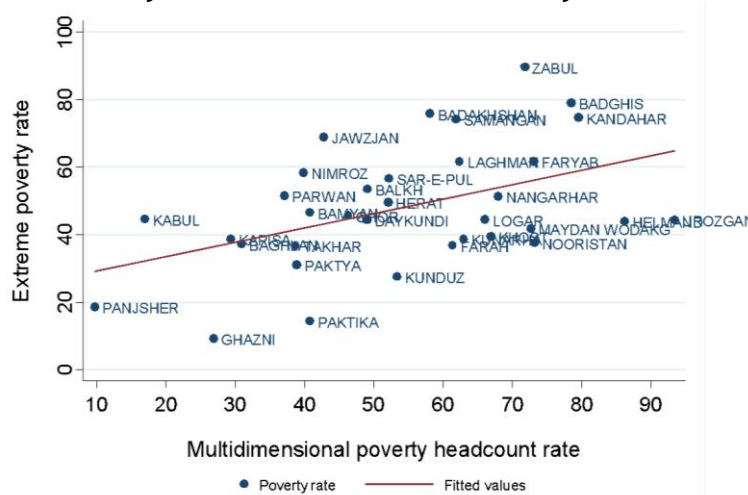
At the same time, some of these social dimensions may be linked to income. Indeed, our analysis points to a moderate correlation between multidimensional and monetary poverty, suggesting that the geographic patterns in the monetary poverty data may also correlate with other multidimensional sources of vulnerability. Kandahar and Badghis, which have the third- and fourth-highest share of people in multidimensional poverty, are also in the top four in terms of monetary poverty (Figure 10), where at least three in four households are living in monetary poverty and three in four households are also living in multidimensional poverty. In terms of multidimensional deprivations, the weakest indicators in 2019/20 were

³³ J-F. Trani, et al. (2016). Multidimensional Poverty in Afghanistan: Who are the Poorest of. *Oxford Development Studies*.

³⁴ Ibid.

in relation to female schooling, followed by high shares of dependents in the household. Both Kandahar and Badghis provinces, with high monetary and multidimensional poverty, also fared poorly on school attendance, assisted delivery, and food security. There are other provinces, namely Urozgan and Helmand, where monetary poverty rates are below the nation-wide average, but which have the largest share of their population living in multidimensional poverty. In Urozgan, this is largely due to security shocks and deprivations in assisted delivery, though food insecurity rates are low. In Helmand, school attendance is particularly low, also followed by assisted delivery and security shocks.

Figure 10: Monetary and Multidimensional Poverty Headcount by Region



Note: The multidimensional poverty measure is based on the Afghanistan-specific multidimensional poverty index, capturing deprivations not only related to living standards, health, and education, but also to work, shocks and disaggregated schooling metrics.

Source: Authors’ analysis of IE&LFS 2019/20 data.

Education system risks and resilience

The multidimensional poverty analysis above raises poor school attendance as a key source of deprivation. In December 2021-January 2022, the main barrier for children to enrol or register in school across 31 provinces in the country is the perceived need for children to earn money (Figure 11), linked also to the direct and opportunity cost of education. This need may intuitively be higher amongst groups with lower income, such as children in poor households, or nomad children and street children.³⁵ The combination of labour and cost indicates how children are at the centre of the household economy in terms of earnings and expenditure. It is moreover a push factor that in turn limits the development of resilience capacities.

By mid-2022, the main reason for children to be out of school was that there was no school in the area, followed by new bans and restrictions, especially for girls, interruptions, and concerns around education being too expensive or the child’s need to earn money.³⁶ The closure of schools has also contributed to these restrictions. However, girls’ access to education following the Taliban’s imposition of restrictions above Grade 6 varies across districts, reflecting differences between “traditionalists and hardliners... [and] those who recognise that Afghanistan needs more diverse and modern ideas” for its education.³⁷

³⁵ OHCHR. (2020). Human Rights Dimension of Poverty in Afghanistan. OHCHR.

³⁶ WoAA. (2022). Mid year Whole of Afghanistan Assessment. Survey dataset. REACH Resource Centre. <https://www.reachresourcecentre.info/country/afghanistan/>

³⁷ R. Amiri, and A. Jackson, (2021) Taliban Attitudes and Policies Towards Education, ODI Working Paper 601, London: Centre for the Study of Armed Groups, ODI; Allouche, et al. *Needs and Vulnerability in Afghanistan*

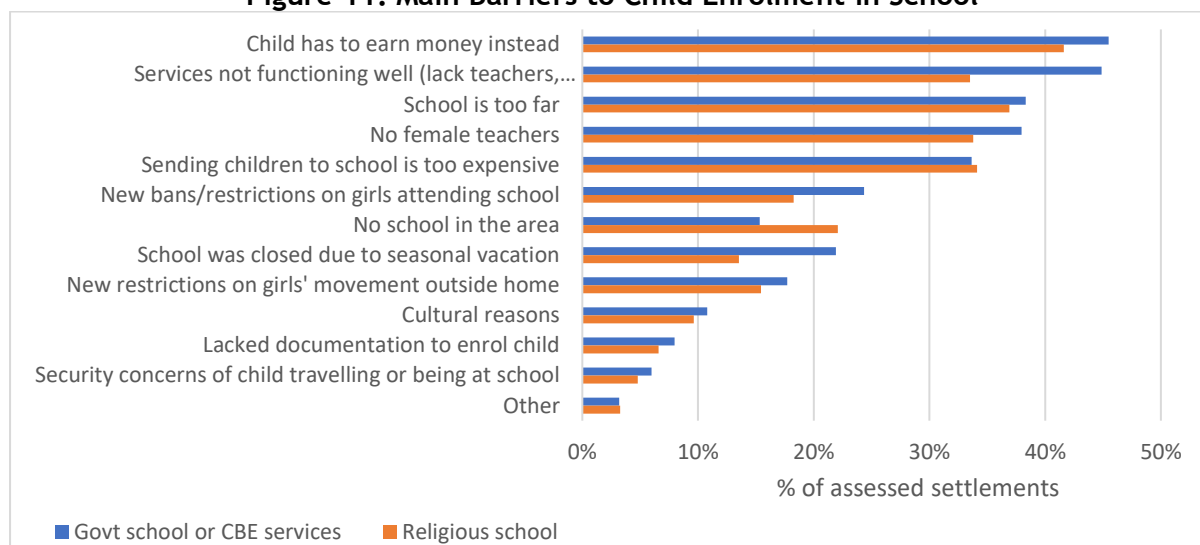
Relatedly, the stock of education of the household head, especially secondary or higher, in the regression analysis is relatively unmatched in terms of its association with a lower probability of poverty, welfare loss, and hunger (Table A2). For example, primary education completion of the household head is associated with a 3.8 percentage point lower probability of extreme poverty (relative to the reference group of household heads with less than primary school completion). Secondary school or higher is associated with a 11.5 percentage point lower probability of extreme poverty, and a 10-ppt lower probability of welfare loss, again relative to the reference group.

Another barrier observed in Figure 11 and the wider literature was the absence of female teachers, which limits girls’ access and attendance in particular.³⁸ Even so, it is worth noting that the presence of female teachers alone is insufficient in improving access, particularly in a context where girls’ secondary and high school access has been constrained. There are some KIs who are hopeful that girls will be able to go back to school:

There is a quite high level of engagement with the authorities, both at the ministry of education level and with broader government authorities. At the moment, I would say that we are quite hopeful that these girls can go back to school. (KI in Kabul, May 2022)

However, the constraints in access since the transition suggest that further dialogue is needed.³⁹ For example, the limited number of female teachers and the lack of infrastructure to accommodate gender segregation in education imposed is likely to severely restrict access to education for girls.

Figure 11: Main Barriers to Child Enrolment in School



Source: Authors’ analysis of HSMP 2022 data, which as noted in Section 3 is a survey administered to key informant interviews in 31 out of 34 provinces.

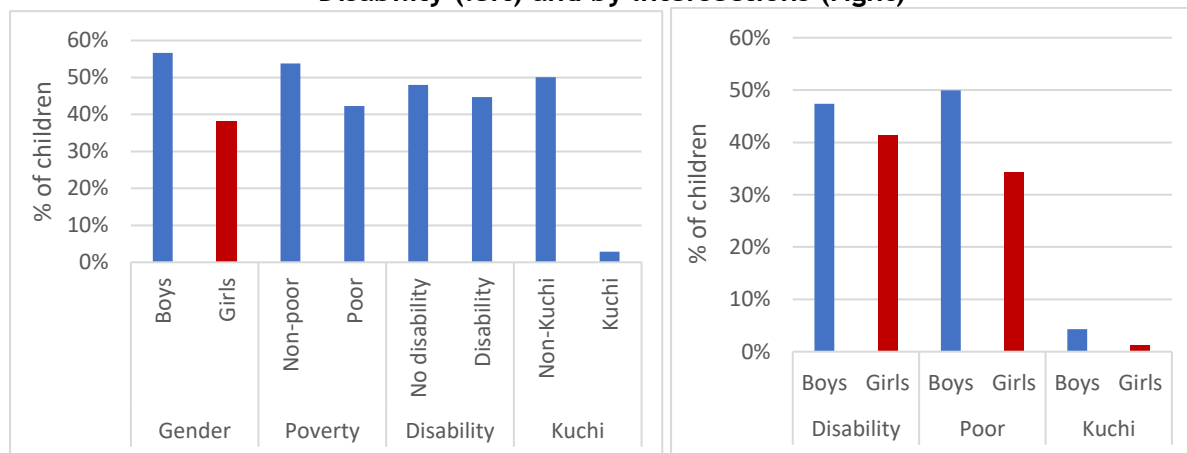
Partly reflecting these challenges, gender is second only to living in Kuchi areas, as the main differentiators in education access and outcomes (Figure 12). These are even stronger differentiators than disability or poverty on their own. Even so, there are important intersections, with girls in poor households and children in Kuchi areas less likely to have ever attended school compared to their male comparator groups, with differences statistically significant at conventional levels. For example, by gender, 50% of boys in poor

³⁸ UNESCO. (2020). Unpacking inclusion in education: lessons from Afghanistan for achieving SDG4. Global Education Monitoring Report. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373690>

³⁹ Ahmadi, B., and Ebadi, A. (2022, April 1). Taliban’s ban on girls’ education in Afghanistan. USIP. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/04/talibans-ban-girls-education-afghanistan>

households ever attended school, compared to 34% of girls. Overall, however, in terms of area of residence, only 3% of Kuchi children ever attended school. The gender parity index based on net primary school attendance is also much lower amongst Kuchis (0.23) compared to the nation as a whole (0.72).⁴⁰

Figure 12: Children (6-17 years) who Ever Attended School, by Gender, Poverty, and Disability (left) and by Intersections (right)



Source: Authors' analysis of IE&LFS 2019/20 data.

Other common barriers included limited functioning of services due to lack of teachers or equipment, distance, and school being too expensive. Distance creates additional challenges for certain children, including girls and children with disabilities. Poor services were a particularly common barrier for child enrolment in government schools or community-based education (CBE) services, compared to religious schools. Other regression analysis also points to the absence of primary and secondary school in communities being associated with higher poverty rates,⁴¹ linked to our regression results above about the level of access in turn also being associated with poverty. In the wider literature, some of these concerns were also articulated, such as lack of professional staffing, premises, curricula, and student attendance, for both male and female students.⁴² This in turn has affected the quality of education, observed by a downward trend in basic learning outcomes.⁴³ In the qualitative data, school closures resulted in additional challenges, only sometimes linked directly to the pandemic: “Now, schools are not only closed due to corona, it is closed due to the Taliban too. As our area is under Taliban control now” (Interview with Kubra, Herat, July 2021).

Finally, institutions of human assets development also need to go beyond formal schooling pathways to include skills building, vocational and technical capacity, and strengthened employability and links to labour markets. This is because there is evidence that vulnerabilities of people with better marketable skills are different from people who lack such skills. There is moreover stark gender divisions again, where for example girls are often underrepresented in many TVET programs in the country.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ NSIA, 2021. Estimated Population of Afghanistan 2021-2022. Published by National Statistic and Information Authority (NISA), <https://www.nsia.gov.af:8080/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Estimated-Population-of-Afghanistan1-1400.pdf> (PDF)

⁴¹ Joya et al. (2022). Understanding the drivers of poverty in Afghanistan. Biruni Institute.

⁴² World Bank. (2016). Afghanistan: promoting education during times of increased fragility. World Bank <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/280721531831663216/pdf/124921-REVISED-AFGHANISTANPROMOTINGEDUCATIONPublication.pdf> (25.04.22)

⁴³ UIS. (2017). Afghanistan data. UNESCO Institute for Statistics.

⁴⁴ Attal, N. (2021, August 3). The power of technical and vocational skills: increasing girls' participation in formal agriculture education in Afghanistan: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/education-plus->

Health system disruptions

The health sector too is affected by damaged infrastructure, a lack of trained health care providers and under-resourced healthcare facilities. In the qualitative study sites, the limited healthcare infrastructure as a result of armed conflict, inadequate budgets, and other shocks and stressors moreover reduced the quality of existing health services and accessibility for people who required healthcare support for longer periods of time. As one KI (May 2022) in Kandahar noted:

War has damaged our health facilities partially or completely. To provide health services to the people on time, most of our health facilities either have no proper or damaged infrastructure. On the one hand, again this reduces the quality of services and in the rented facilities many times we cannot find a decent building for our health centres in the close proximity that is accessible to everyone; in addition to this, we cannot keep [patients] for longer periods of time, which has its own implications.

In December 2021-January 2022, the main barrier in access to health services across 31 provinces was the high cost of services and medicine (Figure 13). By mid-2022, this key cost barrier was also combined with medicines, treatment, or services being unavailable or too far.⁴⁵ In terms of expenses, out of pocket expenditures as a share of current health expenditure on average between 2015 and 2019 was 77%, the third highest globally.⁴⁶ Moreover, 24% of the population spend more than 10% of their household consumption or income on these out-of-pocket expenditures.⁴⁷ In Afghanistan, too, the major cause of death in the 6 months preceding the PLSA survey in 2022 was severe sickness, affecting 69% of those who died.⁴⁸ This finding is very much in line with the qualitative data where even though some people had access to health services, the lack of quality healthcare staff and limited availability of quality drugs paved the path for erosive forms of coping. As one KI (May 2022) noted:

We have conducted many meetings with traders who import drugs to Afghanistan and share the issue of high-quality drugs. In these meetings, the traders clearly said that we have the legal permit for drug imports along with supporting documents from the Quality control department. We import high-quality drugs to Afghanistan. However, during the time of monitoring and getting feedback from our health post, we file many complaints about the quality of drug available in the market.

