PANDEMIC PERSPECTIVES: WHY DIFFERENT VOICES AND VIEWS MATTER

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Livelihoods and Welfare Amidst Layered Crises in Afghanistan*

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Abstract Afghanistan experienced an extraordinary situation in 2021, marked by intensified conflict, the Covid-19 pandemic, and prolonged drought. This article reflects on the research method and approaches employed to investigate these overlapping crises, and the applications of this approach to assess the livelihoods impacts of the pandemic in the context of conflict and climate change in Afghanistan. It relies primarily on field qualitative data collection and analysis from Kandahar and Herat provinces supported by further insights from the quantitative analysis of household survey data in 2019/20, part of which overlaps with the onset of the pandemic. Reflections on the methodology reveal the importance of longitudinal qualitative methods of analysis to understand the pathways through which layered crises can affect people's lives and livelihoods. These research findings are used to develop implications for coherent development of policies and programming to better support poor and vulnerable Afghan people in the context of overlapping crises.

Keywords Covid-19, livelihoods, conflict, climate, mixed methods, Afghanistan.

1 Introduction
Afghanistan experienced an extraordinary situation in 2021. This situation presents a complex example of how an intensified level of conflict, the Covid-19 pandemic, and an increasing prevalence of drought due to climate change has been affecting people's livelihoods in different ways. Pre-August 2021, the country had experienced record levels of violence across the provinces (UNAMA 2021). This was followed by the gradual fall of districts, provinces, and finally the capital, Kabul, into the hands of the Taliban. Meanwhile, Afghanistan experienced the impacts of the pandemic which hindered people's access to jobs, health care,

and different sources of revenue. Alongside this, the second-worst drought in four years (IFRC 2021) has widely affected the livelihoods of the majority of people who rely on agriculture and livestock as their sole source of income.

There has been limited research into how these situations have combined to affect livelihoods and wellbeing in Afghanistan. This article attempts to advance our understanding of this issue and promote research that investigates these overlapping crises. It is based on research that focused on how the pandemic has affected the labour market and livelihood stability for young Afghans, how have they coped (differentially), and what types of collective action and sources of resilience they have employed during this period.[5]

The article has two key objectives. Firstly, it reflects on the research method and approaches employed, drawing on key lessons learned from conducting research in a time of overlapping crises, marked by a pandemic, in an intense conflict-affected setting, and where there was increased economic uncertainty due to prolonged drought. Secondly, the article assesses livelihoods impacts of the pandemic in the context of conflict and climate change in Afghanistan using field qualitative data from two provinces (Kandahar and Herat) and supported by quantitative research based on the Income, Expenditure and Labour Force Survey (IE&LFS) 2019/20, part of which overlaps with the onset of the pandemic. These research findings in turn are used to develop implications for policies and programming to better support livelihoods of poor and vulnerable Afghan people in the context of overlapping crises.

The article is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the context, encompassing the pandemic, conflict, and climate change which characterise Afghanistan in recent years, with a focus on Kandahar and Herat provinces. Section 3 then details the methodology adopted for our analysis, including reflections on qualitative data collection in contexts of overlapping crises, and the role of mixed methods to improve our understanding of these complex contexts. Section 4 highlights the overlapping context of intense conflict, the pandemic, and climate change, alongside the resulting coping strategies adopted by households since the onset of the pandemic. Section 5 concludes with policy implications and recommendations stemming from the research results around overlapping crises in these contexts.

2 Crises in Afghanistan, with a focus on Kandahar and Herat provinces

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 Province is the central hub for most of the south and southwestern provinces in terms of migration, commercial and trading activities,

education, and cultural as well as political activities. Kandahar Province holds one of the largest border crossings, the Spin Boldak–Chaman border with Pakistan. The Kandahar Province population in 2021 was an estimated 1.4 million, with a 0.8 million rural population and a 0.6 million urban population (*ibid*.). 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 (*ibid*.). Economically, Herat is frequently represented as one of Afghanistan's most stable and well-off provinces (Huot, Pain and Ghafoori 2016) and Kandahar as the city of power hubs for political elites such as Karzai (Jackson 2015). However, in recent years, this situation has been changing, on account of various crises as detailed in the following sections.

2.1 Covid-19

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. Globally, as of April 2022, there have been over 494 million people who have been infected and over 6.1 million people have lost their lives due to Covid-19 (WHO 2022). One of the main challenges in countries with protracted years of violent conflict and weak management systems is the lack of reliable data, but despite that (and based on official figures), 177,974 Afghans have been infected with Covid-19 and by April 2022, 7,671 had died in the country (*ibid*.) The data collection for this study was conducted during April–July 2021, which was also one of the peak times for Covid-19 spread across Afghanistan, and both Kandahar and Herat were among the provinces with the highest number of positive cases.[6]

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 pandemic in 2020. At the same time, access to verifiable Covid-19 data in Afghanistan has been hugely problematic due to sociocultural stigma; many families would hide suspected cases to begin with, and those with weaker symptoms would rarely attempt testing or treatment (Khudadad *et al.* 2021: 221). Therefore, often the data for the two selected sites are only an estimation of the actual active and confirmed cases of Covid-19 patients, many of whom faced severe health issues or were even hospitalised.

From the early days of Covid-19 being declared as a pandemic, there have been different responses by various actors on the ground in Afghanistan. The non-governmental organisations (NGOs) mostly working on community-based development have designed awareness campaigns about health and hygiene, preventative measures, and have provided some emergency personal protective equipment (PPE) to medical personnel.