This is even more concerning given the role of morbidity and mortality, especially of income-earners, in driving impoverishment in many low- and middle-income contexts, including in South Asia.⁴⁹ In Afghanistan, too, households living in communities without health facilities have a higher probability of poverty.⁵⁰ In the qualitative data, ill health frequently drove impoverishment. As Rana (F, Herat, July 2021) recalls:

Each time of visit, we spend about AFN3,000 to AFN4,000. These medicines did not affect in one visit... Of course, it impacts on economic condition. We are farmers, spending such amount of money in a short period of time seriously affects our

development/2021/08/03/the-power-of-technical-and-vocational-skills-increasing-girls-participation-in-formal-agriculture-education-in-afghanistan/

⁴⁵ WoAA. (2022). Mid year Whole of Afghanistan Assessment. Survey dataset. REACH Resource Centre. <https://www.reachresourcecentre.info/country/afghanistan/>

⁴⁶ Authors' analysis of WDI, *World Development Indicators* database (2022).

⁴⁷ Ibid.

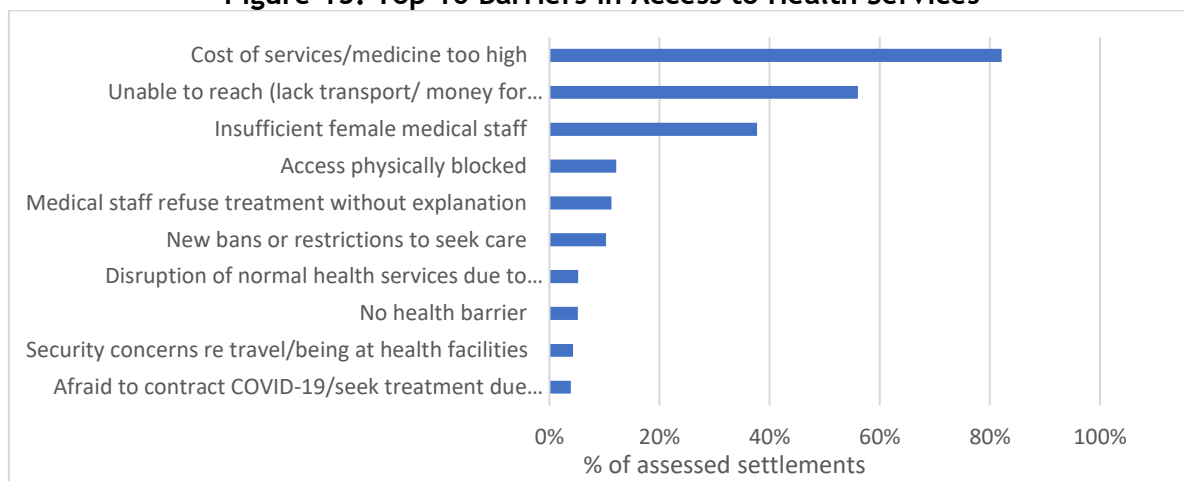
⁴⁸ WFP. (2022) Pre-Lean Season Assessment survey dataset.

⁴⁹ Diwakar, V., Shepherd, A., and Eichsteller, M. (2018). Health, resilience and sustainable poverty escapes. USAID report.

⁵⁰ Joya et al. "Understanding the Drivers of Poverty in Afghanistan".

livelihood and economic condition... when we collect our harvest products and took it to the market there is no buyers. Because of quarantine which happened twice, once last year and once this year, therefore, we cannot sell our yield in the last two years. It is a financial effect on our livelihood.

Figure 13: Top 10 Barriers in Access to Health Services



Note: based on a question asking respondents what their main three barriers were, if any, that households in the settlement most commonly encountered when attempting to access health services.

Source: Authors' analysis of HSMP 2022 data.

The situation deteriorated during the pause in funding in late 2021 to the Sehatmandi project, the main source of healthcare in the country.⁵¹ The suspension following the shift in power rendered Afghanistan's healthcare system "on the brink of collapse," curtailing women's access to health workers, worsening child malnutrition, and potentially contributing to thousands of preventable illnesses and death.⁵² As a result of this service volatility against a volatile economic situation, many households interviewed in Herat and Kandahar in 2022 have been unable to pay for medicine when ill health did strike. This has been an enduring hazard for poor households, but aggravated in a context of increased healthcare barriers and reduced household welfare:

We are not able to buy the medicine and cannot make money. Last week my wife was sick, and we went to the clinic and visit the dentist. But we were not able to buy medicine, so the store gave the medicine as a loan and told us to bring the money back when you get your salary or find any labour work. (Interview with Abdul, M, Herat, July 2021).

The second main barrier to accessing health services cited was the lack of transport or ability to reach health services. Part of this is highly gendered. For example, post-August 2021, restrictions on women's access to healthcare were intensified. For example, when seeking healthcare, the Taliban has required women to be accompanied by a Mahram in some parts of the country, a male family member with whom marriage is forbidden. However, many women, especially women-headed households, may not be able to meet this requirement, while others who do may not feel comfortable discussing certain healthcare needs in front of a male guardian. However, through discussions between male healthcare

⁵¹ WHO. (2021). Afghanistan emergency situation report. Retrieved from

http://www.emro.who.int/images/stories/afghanistan/Situation-Report_Issue-6-6-Sept-2021.pdf?ua=1

⁵² B. Farmer (2022, April 21). 'Bleak outlook' : aid groups warn they cannot prop up Afghanistan's crumbling health system. The Telegraph. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/global-health/terror-and-security/bleak-outlook-aid-groups-warn-cannot-prop-afghanistans-crumbling/>

staff, community elders, and authorities, some of these restrictions were subsequently slightly relaxed. A KI (Kandahar, April 2022) describes this:

Our female staff was not allowed, or they were scared of the force of Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, so they did not attend their office. It was a big problem for us, and our service for females was halted... After a couple of detailed discussions, the IEA authority agreed to allow women to join their office. The second issue that we faced with females was going to Health facilities without Mahram. First, we identified this issue as a problem, set with the white beard and other influential people, and then discussed the issue with the IEA authorities. Through a couple of meetings, the IEA agreed that females can go to the local clinic without their Mahrams, provided they are accompanied by an elder or other seniors in the community.

Lack of transport is also problematic given limited mobility for physical reasons amongst older people and persons with disabilities. On the latter, limited access to health facilities and transportation was some of the factors outlined in the literature as determinants of disability.⁵³ One study found that four in five households live with some form of disability, with severe disabilities more prevalent amongst women. People with severe disabilities were least satisfied with their health and ability to perform daily activities, reporting limited energy, money, constrained access to education, employment, and healthcare, limited companionship, and a sense of isolation as well as lower empowerment.⁵⁴ This was also observed in our qualitative data, where for example Qasim (M, Herat, July 2021) mentioned:

I am a disabled and cannot work properly. When I got engaged, bride's father asked me to pay 500,000 AFN as bride price. My financial condition was not good. I was obliged to go to Iran and work there. However, as a disabled person, I cannot earn more money as my other colleagues could.

Moreover, our regression analysis points to disability of the household head being associated with a higher probability that the household as a whole experiences welfare loss and hunger, suggesting that low satisfaction and limited support is further reflected in lower welfare.

The third key barrier to health service access was insufficient female medical staff. This in turns drives vulnerability especially amongst certain groups, such as pregnant and lactating women, and care for women and girls more generally. Again, there are potential intersections, where for example 25% of rural households and 35% of Kuchi households, a population group with high poverty rates, require 2 to 6 hours to reach a public clinic.⁵⁵ In addition, just 59% of women with Islamic schooling and 67% with primary schooling who had a live birth were assisted in delivery by a skilled birth attendant, compared to 73% and above for lower secondary school levels or higher.⁵⁶ All of this with a weak healthcare context, and limited access to information on health and family planning for women has resulted in Afghanistan having one of the worst maternal and infant mortality rates in the world.⁵⁷

Additionally, some policies may also prevent women's level of access to health facilities. For instance, as per the Basic Public Health System (PBHS), each health facility should have

⁵³ N. Shinwari, Akseer, T., and Kamali, M. (2020). Model Disability Survey of Afghanistan 2019. The Asia Foundation. <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/model-disability-survey-afghanistan-2019>

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ NSIA, 2021. Estimated Population of Afghanistan 2021-2022. Published by National Statistic and Information Authority (NISA), <https://www.nsia.gov.af:8080/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Estimated-Population-of-Afghanistan1-1400.pdf> (PDF)

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ WDI. (2022). World Development Indicators database.

two midwives. However, in some high-density areas two midwives are insufficient to provide basic health services. As one KII (Kandahar, April 2022) reflected:

There are some limitations to the BPHS policy. We have many clinics in the congestion area where we have many clients daily, including pregnant women. As per the BPHS policy, there are the positions of two midwives in each health facility. These two midwives cannot provide proper and timely services to the people. As per the need, there is a strong recommendation for adopting these policies.

Limited legal protection, human rights and voice for minorities

Human development also relies on an enabling legal environment that guards against people's basic rights. However, there are generally limited laws on anti-discrimination and protection of minority rights in Afghanistan, such as for certain religious and ethnic groups in the country. Most of the population (85%-90%) is Sunni, followed by Shi'a. Many ethnic groups (e.g., Kyrgyzs, Balochs, Ismailis, Nuristanis) also exist in the country, many comprising 1% or less each within the population.⁵⁸ Shi'a Hazaras at the intersections have been historically discriminated, experiencing waves of violence over the decades including recent killings.⁵⁹ They have long faced exclusion from social, political and economic positions in the country.⁶⁰ Persecution of Hindus and Sikhs, constituting just 1% of the population, has also increased in recent years. Though an estimated 100,000 Sikhs lived in Afghanistan before 1970, religious discrimination and government neglect resulted in their departure, such that there were just 240 Sikh inhabitants last year.⁶¹

Certain nomadic groups are also vulnerable due to conflict and displacement, drought, gender inequalities, and settlement.⁶² Though Kuchis as Pashtuns have long been favoured as a social group, they frequently lack access to education, health services, shelter, clean water, and other basic needs. This is often correlated with monetary poverty, which has been higher amongst nomadic Kuchis, compared to rural and urban areas (Figure 5). There has also been limited longer-term donor assistance that could support Kuchis rebuilding livelihoods and accessing essential services.⁶³ Prolonged conflict and drought have contributed to the death of livestock, while conflict over the years has also affected Kuchi migratory routes.⁶⁴ In addition, limited land tenure policy and pasture rights has also driven resource-related conflicts between settled Afghans and the Kuchi population. COVID-19 further affected Kuchi herders' livelihoods, when their typical transhumance across borders internally and internationally during the summer was limited due to the lockdown.⁶⁵ The Afghan government, with direct support from the international community, developed a Kuchi development strategy and committed to spending up to US\$30 million to support

⁵⁸ MRG. (2018). South Asia: state of minorities report 2018—annex. Retrieved from <https://www.misaal.ngo/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/afghanistan.pdf>

⁵⁹ Amnesty International (2021) Afghanistan: 13 Hazara Killed by Taliban Fighters in Daykundi Province - New Investigation.

⁶⁰ Hasrat, M. H. (2019). Over a century of persecution: massive human rights violation against Hazaras in Afghanistan. <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Racism/SR/Call/mhhasrat.pdf>;

Chioyenda, M. (2014) 'The Illumination of Marginality: How Ethnic Hazaras in Bamyan, Afghanistan, Perceive the Lack of Electricity as Discrimination', Central Asian Survey 33.4: 449-62, DOI: 10.1080/02634937.2014.987967

⁶¹ TOLO news. (2016). "Nearly 99% of Hindus, Sikhs left Afghanistan in last three decades." <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan/nearly-99-hindus-sikhs-left-afghanistan-last-three-decades>

⁶² FAO. (2020b). Adapting Targeted Support to Kuchi Pastoralists in Afghanistan for COVID-19. <https://www.fao.org/3/cb1546en/cb1546en.pdf>

⁶³ MRGI. (2021b). Afghanistan: Kuchis. World Directory of minorities and indigenous people. <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/kuchis/>

⁶⁴ *ibid.*

⁶⁵ FAO. (2020b). Adapting Targeted Support to Kuchi Pastoralists in Afghanistan for COVID-19. <https://www.fao.org/3/cb1546en/cb1546en.pdf>

nomadic and seminomadic communities,⁶⁶ but since the regime change these plans have not been implemented.

The limited protection against groups also extends to women who are in most vulnerable positions such as widows, women-headed households, women with disabilities etc. and other individuals with different gender orientations, with the situation also worsening since the shift in power. There is some evidence of increased threats and attacks on some of these groups since the transition.⁶⁷ Evidence of gender discrimination is more consistently reported, though still likely to be underestimated. There is considerable variation in gender norms across the country, due to regional, ethnic, religious, cultural and security differences.⁶⁸ Even so, in 2019, Afghanistan was in the top 10 countries globally in terms of discrimination against women in social institutions (formal and informal laws, social norms, and practices), as reflected through the Social Institutions and Gender Index. Moreover, even before the political transition, a KI (Herat, July 2021) reflected that the insecurity “has highly impacted women. Girls even stopped going to schools in addition to leaving jobs outside; they are not able to walk out of home courageously”. It is perhaps for these reasons that female-headed households are associated with a higher probability of extreme food poverty, as well as hunger (Table A2), a result that persists even after controlling for marital status.

After 15 August 2021, there is evidence that women are experiencing a reversal of their rights through a range of policies and regulations. Systematic gender-based discrimination is now widespread across sectors. Even in the health sector, where there have been some attempts to ensure women’s involvement, female health practitioners continue to face restrictions, including around who they may communicate with. In other sectors, measures have been introduced that limit access to employment and education, and the right to peaceful assembly,⁶⁹ such as the requirement to be accompanied outside the home by a Mahram as mentioned earlier. Reflecting this, Kubra (F, Herat, April 2022) suggests that the situation has further deteriorated this year:

Women are more vulnerable than all. Women become more dependent on men. They are not allowed to work outside and have no more income. They have to wait for men to provide them food, cloth and other needs... They don’t have freedom. They have to sit at home and do household tasks, they will not be able to get income by doing household tasks... these economic crises and poverty put more pressure on women.