The government response, though not highly coordinated, was divided into two parts: the Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) took the lead on the emergency health response by creating Covid-19 treatment centres, testing centres, and provision of PPE to health sector personnel. The Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD) and the Independent Directorate of Local Governance (IDLG) jointly with financial support from the World Bank, opened a new project line called Relief Effort for Afghan Communities and Households (REACH), also known locally as Distarkhwan-e-Milli, with a US$280m budget (August 2020–December 2021) (World Bank 2022). According to a Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) report (2021), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the World Bank through the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF), and the Program for Asia Resilience to Climate Change (PARCC) have collectively provided cash support worth US$253m in response to the pandemic and for drought-affected families (SIGAR 2021). Although the REACH project has been operationalised, the anti-government armed opposition at the time have opposed programme implementation in some parts of the country due to concerns about lack of coordination with them, corruption, and the programme not reaching the neediest people.[7]

2.2 Insecurity and climate change

Parallel to the pandemic, Afghanistan has also experienced one of the most challenging phases of its history during this period. First, the worst surge in violence across the country during the first half of 2021 resulted in massive displacement, job losses, and limited access to markets. Second, by mid-August 2021, the entire government, that was mainly depending on external aid funds, had collapsed and the Taliban, which operated as the key military opponent to the government, had taken full control of the country. 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 provinces are magnets for internally displaced persons (IDPs) who leave their homes, mostly in the western region and central highlands and southern regions, arriving in the provinces to settle in order to seek assistance and/or seek jobs in the labour market (Mansfield 2021). This happens more intensely during the months of June and July. With a record-level spike in violence in the country during the first half of 2021, both Kandahar and Herat provinces experienced a number of high-profile security incidents. On 13 February 2021, the main port, Islam Qala, was set on fire which cost millions of dollars in losses for businesses and traders. A UN office in Herat City was attacked in July 2021 which was reported in the international media. Kandahar security deteriorated most significantly in the bordering city of Spin Boldak, with reports of 100 people being killed (Aljazeera 2021). In both provinces, there

was daily violence, including the kidnapping of – mostly – traders and businessmen and their relatives for ransom. Ultimately, both Kandahar and Herat provinces were fully captured by the Taliban on 13 August 2021. By that time, the Taliban already controlled the border crossings and most of the districts in both provinces prior to this date.

Another key stressor in Afghanistan has been the prolonged nature of drought, often attributed to climate change. The drought during 2021 was officially declared in January 2021 by the former president of Afghanistan (IFRC 2021). It is the second severe drought in four years. As a result, the wheat crop was estimated to drop by nearly 2 million tonnes and over 3 million livestock were considered at risk of death due to lack of fodder and water (*ibid*.) This situation, combined with an increase in violence as previously mentioned, also resulted in massive displacement of the population and by the first half of 2021, over 600,000 people were displaced due to both severe conflict and drought (*ibid*.).

2.3 Livelihood strategies

The onset of the pandemic, increased insecurity, and climate change have contributed to changing livelihood strategies. In the last few 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, and even in Kandahar Province, the cropping season has reduced from four to two seasons. Hence, to reduce the effects of drought and limited access to resources, households have diversified income sources including farm and non-farm sources in both provinces, such as through migration and daily wage labour (Huot *et al.* 2016). Migration to Iran has been observed more in Herat Province than in Kandahar Province over the years, often related to repaying past debts or in response to drought. Instead, the economy of Kandahar has been boosted by the cash flow of reconstruction funds that massively inflated the economy (*ibid*.).

Other kinds of income sources common in these two provinces were working in the brick fields,[8] the construction market, seasonal wage labour in the agriculture market, selling the harvest or vegetables for daily consumption, and working in NGOs, or in the private and government sectors. However, there has been a growing reduction in all of these markets, which has meant that people frequently have limited access to daily wage labour, and migrating to Iran has become a very challenging and risky journey since the start of the pandemic. Therefore, in both provinces, the livelihoods, income sources, and lifestyles of people have changed tremendously.

To sum up, as Figure 1 illustrates, the overlapping crises in Afghanistan as observed in the two provinces have resulted in further increases in migration and displacement, job restrictions and limitations, and losing access to markets and resources.

Figure 1 **Overlapping crises and rural livelihoods in Kandahar and Herat provinces**

Losing access to markets
and resources

Covid-19

Job restrictions and
limitations

Livelihoods

Climate

Conflict

Increased migration and
displacement
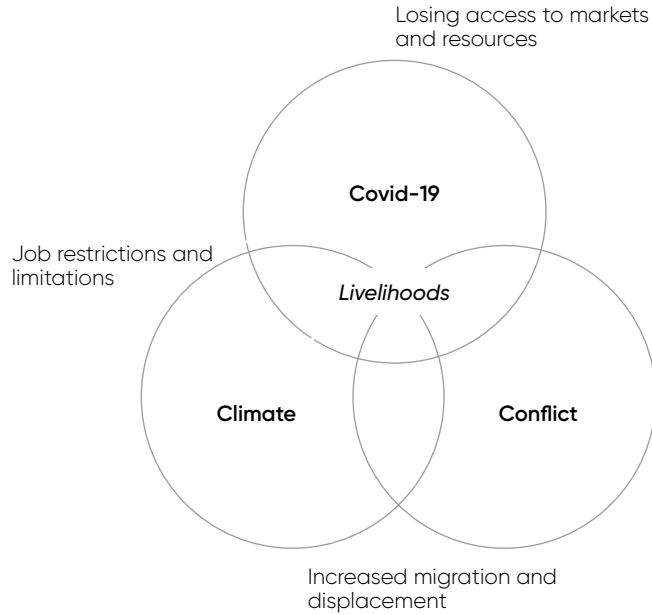
Source Nemat *et al.* (forthcoming, 2022). © AREU and CPAN, reproduced with permission.

3 Methods and reflections

This section outlines reflections on how qualitative methods can help inform the design of social science research in crisis contexts, and how qualitative research tools can be combined into mixed methodologies to improve our understanding of complex crises and livelihood and wellbeing consequences.

3.1 Qualitative data collection and analysis

Kandahar and Herat provinces were selected for the field research due to the prevalence of the Covid-19 virus, insecurity, and climate change, as well as practical considerations around past research. On the latter, researchers had already investigated livelihood trajectories in these sites from earlier years (Pain, Huot and Ghafoori 2016; Huot *et al.* 2016; Pain and Huot 2017), thus forming an earlier baseline that helped inform our new data collection and analysis.

The qualitative tool formed part of a Q-squared approach tried and tested by the Chronic Poverty Advisory Network (CPAN) to investigate poverty and wellbeing dynamics (see summary in da Corta *et al.* 2021). This toolkit was selected to inform the key research questions which focused on understanding wellbeing, its dynamics, and the livelihood trajectories that affected these. The qualitative toolkit comprised key informant interviews in Kandahar and Herat provinces, and life history interviews with

women and men in the study sites. Key informant interviews were undertaken to understand the context in relation to the different crises, as well as programmatic and policy constraints and enablers to livelihoods in the study areas, and how these took into consideration the contexts of the crises. Life history interviews, in turn, were selected to understand in-depth sequences and processes through which individuals and households experienced changes in wellbeing, and how these in turn affected and were affected by livelihood trajectories. A gender balance in interviews was sought to understand commonalities as well as differences in perspectives from women and men. A subset of life history interviews furthermore revisited households that were previously interviewed in past studies on livelihood trajectories as noted above, to understand changing wellbeing in more detail over time where a baseline had already been established.

The questionnaire tool was tested on a field site in a rural context near Kabul. The selection of the testing site was based on security, health, and feasibility considerations in that phase, as detailed in Section 2.2. Following the testing process, the research team gathered to assess the results of the testing. Although the results were helpful, researchers were mindful of the diversity in context and the particular characteristics of study localities, which could not be fully captured through a pilot in Kabul.

Qualitative data was collected between June and late July 2021. For the most part, interviews were conducted in person, though in some instances also via mobile phones and with the help of male relatives of the women in the households, given the deteriorating security situation. Researchers completed planned interviews with both male and female members of the selected households in Kandahar and Herat provinces during the months of June and mid-July 2021. There were a total of 37 (26 male and 11 female) interviews in both provinces. Among them, eight were male and female IDP interviews, 20 were household-level interviews, and nine were key informant interviews with actors on the ground who were NGO workers, business owners, and others.

Data in turn were coded through NVivo, with a coding frame developed by CPAN to understand household resources, assets, activities, and shocks. The coding frame was adapted to the Afghan context to ensure contextual relevance, for example by developing nodes on insecurity-related drivers, norms around patriarchy and gendered perceptions, and the presence of compounded crises and coping strategies in response to these. Alongside the coding analysis, process tracing methods were adopted to understand the sequences through which some individuals and households were able to manoeuvre into and out of livelihoods in ways that helped maintain their welfare, while others were instead driven towards impoverishment in the absence of alternatives.

3.2 Reflection on qualitative research and the role for mixed methods

This section outlines key reflections from the qualitative data collection and analysis, derived through multiple debriefs and regular coordination and collaboration between national and international research partners. It embeds this discussion in the existing literature on poverty dynamics, as developed through CPAN's Q-squared approach, and more generally on qualitative methods in conflict contexts, extending this combined focus to the analysis of overlapping crises.

3.2.1 Insights on qualitative data collection in contexts of overlapping crises

Conducting field research in the context of protracted years of violent conflict has its own complexities. This is only partly due to the security and safety of the field researchers and of the informants and their communities. It is also informed by ethical considerations, and possible biases that can affect methods and approaches in any context, but more specifically in the conflict-affected settings (Campbell 2017). The reason these matters are more important in conflict settings is due to the potential harmful consequences in any stages of research for anyone involved in the study due to the insecurity characterising these environments. In our analysis, given the overlapping crises due to insecurity but also due to the pandemic and climate change, we adopted additional protocols to respond and adapt to the changing circumstances.

Many of the challenges we faced while conducting research were due to the time and place of data collection. The time and place factors are very important in conflict-affected contexts, given the unpredictability of the situation in a short period of time in a given place. As mentioned in Section 2, in the period of field research for this study, the violence had increased to a record level, as the situation had started to change rapidly particularly at subnational level, when districts started to fall one after the other across provinces. Prolonged drought meant that participant availability was also affected as they faced additional income-generation burdens that researchers needed to be mindful of through the timing of the interviews. The pandemic waves also ebbed and flowed, which caused additional challenges in access and safety of participants and researchers. This provided an additional challenge related to 'place', insofar as our site selection covered a multiplicity of crises that was challenging to disentangle.

The assumption of conducting a study in a conflict-affected context is that it is an area of high risk, and so research plans generally aim to ensure that any risks faced by the research team and other human and environmental elements that they come across are safe and protected. Conducting research in the case of Afghanistan, the default situation is one that indicates that

war, violence, and harm to the stakeholders is a likely possibility. Hence, the researchers always accept this risk when they decide to work under such circumstances. To mitigate the risk associated with this, we ensured a range of protocols as detailed below. Even so, this risk may become an issue between the field researchers and external donors and guidelines that they follow. To address this in the course of this study, we adopted regular communications between external donors, partners, and field researchers and ensured full due diligence as an integral part of the implementing partner's protocols.

Moreover, research during the pandemic required research organisations to adapt to an additional new dimension of field assessment in order to ensure that all precautionary steps are taken to protect everyone involved in the process of data collection. With overlapping crises due to insecurity and Covid-19, the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU), as the lead implementing partner in this study in Afghanistan, added a health assessment component (with a focus on Covid-19 risks) in its usual security protocol. The phased process included (1) an overall assessment of the different regions and provinces selected for the study, in the course of its initial design; (2) a pre-field research health and security assessment, followed by the daily health and security assessment of the locality in which the field researchers were present in the course of the data collection process; and (3) assessment immediately after the team returned from the field to ensure the safety of the informants and to maintain contact with them for the possible need to reconnect for missing information and so forth. It has to be noted that timing was also of crucial importance to this assessment. The team looked into timing in both sites and prioritised visits to a site that had fewer positive Covid-19 cases and lower security incidents at that time.