This reflection, one shared by other respondents, suggests that women in poverty are particularly hard hit, unable to solve their financial problems as a result of restrictions on mobility.

In the Social Institutions and Gender Index, Afghanistan scored particularly weakly in the dimension of restricted physical integrity, capturing violence against women, reproductive autonomy, missing women, and female genital mutilation. Limited autonomy and voice are often linked, where for example Afghanistan also scores low on global measures of voice

⁶⁶ Siddique, A. (2021, April 08). “Afghan nomads mourn a vanishing way of life.” Gandahara. Retrieved from <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/afghan-nomads-mourn-a-vanishing-way-of-life/31192945.html>

⁶⁷ HRW. (2022a). ‘Even if you go to the skies, we’ll find you’: LGBT people in Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover. HRW report: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2022/01/26/even-if-you-go-skies-well-find-you/lgbt-people-afghanistan-after-taliban-takeover>

⁶⁸ Allouche, et al. “Needs and Vulnerability in Afghanistan”.

⁶⁹ UNSC. (2022, June 23). Amid plummeting humanitarian conditions in Afghanistan, women, girls ‘are being written out of society’ by de facto authorities, briefers warn Security Council. Meetings coverage, Security Council, 9075th meeting, SC/14946. <https://press.un.org/en/2022/sc14946.doc.htm>;

HRW. (2022d). Afghanistan: events of 2021. World report. HRW report. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2022/country-chapters/afghanistan>

and accountability (WGI, 2022).⁷⁰ Moreover, with respect to gender, though there is the Elimination of Violence against Women law, it was weakly enforced. Partly as a result, in 2008 it was estimated that as much as 87.2% of women continue to experience different types of violence including physical and psychological violence and forced marriages in their lifetime (Human Rights Council, 2015; Global Rights, 2008).⁷¹ In the PLSA in 2022, 17% of respondents noted that there was at least one incidence of violence against women in their household in the 6 months preceding the survey that was reported to be as a result of COVID-19 restrictions or economic stress. There were strong subnational variations, with rates highest in rural areas of Badghis (47.6%) and Nuristan (46.8%), though rates were also high in urban Herat (35.1%).

4.1.3 Economic, environmental and political vulnerability

Key messages

- In recent years pre-pandemic, the scaling back of troops and aid reduced revenue. Into 2022, shocks related to food price, income, and employment were frequently reported. During the pandemic in 2019/20, these shocks were also associated with a higher probability of poverty, welfare loss and hunger.
- Afghanistan is experiencing contemporaneous crises including drought, floods, COVID-19, insecurity, political and economic crises, and displacement. Layering of crises heightens the probability of welfare loss, which has worsened since the transition.
- Aggravating the situation is political fragmentation and, recently, the shift in power, which has heightened people's vulnerabilities. There has also been a fragmented aid environment over the last decades and continuing into the hugely challenging context of operation today, which has resulted in limited impacts on the welfare of Afghans.

The limited formal institutional functioning or in some cases the absence of (formal and/or informal) institutions in Afghanistan has also created a context of limited support to individual and household resilience capacities, resulting in heightened vulnerability. For example, economic institutions (e.g., the banking system and also labour markets) have been highly volatile in the face of a series of shocks. On top of this, in the absence of strong formal institutions to promote climate mitigation or adaptation, populations have been particularly susceptible to climate induced shocks and stressors such as drought, further constraining livelihoods. The lack of formal judicial institutions also limits people's ability to seek recourse for grievances. Relatedly, limited government effectiveness has contributed to heightened physical insecurity, though some reports point to greater physical security today than before 2021. This section discusses the economic context, followed by human and natural hazards and how they have affected wellbeing. In this discussion, we consider formal as well as informal institutions, where the boundaries may sometimes be blurry, but where consideration of informal institutions is key in the Afghan context.

Economic shocks

Afghanistan has been marked by a series of economic shocks over the last few years. The country's real GDP annual growth between 2001 and 2018 was one of the fastest in low-income countries, reaching nearly 7 percent.⁷² However, the scaling back of troops and aid, even in the years before the pandemic, reduced a key source of state revenue. As one KI (June 2021) reflected:

⁷⁰ WGI. (2022). Worldwide Governance Indicators database.

⁷¹ Human Rights Council (2015). Report of the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, its Causes and Consequences. New York: General Assembly, United Nations. <https://evaw-global-database.unwomen.org/-/media/files/un%20women/vaw/country%20report/asia/afghanistan/afghanistan%20srvaaw.pdf?vs=2210>; Global Rights. (2008). Living with Violence: A National Report on Domestic Abuse in Afghanistan. Washington, DC: Global Rights.

⁷² World Bank, "Afghanistan's Development Gains".

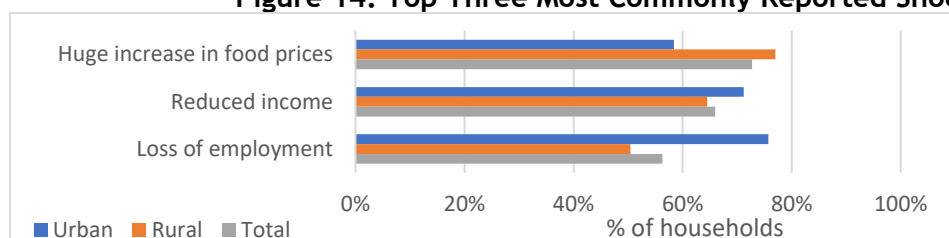
Since the withdrawal of international troops that have reduced aid and development projects in Kandahar city, people have lost their jobs. In addition to this, from the start of COVID-19, Kandahar province's job market has reduced significantly. People have stopped investing in the construction sector, and they stopped building new houses. The only job market that provides work opportunities to the people and where most people are busy is agriculture sector.

Economic growth, which expanded considerably since 2001 and was increasing into the mid-2010s albeit with volatility, slowed down largely as a result of this drop in aid.⁷³ Then, with the pandemic, the economy shrank by 2% in 2020.⁷⁴ By spring and into the summer 2020, there was a large increase in households reporting that their economic situation was worse off than it had been prior to the pandemic.⁷⁵ The situation further deteriorated after the political events of August 2021; for example, there was an estimated 35% decline in per capita income between the last 4 months of 2021 compared to the last 4 months of 2020.⁷⁶

Shocks related to food price, income, and employment were the most commonly reported in early 2022 (Figure 14). By mid-2022, 60% of households reported that economic shocks directly affected much of their household.⁷⁷ Price shocks reported by households during 2019/20 were moreover associated with a higher probability of poverty, welfare loss, and hunger (Table A2). These shocks were widely prevalent in the qualitative data, too, prompting downward mobility, as Abdul (M, Herat, July 2021) reflected:

We are going backward. The price of every food item has increased, for instance, before COVID-19, I was buying 10 litres of cooking for AFN600 to AFN700. Now, the price of the same cooking for 10 litres is more than AFN1,100. In addition to this, the price of one litre of petrol was AFN25 to AFN30. After the start of COVID-19, it has reached to AFN57. When we ask from shopkeepers why the price is so high, they said that borders are closed. There is no transportation between the countries that has impact on the import and exports. Therefore, the prices get higher day by day.

Figure 14: Top Three Most Commonly Reported Shocks



Source: Visualisation of PLSA 2022 data.

Widely prevalent losses in household income and rising inflation during the pandemic were aggravated following the shift in power in August 2021. This was accompanied by a plunge in foreign aid, and the virtual collapse of the country's banking system and associated liquidity crisis. On the former, given that the Afghan economy before August 2021 was three-quarters dependent on foreign assistance, the abrupt suspension of donor support last August meant that essential salaries in teaching, healthcare, and other essential workers

⁷³ At the same time, the importance of the informal economy contributing perhaps 80 percent to overall economic activity in the country, and the absence of illegal products like opium in national accounting means that formal growth metrics capture only a partial picture of the country's economy

⁷⁴ T. Arnold, and K. Sandor (2021, August 20). Factbox: crisis pushes Afghanistan's economy closer to the brink. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/crisis-pushes-afghanistans-economy-closer-brink-2021-08-20/>

⁷⁵ V. Diwakar (2022). Welfare of young adults amid covid-19, conflict, and disasters. London: CPAN.

⁷⁶ World Bank, "Afghanistan's Development Gains".

⁷⁷ WoAA. (2022). Mid year Whole of Afghanistan Assessment. Survey dataset. REACH Resource Centre. <https://www.reachresourcecentre.info/country/afghanistan/>

funded through key international donors was cut off.⁷⁸ Many salaried workers were not getting paid, while they and others continued to suffer through the absence of employment opportunities.

Moreover, the freezing of international reserves, revoking of the Afghan Central Bank's credentials, and suspension of international settlements and grant transfers following August 15 contributed to a cash liquidity crisis and loss of confidence, worsening the already critical situation the country was facing (UNDP, 2021; HRW, 2022; Byrd, 2022).⁷⁹ These liquidity problems also affected livelihoods of people in poverty in both rural and urban areas. For example, it reduced access to agricultural inputs, and potentially exacerbated pressures on informal exchanges such as through favours, reciprocity and social credit.⁸⁰ Another concern is that by affecting urban work, it also limited the role of migration to urban areas as a coping response to drought and other shocks.⁸¹ Finally, while the national budget for the first quarter of this year suggested that the Taliban would be collecting sufficient revenues to pay for most of its civilian operating costs, civil service salary payments have been sporadic.⁸² Moreover, the annual budget for this year anticipates a US\$501 million deficit.⁸³ Despite the removal of barriers to transactions going into Afghanistan, international banks still consider the risk of violating international anti-money laundering legislation to be too high. The central bank lacks the independence needed to provide confidence for the release of frozen reserves or to attract foreign direct investment.

Layered crises: natural and human hazards

Additionally, contemporaneous crises marked variably by insecurity, disasters, and COVID-19 have affected the dimensions of income and human assets.⁸⁴ Regression results suggest that insecurity and displacement was associated with a higher probability of hunger and welfare loss (Table A2). Other research moreover finds that the type of conflict matters, where communities exposed to conflict resulting in civilian fatalities compared to military casualties alone are more likely to be in poverty.⁸⁵ Conflict affected livelihoods directly through insecurity and mortality, and indirectly through effects on the investment climate:

Due to insecurity no one would like to invest. They have the fear of abduction or terror attack, and they may lose their investment... When a person wants to invest or start a business, their blackmailed, abducted and loot, their resources and they are in risk. Therefore, people do not like to invest in Afghanistan. (Zar, M, Herat, July 2021)

The effects of insecurity moreover have been heightened during the pandemic:

I had a job 5 years ago. My wife had a job. My daughter and my son had a job. Now that I say the security situation of the country is deteriorating, we, the nation, are

⁷⁸ HRW. (2022b). Afghanistan: economic roots of the humanitarian crisis.

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/03/01/afghanistan-economic-roots-humanitarian-crisis>

⁷⁹ W. Byrd (2022, January 4). How to mitigate Afghanistan's economic and humanitarian crises.

<https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/01/how-mitigate-afghanistans-economic-and-humanitarian-crises>;

HRW. (2022b). Afghanistan: economic roots of the humanitarian crisis.

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/03/01/afghanistan-economic-roots-humanitarian-crisis>;

UNDP. (2021a). Policy Brief: The Afghani Banking and Financial System Situation Report. UNDP.

⁸⁰ Allouche, et al. "Needs and Vulnerability in Afghanistan".

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Byrd, "How to Mitigate Afghanistan's Economic and Humanitarian Crises".

⁸³ M.Y. Yawar (2022, May 14). Taliban's First Annual Afghan Budget Foresees \$501 Million Deficit. Reuters.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/talibans-first-annual-afghan-budget-foresees-501-million-deficit-2022-05-14/>

⁸⁴ Ahmadi, B. et al. (2021) Food Security and COVID-19 in Afghanistan: A Two-Sided Battlefield, *Tropical Medicine and Health* 49:77 <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41182-021-00370-8>

⁸⁵ Joya et al. "Understanding the Drivers of Poverty in Afghanistan".

also suffering. We are all unemployed now. The government do not support us. (Qasim, M, Herat, July 2021)

In the early morning, when people want to bring milk to the market. They may sell their dairy product for AFN200 to AFN300, but there are thieves who stop people and take their mobile phone, which may cost AFN6,000; and even they took motorbike from people. Such incidents happened a lot. Security situation has a lot of impact on farmers and everyone. As a result, it has affected our income and livelihood. (Shamsul, M, Herat, July 2021)

The regression results point to environmental or agriculture shocks being associated with a higher probability of hunger (Table A2). There are geographic variations to these across Afghanistan. Flooding is the most frequent natural hazard, though earthquakes have caused the most fatalities historically.⁸⁶ Floods have been prevalent especially in Hairatan (north) and the Helmand basin (west) with high flood hazard, though Kabul has the largest population affected on average. Earthquakes are also common in the northeastern region of the country, while drought risk is highest in the Helmand basin.⁸⁷ Drought, floods, and pandemics in turn intensified poverty in Afghanistan and limited access to regular income sources and food. One respondent recalls:

We have floods in January and February, which is an excellent time to irrigate our land. But this time, the flood came when our wheat harvest was almost ready for reaping... So this year, the flood was very destructive... In the last couple of years, the whole village was faced with shortage of irrigation water or drought. However, as they had a better livelihood [earlier], they had managed to dig tube well and irrigated their land. (Dost, M, Herat, July 2021)

This is also reflected in the wider literature, which observes for example that 70% of disasters in Afghanistan in 2016 were floods, which resulted in food shortages.⁸⁸

There is furthermore a correlation between the three layered crises (insecurity, disasters, COVID-19) and the probability of households experiencing welfare loss.⁸⁹ This layering has been compounded after August 15. For example, while Qasim (Herat, July 2021) was able to meet costs from successive ill health episodes of family members by relying on the family's diversified income sources from agriculture and salaried employment, after mortgaging his land the opportunities to pay back the mortgage were soon drying up in the context of depressed labour markets during COVID-19. The death of his father meant that he and his brother became the main breadwinners, thus unable to migrate, while the further loss of work of his sisters since the transition meant that the family was unable to rely on the same level of diversification even when compared to the time of COVID-19 before the transition (Figure 15).