This two-pronged, phased assessment compared three selected provinces (Kandahar, Herat, and Balkh) and the situation analysis of these to examine the possibility of field research. While access and quality research may be challenging in crises contexts, we were able to rely on our past work in these areas to ensure continued access to gatekeepers and establish a baseline from which to assess changes over time. It was for this reason, alongside selecting sites in keeping with our substantive focus on Covid-19, conflict, and climate change, that these areas were selected. Even so, the overall process of ongoing assessments resulted in long delays and finally between June and late July, two of the three selected sites (Kandahar and Herat) were visited, and interviews were conducted there. This site selection process was thus made flexible, recognising the need to conduct quality research, and not compromise on in-depth findings from qualitative research on account of developing more breadth. These were trade-offs the research team consciously made for this work even prior to conducting the fieldwork.

Unexpected challenges may occur in volatile contexts despite planning, and so flexibility and adaptation are critical for researchers well after the planning stages. In the process of conducting our research, several such challenges occurred, reflecting the context of overlapping crises. First, both of our field researchers were infected with the Covid-19 virus during the April–July 2021 wave, and one even lost a family member. We thus needed flexibility in the timing of data collection to account for these events. In addition, the intense security situation resulted in further challenges. Due to the deterioration in the security situation in the field sites, in Herat, the researchers invited and paid for transportation for the members of households to come to a local guesthouse located in the provincial capital of Herat. In contrast, in Kandahar, the male researcher was able to conduct interviews at the site. In both cases, security as well as health protocols were followed, and interviews were conducted, mindful of participants' availability to limit interruptions to their day-to-day livelihoods, particularly in the context of increased economic uncertainty due to overlapping crises.

Furthermore, related to the insecurity, our female researcher could no longer gain security clearance to visit one of the two sites. This meant further adaptation to the emerging situation and conducting interviews via mobile phones and with the help of male relatives of the women in the households. In the second site, both female and male teams were able to meet most of the interviewees in person and conduct interviews. Finally, the decision to conduct field interviews in the third site (Balkh) had to be called off at the very last minute due to security reasons.

In sum, this section has highlighted some key lessons from the methodological approaches to investigating overlapping crises such as (1) using multiple sources for health and security assessment on a more frequent basis; (2) having the ability to respond rapidly in the case of an emergency and unexpected changes in the field plans; (3) relying on more than one local support network or individual in the field sites; (4) taking more careful measures in terms of Covid-19 sensitivity and respecting the 'do no harm' principle; (5) having flexibility with adapting methods based on the field site situation, such as visiting homes or inviting interviewees to an open-air venue, and regular contact between local, national, and international researchers on all aspects of the fieldwork. All of these factors reiterate that research design is not a static process but full of challenges, issues, and considerations throughout the process, and at times requires systems that enable very rapid decision-making in order to ensure the principles of research as well as protection of all those involved (Goodhand 2000; Allmark *et al.* 2009).

3.2.2 The role of mixed methods in researching complex crises
In addition to the in-depth qualitative data collection described previously, we also considered other methods of data analysis

to complement our study findings, increase its generalisability, and promote data triangulation. This process was informed by a Q-squared approach that has been tried and tested by CPAN in its analysis of poverty and wellbeing dynamics in a range of low- and middle-income contexts (see da Corta *et al*. 2021 for an overview). In addition to key informant interviews and life history interviews, this approach generally also undertakes focus group discussions which were ultimately not feasible for the present study given timing and security considerations. CPAN's approach also complements qualitative data collection and analysis with quantitative analysis, typically of household panel survey data, to understand correlates of poverty and wellbeing dynamics.

Given the absence of panel data for our work, we have instead made use of another research study by Diwakar (2022) that relies on analysis of the cross-sectional Income, Expenditure, and Labour Force Survey (IE&LFS) 2019/20 to quantitatively analyse correlates of the probability of poverty and welfare loss in Afghanistan. This survey was undertaken between September 2019 and August 2020, thus overlapping with the early months of the pandemic. Not only is it representative at national and provincial levels, but the stratification design employed also enables analysis by season (NSIA 2021) and accordingly an assessment of welfare changes during the pandemic. Interaction terms in the analysis by Diwakar (2022) offers insights on the relationship between overlapping crises and welfare. To offer a longitudinal perspective, existing secondary research based on quantitative analysis of earlier Afghan household surveys was also consulted.

Where possible, we have attempted to ensure that research findings from the qualitative data and quantitative data are triangulated. This has been done through the tools, methods, and discussions of emerging findings. For example, the tools for qualitative data in this study have been developed in close collaboration with the joint team comprising field researchers who conducted the qualitative data collection as well as researchers who led the analysis of quantitative data. This way, the qualitative tool had elements drawn from some aspects of the quantitative data for further elaboration.

Once the field research had taken place, additional debrief sessions were held with all researchers to discuss emerging issues, with a focus on the overlapping crises, that were then further probed in the quantitative analysis. For example, the qualitative findings pointed to compounded shocks and stressors in a period of insecurity as well as climate change–related shocks and stressors. These in turn were interrogated in the quantitative data in the sister study (Diwakar 2022). This iteration enabled detail from the two sites of qualitative data collection to be generalised to the Afghanistan-wide quantitative analysis.

Even so, there are limitations to our approaches. First, the quantitative data set referred to in this article covers mid-2019 until mid-2020, whereas the qualitative data collection took place in the following year (April–July 2021), just before the shift in the political transition. This is particularly important given the significant changes in the pandemic as well as the security situation taking place in Afghanistan in the last two years. There are also risks of endogeneity in the quantitative data set that are mitigated through relying on qualitative insights to strengthen our understanding of these complex issues and interactions.