At the same time, the same respondent noted that “regarding security, now there are no opposing groups to fight against each other. There is no war right now.” This was shared by Ghairat (M, Herat, July 2021): “Regarding security, I can say that 70 percent of crimes and armed robbery of mobile phones and motorcycles have been reduced since the Taliban took the control of Afghanistan”. However, Zarafshan (F, Herat, July 2021) qualified this perception of security: “Security situation is good, but people are living in terror. We are

⁸⁶ World Bank. (2017). *Disaster Risk Profile: Afghanistan*. The World Bank and GFDRR.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

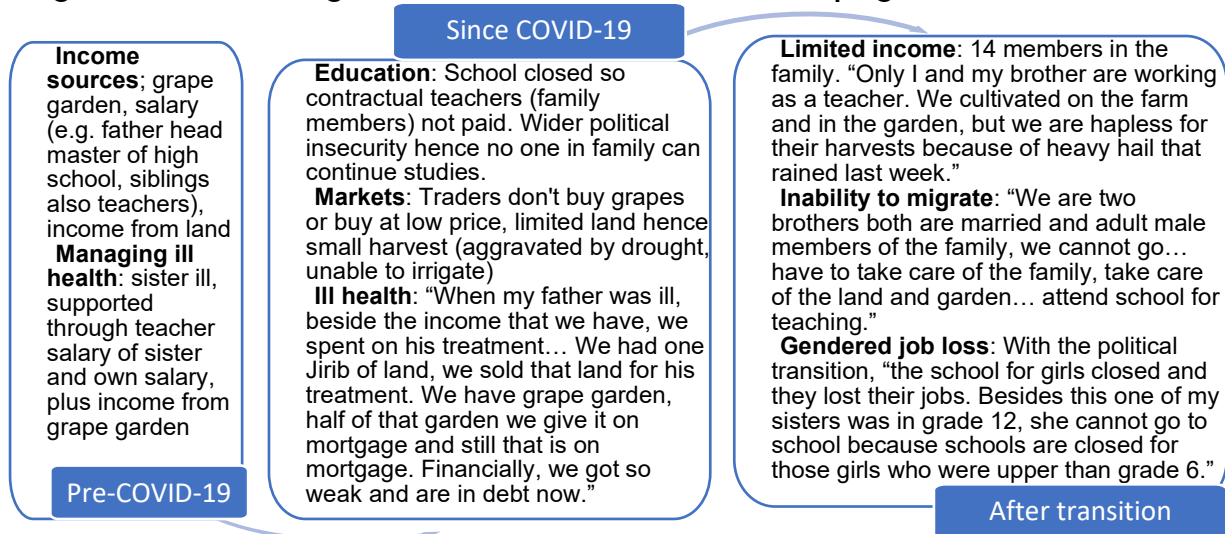
⁸⁸ OCHA. (2016). *Afghanistan: Overview of Natural Disasters in 2016*.

<https://reliefweb.int/map/afghanistan/afghanistan-overview-natural-disasters-2016-natural-disaster-incidents-recorded-ocha>

⁸⁹ Diwakar, V. (2022). *Welfare of Young Adults amid COVID-19, Conflict, and Disasters*. London: CPAN.

going out in a panic, or if any of my family members go out, I am worried until he/she comes back”.

Figure 15: Intersecting Vulnerabilities and Shocks Limit Coping Potential to Ill Health



Source: Interview with Qasim (M, Herat, April 2022).

The multiple crises have also driven internal migration as well as displacement, which further renders populations vulnerable, especially IDPs, forcibly displaced, and returnees.⁹⁰ Reasons for displacements are commonly attributed to climate induced shocks and stressors including storms, floods and droughts, as well as conflict. In 2020, 3.5 million people were internally displaced, with over 404,000 of them associated with the surge in violence.⁹¹ This has also resulted in refugees, undocumented returnees, and child soldiers all experiencing different forms of vulnerability. In addition, groups including IDPs, migrants, and repatriates are vulnerable to different hazards. These groups lack employment, access to essential services like education and health, aid distribution, and proper shelter and housing in many cases (KI, May 2022). Similarly, internally displaced people experience a higher probability of loss of resources and hardly find wage labour in places of destination.⁹²

Part of the reason for heightened vulnerability amongst IDPs, beyond the economic climate, is due to limited social connections:

Our life was relatively better in our village... People knew us as a daily wage labourer. We were busying in people's land and gardens and had a sort of income to support our family... in Kandahar city, we lost our social connection. We cannot find daily wage labour and face a lot of hurdles and challenging times. (Qasim, M, Herat, July 2021)

When we were in our village, we had a good connection with our relatives. In a time of need, I was getting help from them, and in financial issues, I was taking a loan from them. However, when displaced to Herat province, everything has changed. I do know anyone in this place. Therefore, in a time of need, I cannot ask for help or a loan. (Wali, M, Herat, July 2021)

⁹⁰ Nemat, O., Diwakar, V., Ghafoori, I., and Azadmanesh, S. (2022). Livelihoods and welfare amidst layered crises in Afghanistan. *IDS Bulletin* 53(3).

⁹¹ Ahmadi, et al. (2021). "Food Security and COVID-19 in Afghanistan".

⁹² Diwakar, V. (2022). *Welfare of Young Adults amid COVID-19, Conflict, and Disasters*. London: CPAN.

Finally, all of these crises have continued and amplified since 15 August. Ghairat (M, Herat, July 2021) spoke of the multi-faceted nature of the challenge which he linked partly to the changing of the regime, and that has reached a boiling point:

- *Unemployment and being jobless is the main challenge and difficulty that affected our well-being. The economic condition of Afghanistan is getting worst.*
- *The drought increased the crises as well. We and the people in the village have nothing to eat. Extreme poverty exists in our district.*
- *Besides this, the prices have risen. We are not able to buy a kilo of chicken meat. Last year, three kg of oil was AFN320 AFN but now three kg of oil is AFN600. You can find everything on market, but the prices are high, and you cannot buy anything. There is no control, and all shopkeepers select a price, and no one controls them.*
- *We don't have access to health services and medicine.*

Political fragmentation and aid dependency

The constraints noted above have been affected by a context of weak governance. Power has long been fragmented across groups in the country, whether along ethnic divisions, due to repeated international interventions disrupting longer-term state-building, or the erosion of local level governance through instability and conflict.⁹³ The 2001 settlement allocated power to commanders who leveraged power and access to aid to dominate the political and economic arena, often through predatory action.⁹⁴ This contributed to endemic corruption that further undermined state legitimacy.⁹⁵ Off-budget grants for security objectives aggravated this political fragmentation.⁹⁶ Though reconstruction and institution-building were central goals of the state-building process,⁹⁷ it lacked a longer-term strategic vision for transformational change.⁹⁸ As a result, the governance context, characterised by weak state capacity amidst insecurity, limited the government's ability to provide basic health and education services and other service delivery.⁹⁹ The situation has deteriorated since the shift in power, further aggravated by the volatility of aid and frozen assets.

There has been inadequate consideration of political dynamics and patronage-based governance and economic systems in programme design and support to institution-building more broadly.¹⁰⁰ As a result, efforts to build civil service institutions that could support sustainability of interventions have seen limited outcomes. In some cases, patronage systems have contributed to discrimination in selecting vulnerable groups for programme involvement, and some projects and programmes that were meant to improve welfare and be "insulated" from insecurity have inadvertently exacerbated conflict.¹⁰¹ Under the current context, the patronage system may be even further narrowed to a one-party rule. This may limit scope for inclusivity of decision-making - even to the exclusion of former patrons and

⁹³ World Bank. (2021). "Afghanistan: Risk and Resilience Assessment".

⁹⁴ Barma, N. (2017). *The Peacebuilding Puzzle*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.; Sharan, T., & Bose, S. (2016). Political networks and the 2014 Afghan presidential election: power restructuring, ethnicity and state stability. *Conflict, Security, and Development*, 16(6).

⁹⁵ World Bank, "Afghanistan: Risk and Resilience Assessment"; Barma, "The Peacebuilding Puzzle"; Clark, K. (2019). *A Maelstrom of Militias: Takhar, a Case Study of Strongmen Co-opting the ALP*. Kabul: Afghanistan Analysts Network.

⁹⁶ Barma, "The Peacebuilding Puzzle".

⁹⁷ BTI. (2022). Country Report: Afghanistan. https://bti-project.org/fileadmin/api/content/en/downloads/reports/country_report_2022_AFG.pdf

⁹⁸ SIGAR. (2021). What we need to learn: lessons from twenty years of Afghanistan reconstruction. <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-21-46-LL.pdf> (18.03.22)

⁹⁹ World Bank. (2016). *Afghanistan: promoting education during times of increased fragility*. World Bank <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/280721531831663216/pdf/124921-REVISED-AFGHANISTANPROMOTINGEDUCATIONPublication.pdf> (25.04.22);

Zurcher, C. (2020). *Meta-review of evaluations of development assistance to Afghanistan, 2008-2018*. Chapeau paper. <https://www.sicherheitneudenken.de/media/download/variant/198198>

¹⁰⁰ World Bank, "Afghanistan Welfare Survey".

¹⁰¹ A. Pain, et al. (2022). *Agribusiness Meets Alternative Development: Lessons for Afghanistan's Licit and Illicit Commodity Markets*. Kabul: AREU.

elites - and jeopardises development in certain communities and vulnerable groups. As one KI notes:

The interference of [local government] in our management and administrative work. The issue is more problematic during the time of staff recruitment. The interference... prevents us from recruiting highly qualified people that affect our service delivery... [Another] that we face and prevent us from providing high-quality services is no high-quality drugs are available in the market. (KII in Kandahar, 2022)

Western technocratic models were sometimes forced onto communities in past years, without adequate consideration of informal institutions which often provide a moral collective economy that can help limit exclusion.¹⁰² This includes key institutions that the Afghan population rely on for meeting their welfare and wellbeing needs, such as for dispute resolution and credit. Indeed, the qualitative data described in the last section points to shopkeepers who regularly gave items on credit during the pandemic, and even prior to that a system of informal credit that is reflected in the wider literature.¹⁰³ This type of exchange is hugely common in the Afghan context, for example during periods of poor harvest when villagers would commonly go to the “landlord or other households to collect grain given as zakat (obligatory alms)” (Pain, 2008).¹⁰⁴

4.2 Coping with vulnerability

4.2.1 Limited institutional support

Key messages

- Over the last 2 decades, there have been wide-ranging constraints affecting the effectiveness of aid programmes in improving the lives and livelihood of Afghans.
- More recently during COVID-19, the impact of implemented programmes have largely yet to be identified, but face constraints such as due to inadequacy of coverage or assistance value, and fragmentation. This situation does not appear to have improved into early 2022.

There is a long history of poor performance of aid interventions,¹⁰⁵ and limited sustainability of achieved results from existing interventions.¹⁰⁶ Short-term fixes to developmental issues have been a common response over the last two decades, with limited impacts on welfare, but instead contributing to an aid-dependent economic system.¹⁰⁷ Relatedly, there has also been a prioritisation of short-term political interests by international actors over longer-term sustainable development aid.¹⁰⁸ This has over time created perverse incentives to spend quickly, rather than sow the seeds for longer-term sustainable reforms.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰² SIGAR. (2021). What we need to learn: lessons from twenty years of Afghanistan reconstruction. <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-21-46-LL.pdf> (18.03.22);

Kantor, P. (2012). Understanding informal institutions in Afghanistan. MEI.

<https://www.mei.edu/publications/understanding-informal-institutions-afghanistan> (20.03.22)

¹⁰³ Pain, A., and Levine, S. (2022, forthcoming). Informal credit briefing note for FCDO.

Kantor, P. (2012). Understanding informal institutions in Afghanistan. MEI.

<https://www.mei.edu/publications/understanding-informal-institutions-afghanistan> (20.03.22)

¹⁰⁴ A. Pain (2008). Opium Poppy and Informal Credit. AREU Issue Paper Series. Kabul: AREU.

¹⁰⁵ M. Buheji and A. Korze (2020) Re-Emphasizing ‘Geography Role’ in Socioeconomic Solutions- A Pedagogical Approach Using Poverty Elimination as a Context. *American Journal of Economics* 10(6): 459-465.

¹⁰⁶ Zurcher, C. (2020). Meta-review of evaluations of development assistance to Afghanistan, 2008-2018.

Chapeau paper. <https://www.sicherheitneudenken.de/media/download/variant/198198>

¹⁰⁷ Allouche, et al. “Needs and Vulnerability in Afghanistan”. Jackson, A., & Nemat, O. (2018). Politics over Evidence: Questioning the Link between Service Delivery and State Legitimacy in Afghanistan. Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium, August, 28.

¹⁰⁸ Jackson and Nemat, “Politics over Evidence”.

¹⁰⁹ SIGAR. (2021). What we need to learn: lessons from twenty years of Afghanistan reconstruction.