In addition, the quantitative analysis relied on a monetary measure to assess poverty and its correlates, whereas the qualitative analysis adopted a more multidimensional conception of wellbeing. Both also rely on self-reported measures of insecurity and climate change, which may vary from actual events. The aim is not to make direct comparisons between the methods, but to assess complementarities and focus on the strengths of each method and its results. Finally, the quantitative analysis covered a situation-wide analysis across Afghan provinces, while qualitative analysis focused on the selected sites in Kandahar and Herat. It should be emphasised that our goal in the qualitative data was not to generalise to the country or even province levels, but rather to provide in-depth insights on the processes and pathways through which households experienced changes in their wellbeing, and what was responsible for those changes (da Corta *et al*. 2021).

4 Overlapping crises and coping strategies for conflict, climate change, and the pandemic

This section outlines the application of the methodologies above, in terms of the research results on overlapping crises and coping strategies for these crises. Findings from the mixed methods data points to the series of long-term impoverishment factors that affect the households on the three levels. Firstly, macro-level issues, clustered in the three major challenges of the pandemic, weather instabilities exacerbated by climate change, and political instabilities associated with the political transition and escalating conflict. The macro-level issues associated with the overlap of the pandemic, climate change, and political instabilities create sets of synergies that affect livelihoods and drive impoverishment in Afghanistan.

4.1 Overlapping crises: conflict, climate change, and the pandemic

The quantitative data analysis pointed to a nexus whereby disasters, insecurity, and a range of negative shocks and stressors during the pandemic months was not only associated with a higher probability of poverty, but also with a higher probability of households self-reporting income loss in the year leading up to the survey (Diwakar 2022). For example, as illustrated in Figure 2, shocks related to disasters, agriculture, or food and farm prices were associated with an even higher probability of poverty and welfare

Figure 2 **Predicted probabilities of welfare loss, by disaster and season**
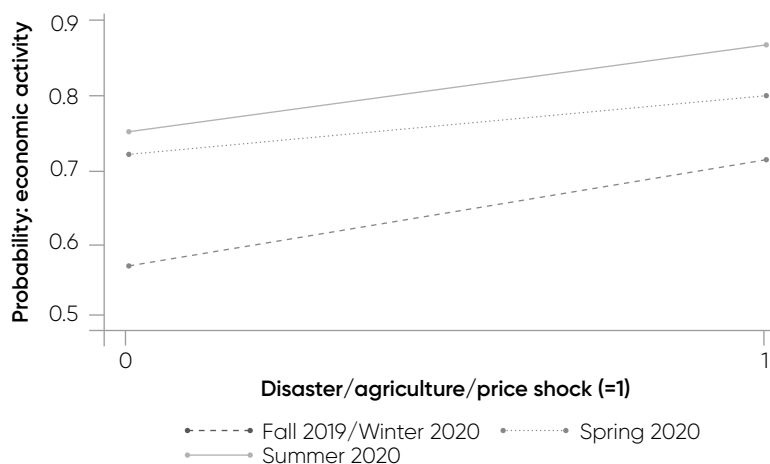
Source Diwakar (2022). © CPAN, reproduced with permission.

loss (compared to the absence of these shocks) into the summer when cases of Covid-19 and insecurity were mounting (*ibid.*).

In the qualitative study sites in Kandahar and Herat, too, there was a strong relationship between climate change and poverty, primarily through the role of its impact on agricultural livelihoods. For example, drought has had an immense effect on water which is the main source for agricultural activities. In the last few years, drought has harshly reduced the yield and harvest in the agriculture sector and the wheat harvest was forecast to be lower compared with the last five years (OCHA 2018), causing large income loss. Moreover, this income loss was then accentuated severely due to the pandemic. One respondent noted that 'drought has affected our yield. However, drought and Covid-19 accord at the same time'.[9]

Another respondent similarly reflected:

> *Due to drought and lack of irrigation resources, I was losing my income. Covid-19 has obliged people who were working in the factory and other manufacturing companies to quit their job as the companies are shut down. The income that we had from outside is now stopped. As a result, it has severely affected our livelihood and economic situation.*[10]

On the one hand, the policy response to the pandemic limited the accessibility of the labour market for families that relied on the daily wage labour. On the other hand, the closing of the borders and the lockdown of commercial hubs and areas caused an increase in food prices. These policy responses exacerbated the socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic on households that

were already suffering due to drought. Indeed, the combination of disasters, as well as agricultural and price shocks observed in the quantitative analysis was associated with a heightened probability of poverty during the pandemic, as noted above from the analysis of quantitative data. In the qualitative data in Herat and Kandahar, this combination in turn limited the ability of workers to support their families. For example, one interviewee noted: 'The drought had affected our harvest and it was a big problem especially in Herat. The rain was so rare; it means that during winter season until the month of April, we had no rain in Herat.'

The same respondent also acknowledged:

> Nowadays, the Covid-19 pandemic is a problem that affects people's income. Sometimes the market is good but when the disease increases and during the quarantine, markets get closed which has also affected people's economy especially farmers and livestock. When we take our dairy product to the city, we know when Covid-19 is increased, the demand will decrease. Because people are not coming to Bazar and the demand of buying and selling is rare or even totally stopped.[11]

A rapid change in the security situation especially over the pandemic period and an increase in local crime further reduced access to work in the agriculture sector that was already affected by the drought and rising food prices. One respondent noted how these various shocks converged to heighten food insecurity, economic precarity, and mortality:

> Covid-19 had a severe effect on the spirit of the people, and they were under a lot of stress. In addition to this, in the time of Covid-19, insecurity has increased in the area... In the last one year, the case of theft, robbery, and other criminal activities has reached its peak. We did not have such insecurity in the past. At the village level, people are stealing a mobile from a person... Looking to the economic situation, the insecurity, drought, lack of work, we may have people who died because of hunger.[12]

Political instability and a change of regime destabilised the economic sector, and reduced income and work opportunities, as well as reducing access to grain and fruit markets both at the national and international level. In the context of already increased food prices, this further reduced the purchasing power of Afghan households.