<https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-21-46-LL.pdf> (18.03.22)

Recognising that most people in poverty and vulnerable to climate change continue to reside in rural areas, a range of programmes have been designed to increase the resilience of rural residents. The TUP (Target the Ultra Poor) in Afghanistan between 2015 and 2018 was aimed at the poorest populations to increase consumption and food security. An impact evaluation found that this programme has increased household revenue and decreased indebtedness, while also improving child health, education, and women empowerment.¹¹⁰ The Comprehensive Agriculture and Rural Development Facility and the Community-Based Agriculture and Rural Development project employed a bottom-up approach to attempt to respond to people's needs. These programmes have influenced farmers' decisions in crop substitution for cash crops. However, a review of the Comprehensive Agriculture and Rural Development Facility project found that market regulations by powerful traders disadvantaged producers, while the attempt of the project to insulate itself from the context of insecurity ended up reinforcing the residual nature of hinterlands.¹¹¹

To protect against vulnerability during COVID-19, a range of programmes were implemented, as noted in the last section. The Afghan government in 2020 implemented a humanitarian response Food Security and Agriculture Cluster programme, with the prime objective of food security for the most vulnerable people. Under this programme, the authorities have distributed agriculture and livestock kits to provide meals and empower the rural workforce.¹¹² The World Bank implemented the COVID-19 Relief Effort for Afghan Communities and Households (REACH) to provide temporary cash transfers to 2.7 million households.¹¹³ To help support IDPs and migrants, many international organisations, including OCHA, have prepared shelter programmes to reduce population density.¹¹⁴ For children, during lockdown, many schools and international organisations supported TV channels to teach students. Other actors introduced alternatives, for instance, paper-based self-learning materials, audio, and video learning. After the school opening, catchup and the extension of classes to the winter season were among the coping strategies used.¹¹⁵

Some programmes' impacts are yet to be identified, and others experienced considerable constraints that limit their effectiveness. For example, in a survey conducted by NRC in six provinces, only 23% of students had access to a television, and the majority were not aware of the educational programmes offered through television programmes and other media channels.¹¹⁶ More generally, according to the World Bank, various support programmes in social protection and social safety nets are fragmented and unbudgeted.¹¹⁷ As a result, many respondents in the qualitative data did not receive aid, or felt it was inadequate:

People have more expectation for aid distribution. The aid packages that they have received was not sufficient for them. Only 10% of people of the poor people at PZ district have received this aid. The remaining 90% poor people were not able to get it. It was quite difficult to identify the neediest people, because since last few years, the financial situation of the people is very poor, there is drought. (KII)

¹¹⁰ Bedoya et al. (2019). No Household Left Behind: Afghanistan targeting the ultra poor impact evaluation. The World Bank Group

¹¹¹ Pain, et al., "Agribusiness Meets Alternative Development".

¹¹² Ahmadi, et al. "Food Security and COVID-19 in Afghanistan".

¹¹³ Burattini, B., et al. (2022). Afghanistan: Needs assessment. International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth.

¹¹⁴ OCHA. (2020). Humanitarian Response Plan Afghanistan.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ NRC. (2020). On the Brink: displacement-affected communities in Afghanistan during the COVID-19 pandemic. <https://www.nrc.no/globalassets/pdf/briefing-notes/on-the-brink/on-the-brink.pdf>

¹¹⁷ Albrecht et al. (2021). Afghanistan's Free Fall - Return of the Taliban and Flight as a Last Resort. 56 CESifo Forum 6 / 2021 November Volume 22.

Finally, even where support is offered, groups like IDPs are still prone and vulnerable to other shocks, including a weak financial situation, lack of winter clothing, and other households' essential equipment and proper health and education services.¹¹⁸

Social safety nets continue to be largely inadequate after 15 August. Survey analysis from October-December 2021 found that just 8% of households had received social assistance, mainly from UN agencies and INGOs.¹¹⁹ Non-humanitarian, non-contributory flagship social assistance programmes in the country lack government support, while social insurance has been mainly targeted to public sector formal workers.¹²⁰ The shift from development to humanitarian aid modalities post-August 2021 has seen the number of safety net programmes and their scale increase, with many programmes doing similar interventions, often with insufficient coordination to reduce duplication and enhance synergies. Many weakly coordinated projects in turn have created a fragmented aid environment,¹²¹ exacerbated by a context of very high need:

With the limited funding because of area competing for priorities on the one hand, on the other hand, with face with a lot of crises as we are not in a position to target almost everyone in need in various areas. (Kil in Kabul, 2022)

In the qualitative data, Dawood (M, Herat, July 2021) noted that a small amount of aid was distributed by WFP that covered around 40% of the district population, when “all the resident of the district is eligible for receiving humanitarian aid because there are no work, no employment, and no income and all the people are living in poverty.” Dawood also said that the “amount of aid is very less. They have given a sack of wheat of 50 kg to three families who are living separately. A 5-litre bottle cooking oil was given to five families; each family received 1 litre of cooking oil. One kilo of sugar to each family.”

The discussion above reflects a hugely challenging context that donors are facing, where needs are high, funding targets are not met, prices are rising, and there is a lack of liquidity in the country and means through which to get cash into Afghanistan. In this context, donors are facing a lot of trade-offs and difficult decisions about the allocation of limited resources. At the same time, as noted above, the number of programmes and their scale is increasing, and there are challenges in aid coordination underpinned by a longer-term strategic vision as detailed in section 4.1.

4.2.2 Individual and household forms of coping

Key messages

- In the absence of effective formal institutional support and with the (often externally imposed) devaluation of informal institutions, households are often driven to erosive forms of coping. Since the political transition, this has included borrowing money for food, decreasing spending on health and education, and selling assets and spending savings. In this process, they render themselves less able to deal with future shocks.
- The reduced ability of many households interviewed to rely on social capital in contexts of insecurity and displacement, and limited economic opportunities, has contributed to

¹¹⁸ OCHA. (2021). Humanitarian Need Overview of Afghanistan. OCHA.

¹¹⁹ World Bank. (2022). Afghanistan Welfare Monitoring Survey, Round 1. <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/138d0857c9a66e7e2a963a1a6137860e-0310062022/original/Afghanistan-Welfare-Monitoring-Survey.pdf> (25.05.22)

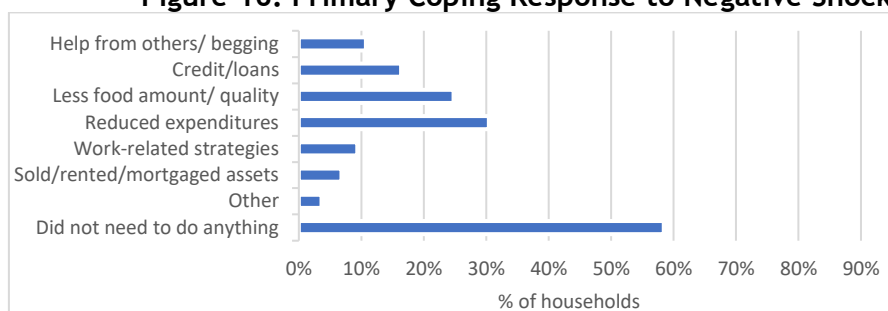
¹²⁰ Burattini, B. (2020). COVID-19 and social protection in South Asia; Afghanistan. IPC one pager 447. https://ipcig.org/pub/eng/OP447_COVID_19_and_social_protection_in_South_Asia_Afghanistan.pdf

¹²¹ E. Kapstein (2017). *Aid and Stabilization in Afghanistan: What do the Data Say?* Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace; ATR Consulting (2018). *Aid Effectiveness in Afghanistan*. Kabul: ATR; M. Bowden, and A. McKechnie (2020). *Afghanistan Partnership Framework: Conditionality without Ownership; Tactics without Strategy?* Afghanistan Lessons for Peace Expert Note, London: Overseas Development Institute.

a context of hopelessness, where people know what can improve their wellbeing but do not have the resources to implement these strategies.

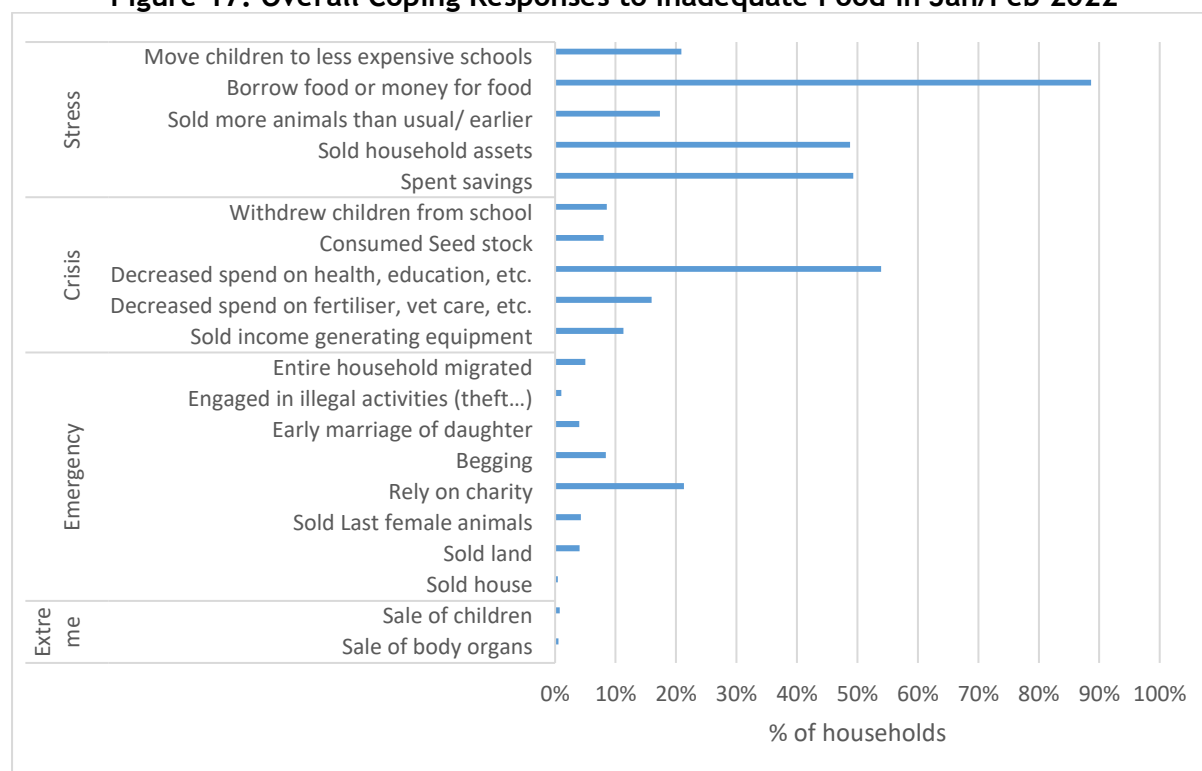
In the absence of or insufficient institutional support and with income loss and food insecurity, many households have no option but to resort to erosive forms of coping that limits their ability to develop longer-term resilience (Figures 16 and 17). In response to shocks, many households did nothing. Out of the active coping responses, most households reduced expenditures. Others before and after the political transition also reduced quality of food and the number of meals per day as outlined in Figures 16 and 17.

Figure 16: Primary Coping Response to Negative Shocks in 2019/20



Source: authors' analysis of IE&LFS 2019/20 data.

Figure 17: Overall Coping Responses to Inadequate Food in Jan/Feb 2022



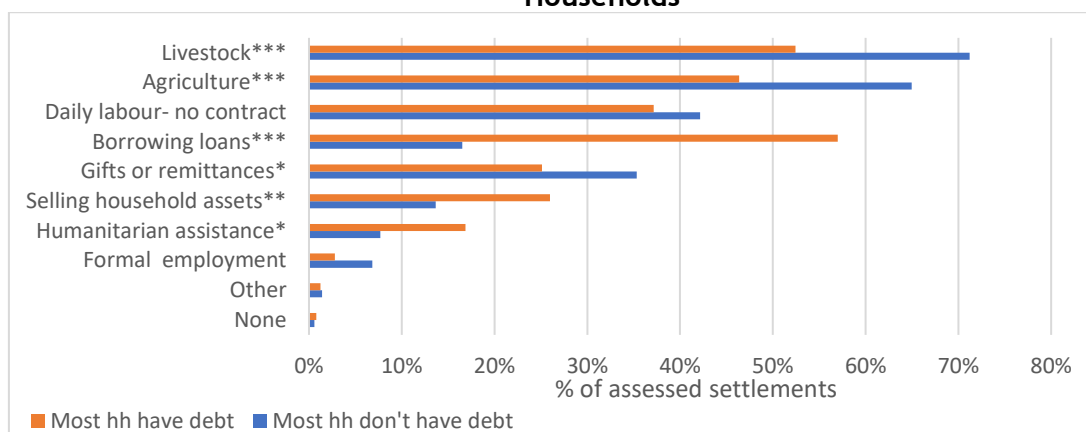
Source: visualisation of PLSA 2022 data.

By 2022, to cope with inadequate food or money to buy food, most households (92%) resorted to borrowing (Figure 17). Informal credit systems are used for consumption smoothing and for purchasing inputs for farming activities, representing “a key social mechanism by which the Afghan households manage survival in an increasingly hostile economic environment in the country”.¹²² The most common reason for borrowing money or in-kind items was to obtain food (97.6%), followed by meeting health needs (69.5%). Across 31 provinces surveyed

¹²² Pain, A., and Levine, S. (2022, forthcoming). Informal credit briefing note for FCDO.

in 2022, areas where households relied on agriculture, livestock, or gifts or remittances as their primary income sources (Figure 18) were less likely to be reported by key informants as heavily indebted. Instead, areas where households relied on humanitarian assistance, selling household assets, and of course borrowing loans for their primary income were more likely to be heavily indebted (authors’ analysis of HSMP 2022).¹²³ Returnees have also been at greater risk of falling into debt.¹²⁴ In the qualitative data, there were many reasons for loans, including wedding and funeral costs, bride price, medical expenses, and daily expenses.¹²⁵ These social and economic expenses make it easy to understand the emphasis households place on investing in social networks.¹²⁶

Figure 18: Primary Income, Disaggregated by Settlements with Most Indebted Households



Source: Authors’ analysis of HSMP 2022 data.

Other common forms of coping were reducing expenditures on health and education, spending savings, and selling household assets. Limited savings and lower spending on education can limit sustained escapes from poverty. Household asset sales and less spending on health would implicitly also render households more vulnerable to impoverishment. This is a double whammy on top of food insecurity that contributes to lower wellbeing and a higher probability of poverty. It also means that households have less resilience capacities to deal with future shocks, particularly given the instrumental role of good health and education in nurturing wellbeing.