This impact of insecurity and an increase in local crime not only broke the working cycle for farmers but it also limited their access to the market. As a result, farmers were unable to sell their harvest on time, causing low returns from their land and in many cases, loss of fixed assets. Restrictions in food trading due

Figure 3 Predicted probabilities of welfare loss, by insecurity and season

Fall 2019/Winter 2020 ••••••• Spring 2020
Summer 2020
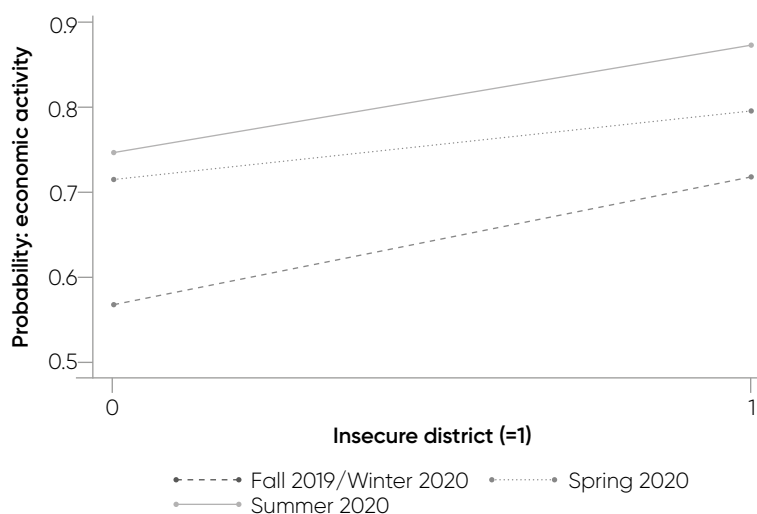
to local Covid-19 lockdowns put additional pressure on people's livelihoods and access to the market for their day-to-day consumption and, most importantly, for the daily wage labour:

After the start of Covid-19, the price of petrol has reached 57 AFN [Afghan afghani]. *When we ask shopkeepers why the price is so high, they said that borders are closed. There is no transportation between the countries that has an impact on the import and exports. Therefore, the prices are getting higher day by day.*[13]

Furthermore, to overcome the scarcity of and accessibility to food items, in some parts of the country the government had opened markets at night-time. However, the same respondent noted a concern around deteriorating insecurity during the night markets, which made them fear that traders would be less likely to visit their area, thus further depressing local markets.

Just as we see these processes in the qualitative data in Herat and Kandahar, we also observe a relationship between insecurity during the pandemic and welfare loss more generally across the country. Indeed, Figure 3 indicates that households in the country residing in an insecure district during the summer of 2020 marked by the onset of the pandemic had a particularly high probability of welfare loss relative to those residing in safer areas of the country. The qualitative data above suggests that Covid-19-induced price volatility also interacted with this insecurity, suggesting that the price shocks channel observed in the quantitative data analysis above would also apply to contexts of insecurity.

The overlap of climate change, insecurity, and the pandemic discussed previously has created several factors which drained household resources and contributed to poverty and welfare loss. Indeed, though the poverty rate from the 2019/20 survey stood at 47.1 per cent of the population, this figure was higher during the onset of the pandemic in the spring season, when poverty rose to 52.3 per cent of the population. Self-reported welfare loss was also much higher during the pandemic. For example, 34.3 per cent of the population interviewed in the summer of 2020 felt that their economic situation at the time of the survey was much worse compared to the preceding year. In contrast, just 19.7 per cent of the population interviewed during the autumn of 2019 felt that their situation was much worse compared to a year preceding their survey (Diwakar 2022).

4.2 Blocked coping responses
These crises and their impacts were met with international and local responses, but these were often inadequate to address the compounded nature of the crises. Despite a range of international and programmatic funding being dedicated as outlined in Section 2, the research team on the ground found very limited evidence of what was actually received by people in the study sites. Widespread corruption, the deterioration of the security situation across the country and to an extent, the politicisation of the national REACH project by the president's office have resulted in limited outreach of the government-led, donor-funded Covid-19 response in the pre-August 2021 context of the country. It is worth noting that the military opposition government at the time when the field research was conducted did not have any specific response or programmes to support Covid-19- and/or drought-affected communities.[14]

As a result, in response to negative shocks and stressors, households were sometimes forced to adopt a variety of often erosive coping strategies that further prompted welfare

Figure 4 Coping responses to negative shocks
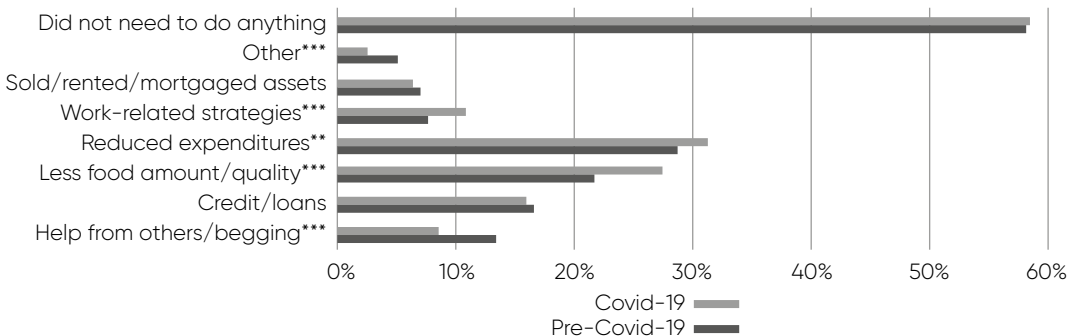
Note Asterisk indicates statistically significant difference between groups, where *** p<0.01. ** p<0.05. * p<0.1.
Source Diwakar (2022). © CPAN, reproduced with permission.

loss. As summarised in Diwakar (2022), many households in Afghanistan in 2019/20 reduced expenditures, contributing to heightened food insecurity especially during the period corresponding to the pandemic (Figure 4). Other differences in coping strategies disaggregated by the months prior to and during the pandemic included a reduced reliance on potentially diminishing community-level social capital and a corresponding increase in work-related strategies perhaps in response to this (*ibid*.). However, migration as a work-related strategy itself was constrained given lockdowns and border closures.