Work-related strategies were also common, though for many households they were already engaging in some of these strategies regardless of the presence of the shock, given the permeation of wider systemic economic crises. After 15 August, some families have resorted to distress migration (Figure 19) given the absence of economic opportunities at home. This has been at the expense of continued education of young men: “For my son who went to Iran, it was a time for him to attend university and learn something, but I send him to Iran for work and to make money for us” (Ghairat, M, Herat, July 2021). This limits development of education as intangible resilience capacity, with negative implications for their longer-term earning potential. Moreover, this pathway is riddled with uncertainty and risk:

Those who spend more than 5 or 10 years in Iran the new a way of making money. But the new people who went to Iran are not able to work because if they start working, the police arrest them and send them back to Afghanistan... It is about

¹²³ HSMP. (2022). Humanitarian Situation Monitoring Pilot. Survey dataset. REACH Resource Centre. <https://www.reachresourcecentre.info/country/afghanistan/>

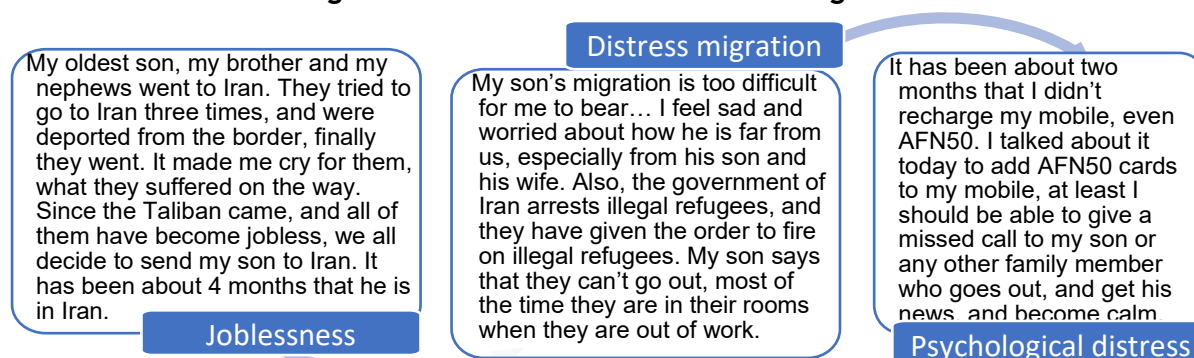
¹²⁴ IDMC and NRC (2017) Global Report on Internal Displacement: GRID 2017, Geneva: Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre and Norwegian Refugee Council.

¹²⁵ Nemat, O., Diwakar, V., Ghafoori, I., and Azadmanesh, S. (2022). Livelihoods and welfare amidst layered crises in Afghanistan. *IDS Bulletin* 53(3).

¹²⁶ Pain, A., and Levine, S. (2022, forthcoming). Informal credit briefing note for FCDO.

eight months that my son is in Iran, and he was able to send me AFN7,500 only. He is telling me that the Iranian people do not pay the salary of Afghans who are illegally migrated to Iran. Therefore, we cannot claim to the police for receiving our salaries, if we do this, the police arrest us and deport us to Afghanistan. (Ghairat, M, Herat, July 2021).

Figure 19: Push Factors for Distress Migration



Source: Interview with Zarafshan (F, Herat, July 2021).

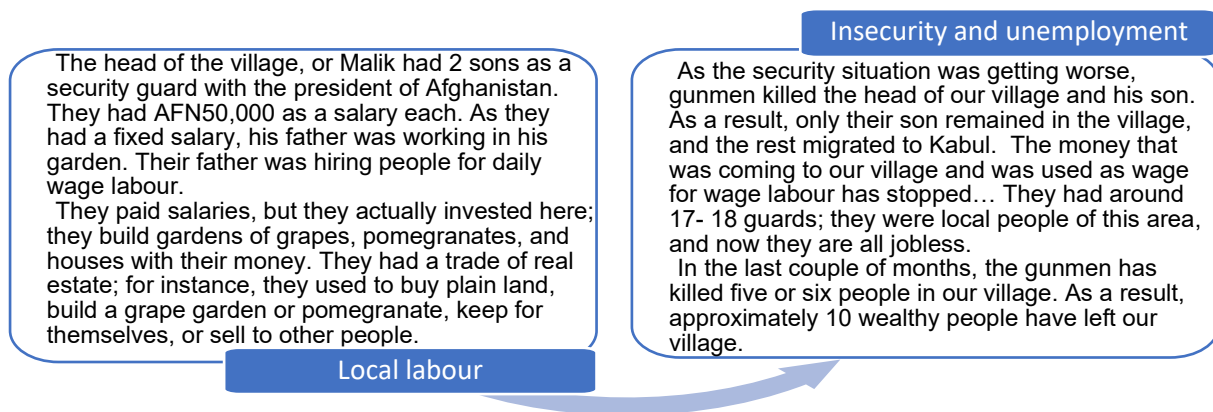
Another consequence of the contraction of licit economies noted elsewhere may be the expansion of illicit economies, not readily captured in national accounting, but which offers low-risk crops in a high-risk environment. For example, the uncertainty since August 2021 has contributed to rising opium prices, increasing incentives for its cultivation (alongside methamphetamine and cannabis) amidst rising poverty and food insecurity.¹²⁷ The increased opium productivity has been a factor in increased agricultural incomes in certain areas of the country. At the same time, this in turn has the potential to render people more vulnerable to drug use and accompanying disorders, further worsened by limited drug treatment options and healthcare access more generally, as well as harsh conditions for those detained in connection to drug abuse.¹²⁸

In the qualitative data, support from wealthier people in the community had been a common strategy, but one that dried up during the pandemic when whole communities were affected by economic crises, and further affected by insecurity. In some cases, targeted violence had spill overs that affected community welfare beyond those physically affected by conflict (Figure 20). A landlord in Kandahar (M, July 2021) noted about another family:

One family used to help poor people in every 'Eid and distributed charity both in cash and in-kind; for example, they distributed money equivalent to the price of 6 cows; to poor people. His wife was a very generous woman. When a person or a family did not have money for construction, she used to go to his house and pay money to such people. It was typical for them to pay for poor people's weddings and build houses for those in need. Still, when the husband got killed, all of them went to Kabul, and now no one is helping poor people.

Figure 20: Spill overs in Targeted Violence

¹²⁷ UNODC. (2021). Drug situation in Afghanistan 2021: latest findings and emerging threats. https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Afghanistan/Afghanistan_brief_Nov_2021.pdf
¹²⁸ Ibid.



Source: Interview with landlord (M, Kandahar, July 2021).

Children were also part of household coping mechanisms, with long-term consequences for intergenerational persistence of poverty and vulnerability. Just over 4% of households undertook early marriage of daughters in response to food shortages in early 2022, and 5% by mid-2022.¹²⁹ However, this figure may considerably understate true prevalence, given that not all households had daughters of an early marriage age, while others may have adopted this strategy in relation to other shocks and stressors if not food shortages. Child marriage in Afghanistan has been used for different purposes, such as a coping response to pay the dues of low-income families, and also sometimes settling down the rivalries among the families and tribes.¹³⁰ Drivers for child marriage include social and economic deprivations, adverse social norms and traditional practices at the community level, religious imperatives, community attitudes, and traditional gender roles.¹³¹ There are a host of negative impacts, not least in health such as pregnancy complications, infant mortality rate, and chronic illness.

Child labour has also been common, with 9% of girls and boys aged 5-17 years engaging in economic activity, according to IE&LFS 2019/20 data. Children are also at risk of trafficking and forced labour in the country.¹³² Of children who were working, over three-quarters were in hazardous work conditions, and were most commonly exposed to extreme cold, heat or humidity, and also dust, fumes or gas. In addition, just under a quarter (22.6%) of working children were injured or fell ill because of the work. At the same time, many qualitative respondents, especially IDPs, felt that they had no other option but to send their children for work:

Since we have come here, our problems have increased. My husband doesn't have a proper and regular job, my sons are going to the streets to collect plastics. If they could collect some, they can get at least AFN10 per kg. Some people say not to send my sons on the streets, it is not good for their health. But, what can we do? If I don't send them what to eat, we will die by poverty before dying by corona (Anees, F, Herat, July 2021).

More generally, since 15 August, there is some evidence that there has been a sense of hopelessness according to the qualitative data, not necessarily or solely due to the security

¹²⁹ WFP. (2022) Pre-Lean Season Assessment survey dataset.;

WoAA. (2022). Mid year Whole of Afghanistan Assessment. Survey dataset. REACH Resource Centre.

<https://www.reachresourcecentre.info/country/afghanistan/>

¹³⁰ UNFPA. (n.d.). Child marriage. UNFPA.

<https://afghanistan.unfpa.org/en/node/15233#:~:text=Child%20marriages%20are%20illegal%20but,along%20the%20borders%20with%20Pakistan.> Accessed 08 June 2022

¹³¹ MOLSAMD and UNICEF. (2018). Child marriage in Afghanistan: Changing the Narrative. Kabul: MOLSAMD and UNICEF.

¹³² Rights Lab (2021) Afghanistan: Prospects and Challenges, School of Politics and International Relations, University of Nottingham.

situation, but as a result of the wider context of multiple crises and resulting unemployment and joblessness. For example, as some respondents note:

We don't know what to do. There is no solution, and nothing comes to our mind to do and overcome these challenges. The only thing we can do is to pray and ask Almighty Allah to solve our challenges (Dawood, M, Herat, April 2022).

The people have plans in their mind and a coping strategy to be adopted to manage the challenges but there is no opportunity and facility to implement that strategy. For example, I want to make a shop or workshop to fix the bicycles, but I have no money to rent the shop and provide tools for the shop (Ghairat, M, Herat, April 2022).

This is sometimes furthermore reflected in some extreme forms of coping, including the sale of children and the sale of body organs, which, though present in less than 1% of the PLSA 2022 sample, still represents a catastrophic attempt for survival.

5. Recommendations: Targeting and Monitoring Vulnerable Groups

Having examined the dimensions, drivers, and forms of coping with vulnerability, this section discusses the implications and recommendations of the analysis. In particular, it relies on the literature and insights from a range of key informants to understand how humanitarian and development assistance might more effectively target, monitor and collect data on vulnerable groups.

5.1 Targeting vulnerable groups

KEY MESSAGE: Systems (formal and informal) that provide basic human needs need to be strengthened as a priority. There is immense value in asking vulnerable groups what their priority needs are to enable the identification of systems to improve, rehabilitate, or construct in contexts of insecurity.

Our research highlights the need to ensure stronger humanitarian-development coherence in the prioritisation of interventions, especially in relation to food security and livelihood support. At the moment, however, several KIs emphasised that the focus on humanitarian (short term) assistance is to the detriment of development (longer term) assistance. Key types of interventions identified from our analysis to have the biggest impact on reducing vulnerability across the humanitarian-development nexus include those that target food security sometimes through livelihood support, and health services (Figure 21). However, a focus on food security and livelihoods has been largely absent in the effective prioritisation of reconstruction efforts since 2001. One KI stressed its importance:

The first intervention is food security and livelihood; a full stomach is better than none. I would say food security and livelihood are sectors that I would upload in the current context to bridge and lower the vulnerability and poverty cases. The second is health services to the people. Besides this, there is also another sector that I would say is needed is cash distribution. (KI, Kabul, May 2020)

Accordingly, some criteria for aid have focused on the worst cases of hunger as the priority, followed by groups who do not have labouring capacity:

Among these 700 families we selected the poorest and the more vulnerable families... we select these people and then go through other vulnerable people... here we select the most vulnerable families who do not have bread to eat for the whole day or only have bread to eat for breakfast and don't have anything to eat for lunch or dinner. Also, those families who don't have male members or

breadwinners in the family. Or the families that the head of the family is infected with cancer or are disabled (Ghairat, M, Herat, July 2021).

Figure 21: Examples of Ways to Strengthen Support towards Livelihoods and Health

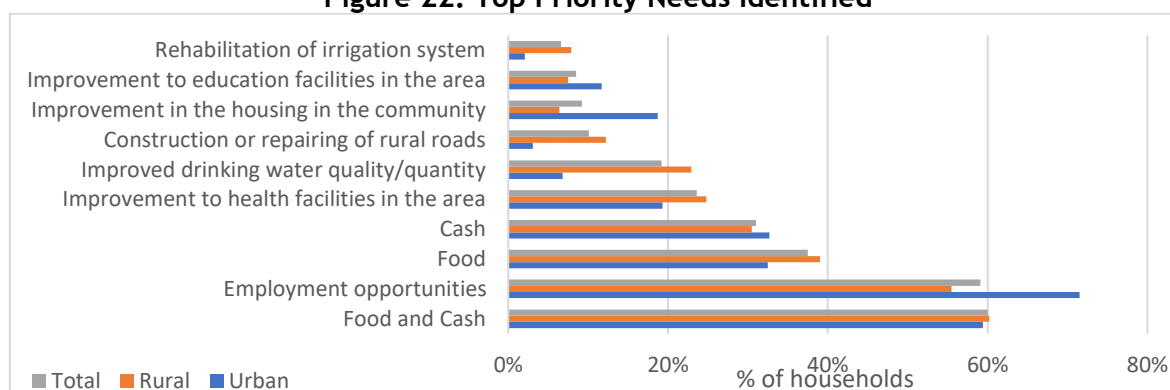
Livelihood support	Health services
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Livelihood support to smallholder agriculture is critical to improve productivity and contribute to long-term vulnerability reduction in a sector that employs a majority of the country’s poor. It also has the added potential to reduce food insecurity. For this, responses need to address the selection (e.g., a diversified portfolio of crops and/or NFEs), development and sustainability of rural livelihoods (KI, 2022). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some balancing of priorities may be useful. The BPHS could balance its focus on provincial and district health units when administering interventions with a focus on population density, to ensure areas with higher density have more midwives (KI, 2022). At the same time, this needs to be done in a way that does not disadvantage remote rural populations from accessing critical health services.

Source: Authors.

Basic service delivery is central in the process of supporting asset development and livelihood pathways. Indeed, our analysis points to the need to strengthen systems that meet basic human needs and strengthen institutions that can support the development of resilience capacities, such as education (especially completion of at least lower secondary levels), good health, risk diversification of livelihoods, and supportive social networks. Such systems include education and health as outlined above, but also shelter, hygiene, psychosocial support, protection and non-farm income support.¹³³ A longer-term focus on these issues can help development partners to transition from humanitarian assistance towards early economic recovery activities and basic service delivery, allowing for universalism in the response.

What sorts of needs might these services and safety nets cover? In 2022, priority needs in the country identified by survey respondents included food and cash, followed by employment opportunities, and improvement to health facilities and drinking water (Figure 22). Prior to that, in 2019/20, the biggest priorities recorded by people in food poverty are improved drinking water quantity and quality, and new or improved local health facilities—services that are largely absent. Compared to the extreme poor, people in food poverty were much more likely to request water, alongside rehabilitation for irrigation, and improved agriculture and veterinary services (author’s analysis of IE&LFS 2019/20).

Figure 22: Top Priority Needs Identified



Source: Authors’ visualisation of PLSA 2022 data.

Many priorities are observed to have been affected by insecurity, and so renewed attention to addressing governance constraints is critical to ensure sustainability of programme

¹³³ HRP. (2022). Afghanistan humanitarian response plan. <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/afghanistan-humanitarian-response-plan-2022.pdf>

interventions. Zar (M, Herat) in 2021 spoke about inequality in access to water resources that has been a long-standing issue not just in “insecure” districts, but also the benefits that might additionally accrue in times of peace.

The government control and make a system that each area and district received properly and equally water rights. In some insecure districts and villages, people are bullying and taking more water by force. When the water reaches to us, it has a lot of losses on the way... If there is peace, and the government control by providing, canal, streams to everybody. They will take their part of water regularly and permanently. It will have good and positive effect on agriculture. If government build proper canal system, it will improve agriculture product that can improve economic situation. If water distribution took properly take place, it will create job, irrigate more land; and enhance agriculture activities in the province.

In this context of insecurity, risk analysis as well as support to peacebuilding is instrumental in ensuring that the approaches and interventions are made more sustainable. A few KIs attempt to ensure that risk analysis is at the centre of their approach, in terms of targeting, identification of participants, and M&E (KI, November 2021). This combined focus on risk and peacebuilding moreover should include a commitment to addressing patronage-based practices, promoting buy-in from those in power, and stronger consideration of institutional requirements of partner institutions.¹³⁴

KEY MESSAGE: Without explicit targeting of the furthest behind, interventions may not reach those most in need. People facing intersecting inequalities are amongst the most vulnerable groups. Considering gradations of vulnerability and vulnerability dynamics could be effective in providing more tailored support for vulnerability reduction.

There is a question implicit in all of this about targeting versus universalism in this context, which is a moral philosophy question as well as a social science one. Universalism in service provision and institutional strengthening must not forego equity considerations, such that life-saving assistance is prioritised, and access is equitable and inclusive. Indeed, related to this, there is value in targeting certain groups that may experience heightened vulnerability, who might otherwise not receive support. Indeed, research in other conflict-affected contexts suggests that without explicit targeting of the furthest behind, interventions may not reach those most in need.¹³⁵ Our research indicates that individuals experiencing intersecting inequalities are also amongst the most vulnerable groups in contexts of uncertainty. Intersections identified in this analysis include those based on the overlap of food or extreme poverty, gender, disability, nomad, and other minority status. Box 2 outlines some approaches to addressing intersectionality to reduce vulnerability.

Box 2: Intersectional Tools and Data on Vulnerable Groups¹³⁶

Intersectional approaches to reducing vulnerability strengthen awareness of people’s needs, interests, capacities and experiences. These recognise that social groups are heterogenous and dynamic, embedded in power relations that also change over time. One such framework is the “Accessibility, Attitude, Communication and Participation Framework”,¹³⁷ which asks at its core:

- **Accessibility:** Do project activities lead to removal of barriers?

¹³⁴ Zurcher, C. (2020). Meta-review of evaluations of development assistance to Afghanistan, 2008-2018. Chapeau paper. <https://www.sicherheitneudenken.de/media/download/variant/198198>

¹³⁵ Mazurana, D., Marshak, A. Opio, J. H. and Gordon, R. (2014) ‘Surveying livelihoods, service delivery and governance: baseline evidence from Uganda.’ SLRC Working Paper 12. London: Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium.

¹³⁶ Chaplin, D., Twigg, J., and Lovell, E. (2019). Intersectional approaches to vulnerability reduction and resilience building. BRACED.

¹³⁷ Van Ek, V., and Schot, S. (2017). Towards inclusion: a guide for organisations and practitioners. https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/towards_inclusion_a4_web.pdf/

- Attitude: Does the project recognise there are different people with different characteristics?
- Communication: Do all people understand the messages delivered through project activities?
- Participation: Can (and do) all people participate in all stages of the project, including decision-making?

Practically, certain intersections of social difference may need to be prioritised in project implementation, so long as it is done in a way that draws attention to what factors are relevant in a given context. The Department for International Development (DFID) “personas” approach is one such example that draws together characteristics into one or several archetypes to understand the group, in an effort to focus the work on people rather than an abstraction of the group they represent.¹³⁸

At the same time, there are other groups that also require targeting due to vulnerability, such as people in poverty, people living in remote or hard-to-reach areas or the poorest regions, women, child labourers, minorities (religious and ethnic, and specific identities), people with disabilities, widows and women-headed households, and IDPs and returnees. As part of the response, programmes should ensure mechanisms are incorporated that give special attention for their needs, as these groups may sometimes have contextual, physical, or other limitations in accessing aid and assistance. There are of course challenges to doing this for certain groups without causing harm given the current political climate.

It may more broadly help to consider four groups: 1) a few people who are ‘getting ahead’ despite challenges, and may even be ‘winners’ amidst the worst crises; 2) people who are ‘getting by’ through effective resilience strategies; 3) the more vulnerable who have ineffective coping responses with limited support and are ‘going down’; and finally 4) the population experiencing the most severe forms of vulnerability who may be ‘going under’ towards destitution due to a catastrophic failure of support for resilience capacities and systems (KI). Such a framing is necessarily longitudinal, and reflects a ‘poverty dynamics’¹³⁹ or ‘vulnerability dynamics’¹⁴⁰ perspective, which can enable policies to provide more tailored support depending on differentiated needs. Indeed, given the near-universal incidence of poverty or multidimensional deprivation, vulnerability to downward mobility that recognises different gradations of poverty, deprivation, and vulnerability may be a more effective focus of programming for vulnerability reduction.

KEY MESSAGE: Even where explicit targeting does occur, there may be wrongful exclusion, which can be overcome by real-time learning and adaptation. Account also needs to be taken of informal targeting practices which are widespread and not necessarily exclusionary, and which could be built on.

Even where efforts are made to target the most vulnerable groups, there may be wrongful exclusion. For example, some organisations sought to maintain neutrality and impartiality while providing services and other humanitarian assistance. However, the current context inevitably meant that they continued to face restrictions in access to women participants of programme activities: “Working with women is difficult right now as around 90 percent of our beneficiaries are women. Women are not allowed to work with us directly; there must be a male member of their families” (KII). Mixed methods data can help prevent wrongful exclusion by balancing deduction, induction, and abduction. For example, data

¹³⁸ DFID (UK Department for International Development) (2017) ‘Using human-centred design at DFID’. London: DFID. <https://diytoolkit.org/tools/personas>

¹³⁹ Shepherd, A., Scott, L., Mariotti, C., Kessy, F., Gaiha, R., da Corta, L., Hanifnia, K., Kaicker, N., Lenhardt, A., Lwanga-Ntale, C., Sen, B., Sijapati, B., Strawson, T., Thapa, G., Underhill, H. and Wild, L. (2014) *The Chronic Poverty Report 2014-2015: The road to zero extreme poverty*. London, UK: ODI

¹⁴⁰ Diwakar, V., with Albert, J. R. G., Vizamos, J., F., V., and Shepherd, A. (2019). Resilience, near poverty and vulnerability dynamics: evidence from Uganda and the Philippines. USAID report.

gathering by several international organisations in the country are in the form of quantitative surveys, sometimes complemented with focus group discussions and other participatory processes involving elders, households, and other actors in communities that draw on local expertise:

We make a list of vulnerable people and the poorest people of the village based on a survey. We conduct focus group discussions with elders and Maliks of villages and also conduct household-level surveys to identify a vulnerable group in communities. Based on the findings of the survey and focus group discussions with the elders and Maliks, we select the extremely vulnerable people and then distribute aid to them.
(KII, Herat)

If wrongful exclusion does occur, transparency for trust-building, adaptability and flexibility of programming is key, to modify - and “stretch” - activities in ways to promote inclusion. In this effort, existing structures such as youth clubs could be used to facilitate dialogue between different groups, including those that may have been excluded (Diwakar et al., 2020).¹⁴¹ In Afghanistan, discussions between community elders and the current authority are likely to be necessary in this process, as the experience of relaxing restrictions for female healthcare staff above outlined. It is worth recognising, however, that access may continue to be limited by certain authorities, and so targeting hard to reach groups should proceed through various modalities. Indeed, during the initial months of the political transition in August 2021, some agencies paused field visits (KI, November 2021). In other cases, though, agencies that had developed established communication in rural areas that were already under control of the Taliban prior to the transition now saw their access improve due to the cessation of hostilities (KI, November 2021). To improve access and targeting, recruiting project staff to reflect the local diversity of target groups, adopting a multi-pronged transparent approach to targeting potential excluded groups, and ensuring conflict-sensitivity in targeting can also help in combatting wrongful exclusion (Diwakar et al., 2020).¹⁴²

Informal and hybrid institutions have often been beyond the purview of donor engagement, but some can also hold the promise to limit exclusion and target vulnerable groups. For example, community development councils have sought to deliver assistance, local governance and development projects. However, in some areas CDCs have been entirely captured or ineffective, the latter partly on account of not taking account of village organisational structures pre-intervention, as well as due to the dearth of functioning payment systems.¹⁴³ Nevertheless, they may hold promise in service delivery at the village level, especially if they become more responsive to the needs of the village populations.¹⁴⁴ Similarly, the informal credit institutions mentioned above are a critical means of liquidity amongst Afghans in and near poverty, yet may be sidestepped in donor programming.¹⁴⁵

In all of this, it is important to acknowledge that the lines between formal and informal may be blurred. Regardless, these more informal institutions can help limit exclusion that could otherwise prompt heightened vulnerability of individuals and households. In the current context, moreover, such institutions represent a potentially effective way of reaching people if other governmental channels may be more challenging to navigate. By circumventing such potential solutions, there is the added risk that international efforts will

¹⁴¹ Diwakar, “Welfare of Young Adults amid COVID-19”.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Allouche, et al. “Needs and Vulnerability in Afghanistan”.

Pain, A., and Levine, S. (2022, forthcoming). Informal credit briefing note for FCDO.

¹⁴⁴ Pain, A., and Levine, S. (2022, forthcoming). Informal credit briefing note for FCDO.

¹⁴⁵ Kantor, P. (2012). Understanding informal institutions in Afghanistan. MEI.

<https://www.mei.edu/publications/understanding-informal-institutions-afghanistan> (20.03.22)

continue to generate parallel systems and aid-dependencies that may be unsustainable in the long-term and with difficulties in the short-term.¹⁴⁶

Finally, such processes related to targeting raise another question of whether there is a choice, in such a situation and with scarce resources, of targeting to prevent further impoverishment or otherwise targeting those already very poor and at risk of destitution. The policy priority is to increase resource flows, but this may be limited by absorption constraints, which are no doubt high as capacity is low. As a result, in the short term there is a strong need to produce additional capacity (for example through NGOs) and run humanitarian arrangements that centre around protection, given the breadth of need for “life-saving, equitable and safe assistance”.¹⁴⁷ Already, there is a good understanding of humanitarian operational presence in the country,¹⁴⁸ which indicates many areas with limited operational presence and varied operational capacity. However, this short-term focus needs to be embedded in longer programmes, for example evolving over seven or eight years, which could offer a promising context to bring humanitarian and development work together and strengthen long-term capacity.

5.2 Monitoring and collecting data on vulnerable groups

KEY MESSAGE: A range of quantitative data is being collected by various actors in Afghanistan, which could benefit from stronger data coordination to make use of synergies and limit duplication.

The range of data collection efforts identified in this study are notable and could be further strengthened through stronger data coordination. Indeed, the limitation identified in some KIs is not the absence of data (though this does still exist for certain issues), but rather the lack of awareness of the data landscape and limited coordination. There is a lot of value to be had in organisations learning from each other, in terms of data collection and results of its analysis. For example, both the HSMP and the PLSA datasets have questions focused on eliciting an understanding of household and community priority needs, debt and what borrowed money was spent on, and food insecurity and coping in 2021/22. The different survey respondents (KIs in the case of HSMP, and households in the case of PLSA) each offer valuable vantage points that could be compared to understand commonalities and divergences with a view to better filling data gaps. In other cases, certain modules could be modified in one survey to expand the collective coverage of issues and understanding of dimensions of vulnerability.

KEY MESSAGE: Strong coordination should extend to the humanitarian-development nexus, between international institutions, within development strategies, and bringing in local organisations more consistently to bridge and build capacity.

Stronger data coordination can further be aided through improved coordination amongst international institutions and actors, as outlined in Box 3. In this process, ensuring strong links between humanitarian-development nexus actors to respond to immediate needs alongside longer-term development is needed. Past interventions through investments in public goods, which have seen some positive impacts, has usually required long-term programming, working collaboratively through agencies and local counterparts that know their territory well and have solid relational networks through which to operate. This is then a question of both capacity (money, human resources) as well as partnerships and coordination mechanisms between and within agencies, and embedded in sounder recognition of political economy dynamics and patronage systems. As noted in Figure 22 above, priority needs and the underlying collaboration requirements span remits of both

¹⁴⁶ Allouche, et al. “Needs and Vulnerability in Afghanistan”.

¹⁴⁷ HRP. (2022). Afghanistan humanitarian response plan

¹⁴⁸ OCHA. (2022). Afghanistan: Operations.

<https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/afghanistan/3w>

humanitarian and development actors. Irrigation, for example, may more closely be a development objective but requires contextualisation within the humanitarian context to overcome wrongful exclusion and other challenges as highlighted above. It also requires both development and rapid response systems in turn to be flexible to respond in close to real-time to the multiple shocks, stressors, and crises that affect populations and contribute to vulnerability.

Box 3: Coordination between and within the Humanitarian-Development Nexus

In an analysis of drivers of poverty in Afghanistan, Joya et al. (2022) warn against repeating a similar situation in the early 2000s when the majority of development assistance in Afghanistan was disbursed “off budget” and leading to a parallel civil service that constrained the development of an “official” civil service. They thus recommend strong coordination by the donor community along the following lines:

- “a) some level of coordination is put in place among the donor agencies and international institutions to prevent redundancies and increase complementarities in development interventions;
- b) future development interventions in Afghanistan are aligned across-the-board with a uniform development strategy for the country; and
- c) more inclusive and formal mechanisms are established so that not only members of the donor community but also local civil society organisations, including NGOs, think tanks and sub-national community entities, can engage in.”