We further examine these coping strategies in the qualitative data below.

4.2.1 Credit and lack of access to social networks

The most common coping strategy used to cope with the household-level crisis is to access capital via social networks from family and friends. Traditionally, this type of coping strategy is well established throughout Afghan communities. However, with long-term impoverishment, we observe that this type of coping strategy has declined. On the one hand, there are very few households with enough resources that can be lent to others, and on the other, due to displacements, some of the social networks have been disrupted.

> *However, when* [we] *displaced to Herat Province, everything changed. I don't know anyone in this place. Therefore, in the time of need, I cannot ask for help or a loan from the people in my neighbourhood. When I do not know someone, I cannot ask for a loan.*[15]

> *One day ago, I gave one of the ditches of this garden to my father-in-law on mortgage for 90,000 AFN. The ditch was given on mortgage because I was short of money which I needed for buying fertilisers for the gardens and house expenses.*[16]

In addition, debts also put a huge impact on households' income resources, not always due to the crises discussed above. Instead, wedding costs, bride price, funeral costs, medical expenses or treatment, daily expenses, and some cultural-religious practices are issues which people take loans for in general. Respondents from Kandahar and Herat provinces elaborated their reasons for taking a loan:

> *We got 150,000 AFN to pay the* pishkash [bride price] *of our daughter-in-law. Her total* pishkash *was 500,000 AFN. We took loan of 50,000 AFN for our daily expenses, we had no money to provide daily expenses (including food, medicine, etc).*[17]

> *I am in debt of 210,000 AFN. I took 100,000 AFN for my father's funeral, 50,000 AFN for my children's treatment and 60,000 AFN for my wedding ceremony.*[18]

People can return these kinds of loans through long-term labour, which takes years to repay, or they must sell properties and assets which are a source of income in their turn. For example, one of the respondents mortgaged part of his farmland to provide for his son's wedding. Another respondent sold a piece of his land and cow to repay his debt and to help marry his eldest son.

4.2.2 Substituting work strategies and risky work strategies
In a time of hardship, economic constraints, and the pandemic, families identified other sources of income. Some women engaged in handicraft work, families sent their children to collect used paper and plastic, and some families who could not find daily wage labour in other sectors like agriculture or construction instead migrated to work in the brick fields. This transition has reduced their hardship, though sometimes it has had negative consequences; for example, child labour. Such strategies were helpful in the short term, but the consequences are catastrophic and exacerbated their livelihood problems in the long term. For instance, working in the brick fields required huge physical effort and a long period undertaking this kind of work could cause permanent physical injuries, while children cannot attend school because of their work.

> I went to find a daily wage labour yesterday. I found wage labour, I have to take soil from a person's home. In the end, he gave me 150 AFN for the whole day. First, it is pretty challenging to find daily wage labour. Second, when I see wage labour, the wage is meagre. My other brothers are young, but during the day, they collect script paper and sell it.[19]

> 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 10 AFN 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 in poverty before dying by Corona.[20]

4.2.3 Displacement and migration
Displacement within the country had significantly increased due to intense violence in many districts of Kandahar and Herat. As mentioned earlier, in the first half of 2021 alone, over half a million people had been displaced internally in Afghanistan. While internal displacement has risen, migration to bordering countries such as Iran and Pakistan has declined during the pandemic due to border closures and/or restrictions. Migration was one of the best ways to complete debt repayments. Remittance from Iran and other countries is more generally considered to be an important aspect during times of family crisis, marriage, and other events. People, mainly from Herat, go to Iran to work there and support their families. However, since the pandemic began, the Iranian government has deported thousands of migrants

back to Afghanistan (Rahimi 2021). This has limited their access to resources and the labour market.

> *The situation was worse for labour workers. There were some jobs, but due to war, people were not able to work. So, people were jobless most of the time. All over Shindand had the same situation. He* [her husband] *just came back some months ago. He stayed in Iran only for three months last time. He came back because his father was killed, and there was no man at home. So, he had to be back.*[21]

> *One of my sons went to Iran for work but was deported back. He returned home at the end of March 2021. He was deported after 40 days. He went to work in Iran to earn some money, as we got 150,000 AFN as loan to pay the* pishkash *of his wife. So, we are not able to repay that loan up to now.*[22]

> *When I migrated from the Arghandab district* [Kandahar], *contrary to other people, I did not wait for daily wage labour. Instead, I looked to a famous place like a car washing centre or hotel and asked them for work.*[23]

5 Conclusion and recommendations

This article has highlighted the overlapping crises caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, conflict, and climate challenges that have affected rural livelihoods in Afghanistan. It has elaborated on how rural and semi-rural populations' livelihood strategies have evolved and changed during a very traumatic period in their lives, with the widespread prevalence of the Covid-19 virus, an intense level of violence, and an ongoing drought situation. The article has also reflected on qualitative research embedded within mixed methods and their applications to analyse people's livelihoods amidst overlapping crises within the country. Furthermore, the factors added by the aftermath of regime change at a later phase (post-August 2021) created a unique environment in which the usual system of coping strategies, such as the system of credits based on social networks, alternative work strategies, and migration, are also severely restricted, further driving impoverishment throughout the population.