Source: Joya et al. (2022)

KEY MESSAGE: Agencies’ projects and programmes should include a focus on a mixed methods MEL framework with real-time adaptation to respond to rapidly changing contexts.

Monitoring data on vulnerable groups and wider systems should be part of a broader effort to strengthen frameworks of Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL). This can be done through a stronger focus on mixed methods evaluation and learning as outlined in Box 4. Yet our research shows some of the benefits of qualitative and mixed methods insights in terms of providing a deeper understanding of the processes and sequences that can heighten or protect against vulnerability. It also helps draw attention to issues less evident through quantitative data alone, such as people’s perceptions, wide-ranging constraints in livelihoods (e.g., linked to politicised markets, high tax rates, and other factors), and aspects of social cohesion that were sequentially eroded through COVID-19 and insecurity. Understanding priority needs from the population across the life course is a critical part of the data collection process, and within a flexible MEL framework can help adapt institutional objectives and projects to rapidly changing contexts.

Box 4: MEL Approaches in Conflict-Affected Contexts

An MEL plan should place a strong focus on learning, through establishing learning questions around the intervention, employ feedback loops, and respond to learning for implementors to be able to re-prioritise in real time. DFID¹⁴⁹ suggests five principles for an effective MEL:

- It should be politically aware to priorities, incentives, and contextual reality
- Conflict and gender sensitivity should be mainstreamed across its focus
- Resources should be realistic, appropriate, and proportionate
- The MEL should be innovative, yet also include learning from other contexts
- In rapidly changing contexts, there is a strong need for adaptability, basing programmes and their MEL in real time, drawing on evidence and learning along the way.

¹⁴⁹ DFID. (2019). “Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) in Conflict and Stabilisation Settings: A Guidance Note”. Stabilisation Unit. London: DFID.

6. Conclusion

This study drew attention to the weak systems that give rise to unequal resilience capacities and heightened vulnerability in Afghanistan. It acknowledged that a large share of the population is estimated to be living in poverty in 2022, having experienced widespread job loss and persistent, acute food insecurity. There is also a range of multidimensional deprivations alongside their income poverty, not least brought on by supply-side barriers to education and healthcare access. In this setting of institutional constraints, certain groups especially those facing intersecting inequalities (e.g., women in poverty, girls with disabilities, women in nomadic communities or Kuchi women,...) tend to experience particularly poor outcomes. These monetary and multidimensional deprivations are further exacerbated by a context of uncertainty and insecurity, marked by disasters, COVID-19, insecurity, political and economic crises, and displacement.

Unfortunately, formal institutional responses - from the former republic, the international community and the Taliban - to the uncertainty wrought by contemporaneous crises have been inadequate to meet the scale of the challenge, and have by and large inadequately considered or supported informal institutions that are central to individual and community coping in Afghanistan. While the distinction between the informal and formal itself may be blurred, a focus on exclusively formal systems is bound to reap limited results in a context where informal or hybrid institutions permeate.

In this context, households have been driven to erosive forms of coping. Since the political transition, this has included borrowing money for food, decreasing spending on health and education, and selling assets and spending savings. In this process, they render themselves less able to deal with future shocks. However, there are certain resilience capacities that this analysis draws attention to, namely the role of assets (in particular, farmland, livestock, electricity, and other assets such as refrigerators, computers, tractors and mobile phones) in helping offset poverty and hunger, and the importance of informal institutions of credit and social networks that help limit vulnerability. Livelihood pathways, however, largely remain risky, with mixed relationships with poverty and hunger. Moreover, the informal institutions themselves have been under pressure since the pandemic when entire communities have been struggling.

From this analysis, we identified recommendations for targeting vulnerable groups and collecting and monitoring data on these groups. We prioritise development of systems that provide basic human needs, and in this process, relying on participatory processes to identify and respond to needs. This is part of the humanitarian response in the country, which may need to be the focus in the short term, embedded in an international moral responsibility to act. Reinvigorating and stabilising the economy and ensuring pro-poor growth in key economic sectors, especially agriculture and rural livelihoods more broadly, is also needed to offer a longer-term solution and support livelihood pathways out of poverty through farm and off-farm diversification. In this process, supporting and working with informal institutions will be critical.

Especially in the short term, moreover, there remains value in explicitly targeting the 'most' vulnerable, who tend to be those experiencing intersecting inequalities. At the same time, there are a range of other groups that also require attention, such as people living in remote or hard-to-reach areas or the poorest regions, women, child labourers, religious and ethnic minorities (religious, ethnic, and certain identities), people with disabilities, widows, and women-headed households, and IDPs and returnees. Across these groups, responses to vulnerability could also be more effectively disaggregated by considering risks of downward mobility, and in this process distinguishing gradations of vulnerability.

Fortunately, there is a range of data being collected to highlight the experiences of these groups, though more can be done by way of data coordination to build on synergies where they do exist. Coordination more generally within the humanitarian-development nexus is

also needed. This has been a challenge over the last decade and hence a familiar refrain. Even so, meaningful collaboration with local stakeholders (from government ministries to non-state actors) and between formal and informal institutions remains key to developing contextually relevant responses over the short to long term and support people's resilience capacities in ways that can sustainably mitigate the root causes of vulnerability.

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Annexes

Quantitative analysis tables

Table A1: Average values overall and by poverty status

Variable	All	Households in poverty	Non-poor households
Households in poverty (%)	42.49%	N/A	N/A
Per capita expenditure	2,783.58	3,672.31	1,580.91
Household size	7.26	6.68	8.05
Female head (%)	1.55%	1.25%	1.96%
Head aged 18-25 years (% of households)	9.36%	10.62%	7.66%
Head aged 26-35 years (% of households)	29.70%	31.13%	27.75%
Head aged 36-45 years (% of households)	27.05%	24.42%	30.62%
Head aged 46-55 years (% of households)	16.35%	15.58%	17.39%
Head aged 56-65 years (% of households)	10.87%	11.45%	10.09%
Head aged 65+ years (% of households)	6.67%	6.79%	6.50%
Head completed primary education (%)	9.41%	9.90%	8.75%
Head completed secondary or higher education (%)	23.14%	30.25%	13.48%
Household cultivates farmland (%)	39.99%	40.37%	39.48%
Head engagement in agriculture (%)	33.60%	32.10%	35.63%
Household ownership of non-farm enterprises (%)	15.43%	15.47%	15.38%
Household received remittances (%)	9.26%	9.39%	9.09%
Log (asset value)	10.28	10.62	9.83
Household has electricity (%)	42.01%	44.44%	38.73%
Number of livestock	7.60	7.10	8.27
Number of types of shocks	2.10	2.03	2.19
Urban residence (%)	25.06%	26.12%	23.63%

Source: Diwakar, 2022.

Table A2: Regression results- to be updated/clarified

Variables	(1) Extreme poor	(2) Food poor	(3) Welfare loss	(4) Hunger
Calendar season [ref group= Fall & winter]				
Spring	0.0634*** (0.0215)	0.0295** (0.0149)	0.1255*** (0.0193)	0.0439*** (0.0154)
Summer	0.0217 (0.0197)	0.0036 (0.0134)	0.1765*** (0.0177)	0.0217 (0.0139)
Harvest period [reference group=pre-harvest]				
Harvest	-0.0422** (0.0177)	-0.0113 (0.0124)	-0.0487*** (0.0185)	0.0185 (0.0132)
Post-harvest	-0.0131 (0.0210)	0.0037 (0.0141)	-0.0290 (0.0181)	0.0280* (0.0153)
Household size	0.0536*** (0.0020)	0.0172*** (0.0013)	0.0022 (0.0015)	0.0023* (0.0013)
Female head	0.0597 (0.0365)	0.0618** (0.0257)	0.0154 (0.0451)	0.1923*** (0.0366)
Age of head [reference= 18-25 years]				
26-35 years	0.0124 (0.0161)	0.0156 (0.0123)	-0.0280* (0.0144)	-0.0316** (0.0132)
36-45 years	0.0216 (0.0179)	0.0275** (0.0118)	-0.0209 (0.0151)	-0.0251* (0.0145)
46-55 years	-0.0285 (0.0184)	0.0117 (0.0134)	-0.0177 (0.0168)	-0.0368** (0.0164)
56-65 years	-0.0745*** (0.0209)	-0.0215 (0.0138)	-0.0325* (0.0192)	-0.0411** (0.0176)
65+ years	-0.0754*** (0.0224)	-0.0097 (0.0158)	-0.0238 (0.0239)	-0.0644*** (0.0198)

Education [reference= none or some primary]				
Primary education of head	-0.0381*** (0.0147)	-0.0103 (0.0112)	-0.0227 (0.0162)	0.0068 (0.0126)
Secondary or higher education	-0.1151*** (0.0133)	-0.0694*** (0.0086)	-0.1000*** (0.0117)	-0.0336*** (0.0100)
Household head with disability	0.0041 (0.0217)	0.0027 (0.0149)	0.1233*** (0.0200)	0.1327*** (0.0278)
Household cultivates farmland	0.0137 (0.0124)	-0.0232*** (0.0083)	-0.0226* (0.0124)	-0.0189* (0.0101)
Head employed in agriculture	0.0351*** (0.0121)	0.0227*** (0.0081)	0.0014 (0.0118)	0.0448*** (0.0134)
Household has non-farm enterprise	-0.0300** (0.0153)	0.0277** (0.0119)	0.0132 (0.0144)	-0.0414*** (0.0120)
Household received remittances	0.0100 (0.0152)	-0.0007 (0.0126)	-0.0207 (0.0157)	-0.0189 (0.0142)
Log (asset value)	-0.1710*** (0.0124)	-0.0582*** (0.0084)	-0.0203*** (0.0055)	-0.0260*** (0.0041)
Access to electricity	-0.0422*** (0.0139)	-0.0279*** (0.0088)	-0.0248* (0.0149)	-0.0085 (0.0142)
Household has livestock	-0.0005** (0.0002)	-0.0001 (0.0002)	-0.0013*** (0.0002)	-0.0001 (0.0003)
Urban residence	0.0931*** (0.0182)	-0.0694*** (0.0098)	-0.0268 (0.0200)	-0.0159 (0.0140)
Province controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	17,146	17,146	17,146	16,531

Standard errors in parentheses; *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Source: Author's analysis.

Summary of qualitative study sites

Note: this is an abridged excerpt¹⁵⁰

Afghanistan has a predominantly rural population, which is also where the majority of households in poverty reside (NSIA, 2021). There are subnational variations to this profile, however. Kandahar is the central hub for most of the south and southwestern provinces in terms of migration, commercial and trading, education and cultural as well as political activities. Kandahar holds one of the largest bordering points, the Spinboldak-Chaman border with Pakistan. Its population in 2021 was estimated 1.4 million, with 0.8 million rural and 0.6 million urban (NISA, 2021). Herat province is the commercial, economic, educational and cultural hub of western Afghanistan with an estimated population of 2.1 million of which 1.5 million are rural and 0.6 million are urban residents (NISA, 2021). Economically, Herat is frequently represented as one of Afghanistan's most stable and well-off provinces (Huot et al., 2016) and Kandahar as the power hub for political elites (Jackson, 2015). However, in the recent years, this situation has been changing, on account of various crises as detailed below.

The COVID-19 pandemic reached Afghanistan in the earlier stages of its global spread during the spring of 2020 (Wu et al., 2020). Since then, there have been multiple pandemic waves variably affecting different parts of the country... Herat province was where the first COVID-19 test was declared positive in Afghanistan (Mousavi et al., 2020). Herat became one of the worst suffering parts of the country during the very first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. At the same time, access to verifiable COVID-19 data in Afghanistan has been hugely problematic, due to socio-cultural stigma; many families would hide the positive cases to begin with, and those with weaker symptoms would rarely attempt testing or treatment

¹⁵⁰ Nemat, O., Diwakar, V., Ghafoori, I., and Azadmanesh, S. (2022). Livelihoods and welfare amidst layered crises in Afghanistan. *IDS Bulletin* 53(3).

(Khudadad et al., 2021:221). Therefore, the data for the two selected sites are often only an estimation of the active and confirmed cases of COVID-19 patients who may have faced severe health conditions that have been tested and or hospitalised...

Parallel to the pandemic, Afghanistan in this period also experienced one of the most challenging phases of its history [due to violence, drought, and a political transition...]. These developments were followed by the collapse of international development aid flow, closure or further restrictions on borders for trading and an even worse level of unemployment and humanitarian crisis during the summer of 2021... Within Afghanistan, both Herat and Kandahar are a magnet for internally displaced persons who leave their homes mostly in western central highlands and southern regions arriving in Kandahar and Herat to get settled for seeking assistance and/or seeking jobs in the labour market (Mansfield, 2021), more intensely during the months of June and July 2021... In both provinces, daily violence, kidnapping mostly traders and businessmen and their relatives for ransom and finally, both Kandahar and Herat were fully captured by the Taliban on 13 August 2021. The Taliban by that time already controlled the bordering points and most of the districts in both provinces prior to this date...

The onset of COVID-19, increased insecurity, and climate change has contributed to changing livelihood strategies. In the last couple of years even prior to the pandemic, both provinces were severely affected by having reduced political influence in the capital as well as by severe drought; even in Kandahar, the cropping season has been reduced from four to two seasons. Hence, to reduce the effects of drought and limited access to resources, households in both provinces have diversified income sources including farm and non-farm, such as through migration and daily wage labour. Migration to Iran has been observed more from Herat than from Kandahar over the years, often related to repaying past debts or in response to drought. Instead, the economy of Kandahar was boosted by the cash flow of reconstruction funds that immensely hyperactivated the economy (Huot et al., 2016). Other kinds of income sources common in these two provinces were working in brick kilns, the construction market, seasonal wage labour in the agriculture market, selling vegetables for daily consumption, work in the NGOs, and in private and governmental sectors. However, there has been a growing reduction in all of these markets, and many times people could have limited access to daily wage labour, and migrating to Iran has become a very challenging and risky journey since the start of COVID-19.