With regard to the reflections on methodologies for investigating overlapping crises, the article has underlined the sensitivities of working in an intense context of protracted and increased violence, as well as a large surge in Covid-19 cases. It has unpacked the process of operationalising a mixed methods research study in an intensely complex environment and how researchers can operate and adjust assessments accordingly to ensure ethical, safety, and other aspects of the research while upholding the quality of the primary data collection. These processes were enabled through systematic coordination between national and international teams.

Some of the key lessons learned in terms of the methodological approach are summarised as follows:

- Use multiple sources for health and security assessment on a more frequent basis.

- Be able to rapidly respond in cases of emergencies and unexpected changes to plans in the field.

- Take careful measures in terms of Covid-19 sensitivity and respect the 'do no harm' principle.

- Rely on more than one local support network or individual in the field sites.

- Have flexibility in adapting methods based on the field site situation such as changing plans about the location of interviews; bringing interviewees to a location as opposed to visiting the actual sites; conducting interviews in the open air versus inside their houses and so forth.

- Have more systematic contact between local, national, and international researchers on all aspects of the research design and the fieldwork. For instance, it was very important for the quantitative research team to review the qualitative interview tool and to ensure that there is coherence between the interview questions.

The article has also noted a number of limitations that were faced in this process:

- There was a difference in the time frame for the quantitative survey and qualitative data.

- The quantitative analysis relied on a monetary measure to assess poverty and its correlates, while the qualitative analysis adopted a more multidimensional conception of wellbeing.

- Both also relied on self-reported measures of insecurity and climate change, which may vary from actual events.

Consequently, the article reiterates the point that the research design process should not be seen as static but rather as an alive and dynamic process where all participants need to be involved, from design to operationalisation, and to finalisation of the process.

The article has highlighted the unique nature of Afghanistan's experience with the pandemic being combined with overlapping crises such as intense conflict and an ongoing drought. The study found that these multiple crises have not only broken the cycle of work for most people's rural livelihoods, but they have also deprived them of basic access to the market, trading, and social

networks. The article identified key factors that converged to drive impoverishment in study sites in Kandahar and Herat. This included not only the overlapping crises but their consequences as seen through the effects of inflation, an increase in food prices, family-level crises, coping strategies, and displacement and migration effects. These examples all point to strong linkages and intersections between the triple challenges of conflict, the pandemic, and climate change that affected people's livelihoods.

Above all, this article highlights the already grim and tense situation that Afghans were living in before the mid-August 2021 changes. The aftermath of the political shift since last year, added to economic restrictions, border closures, and the massive collapse of development aid has worsened even further the situation for everyone in the country.

The analysis and findings from this study are also important for humanitarian and development policymakers and programme implementing agencies. Therefore, we present a number of recommendations as follows:

- There is a need for acknowledging the overlapping crises and for a collective crisis management and response to the issues, especially when dealing with humanitarian crises in the context of protracted violence and instability such as in Afghanistan. A more holistic livelihood response will not only help with a better understanding of the context and responses to it, but will also address the issues in the longer term and more effectively.

- Looking at the evidence from this study in the current context, there is a clear need to further strengthen linkages between humanitarian and development responses to the crisis. While the present priority for Afghanistan's people is a humanitarian response from most of the international aid agencies, this alone will not succeed without addressing longer-term development aid-focused responses.

- The findings from this study highlight how youth-headed households were more prone to food insecurity and poverty during the period of the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, future humanitarian and development programmes need to keep youth-headed households in consideration.

- Aid providers need to consider the key characteristics of each context before planning the delivery of services. A clearer understanding of people's livelihoods can help in better provision of immediate, short-, and longer-term assistance.

- There is a critical need to continue studies on livelihood trajectories in order to observe the changes in people's coping strategies and how those could be aligned with the provision of possible jobs and services that the assistance community offers.

● More specifically, donors are encouraged to use the overlapping crises such as the pandemic, conflict, and climate change as a framework for analysis in commissioning poverty monitoring studies, as this will help highlight not only the linkages and overlaps between the three, but also helps with deeper understanding of poverty and poverty reduction strategies.

● The pandemic has still not been declared over, and therefore aid and assistance programmes need to consider addressing its impacts on people's livelihoods. Research organisations also need to maintain effective procedures from both ethics and 'do no harm' perspectives while conducting research during the time of a pandemic.

● The key lessons on methods and studies on livelihoods and poverty in a conflict-affected context at the time of a pandemic highlight the importance of assessing, planning, and executing field research and data collection processes through the lens of overlapping crises. This means that the assessment and planning of research should consider the pandemic, conflict, and climate change as overlapping factors that will affect the data collection and execution of the research itself.

Notes

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6 See OCHA and WHO (2021).

7 *Daily Afghanistan* (2021) reported on 21 January 2021 that the REACH programme was halted in some parts of the country by the Taliban. **The *Daily Afghanistan* quotes the Taliban spokesperson**: 'In fact, our conditions for these programmes is that it has to be coordinated with us, there should be

transparency and poor people should be identified by impartial people and distributions should be conducted by them. If these conditions are not met, there is possibility of theft, corruption and we will not allow it.' [translated from original text in Persian].

8 Brick kilns.
9 Household head (HH) interviews, Herat, 2021.
10 Household head (HH) interviews, Herat, 2021.
11 Household head (HH) interviews, Herat, 2021.
12 Household head (HH) interviews, Herat, 2021.
13 Household head (HH) interviews, Herat, 2021.
14 Based on the field research team observation and interview with key informants. See endnote 5.
15 Household head (HH) interviews, Herat, 2021.
16 Data from earlier study, Herat, 2015.
17 Household head (HH) interviews, Herat, 2021.
18 IDP interview, Herat, 2021.
19 IDP interview, Herat, 2021.
20 IDP interview, Herat, 2021.
21 IDP interview, Herat, 2021.
22 Household head (HH) interviews, Herat, 2021.
23 IDP interview, Herat, 2021.

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