



Needs and Vulnerability in Afghanistan

**Jeremy Allouche, Lewis Sida, Tina Nelis and
Sofya Shahab**

May 2022

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First published by the Institute of Development Studies in May 2022

DOI: [10.19088/IDS.2022.032](https://doi.org/10.19088/IDS.2022.032)

Suggested citation: Allouche, J.; Sida, L.; Nelis, T. and Shahab, S. (2022) *Needs and Vulnerability in Afghanistan*, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, DOI: [10.19088/IDS.2022.032](https://doi.org/10.19088/IDS.2022.032)

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

This paper was supported by the UK Humanitarian Innovation Hub and UK aid from the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO). Opinions and any errors or omissions are the authors' responsibility. The views presented in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of ASLI partners or workshop participants.



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Acknowledgements

IDS would like to thank the ASLI partners: **Sarah Rose** and **Mike Pisa** of CGD; **Renata Dwan**, **Gareth Price**, and **Hameed Hakimi** of Chatham House; **Alastair McKechnie**, **Kathryn Nwajiaku-Dahou**, **Marcus Manuel**, **Ed Laws**, and **Mark Bowden** of ODI; and **Cyprien Fabre** and **Sarah Spencer Bernard** of the OECD-DAC. IDS would also like to thank **Nic Parham** and colleagues at ACAPS for providing advice and data for the paper. IDS would like to extend a special thanks to **Ben Ramalingam** and **Mark Beagan** of the UK Humanitarian Innovation Hub for their continued intellectual, operational, and financial support. We are also grateful to **James Middleton** and **Beth Richard** for editorial support, **Ben O'Donovan-Iland** and **Fionnuala Tennyson** for communications support, and all the partners' programme and events leads. IDS would also like to thank the participants who attended their ASLI workshop on need and vulnerability; their insights were invaluable to the writing of the paper.

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The ASLI was supported by the UK Humanitarian Innovation Hub with UK aid from the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office.

1. Introduction

About the Afghanistan Strategic Learning Initiative

This paper draws on a series of events under the Afghanistan Strategic Learning Initiative (ASLI). The initiative has been convened with the support of the UK Humanitarian Innovation Hub and the donor, the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, in partnership with the Center for Global Development (CGD), Chatham House, the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), ODI and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development-Development Assistance Committee (OECD-DAC).

Between December 2021 and February 2022, ASLI convened four workshops led by each of the partner organisations in turn. The workshops brought together senior leaders, decision-makers, experts, researchers and practitioners to discuss what comes next for foreign aid in Afghanistan. The lead organisation for each workshop published an accompanying paper, of which this is one.

The **first workshop**, led by Chatham House on 17 December 2021, explored four potential scenarios for Afghanistan's political, economic, and security trajectory over the next 18–24 months. The **second workshop**, led by IDS on 28 January 2022, explored need and vulnerability, tying the drivers of these conditions to the scenarios outlined by Chatham House. The **third workshop**, led by CGD on 9 February, assessed options for future aid instruments and mechanisms to address the financial crisis. The **fourth workshop**, for which a background note was distributed to participants, was led by ODI on 28 February and focused on options for collective action.

Following the workshops and papers, ASLI published a synthesis paper that summarises options for effective international engagement with a changed Afghanistan.

ASLI seeks to leverage the collective knowledge and experience of leading global thinktanks working on Afghanistan and aid issues. Our goal is to make a coherent and evidence-based contribution to emerging and ongoing work addressing development and vulnerability in Afghanistan.

This paper examines four broad areas: poverty, structural vulnerability, basic services, and shocks. The intention is to stimulate debate and exchange of information and ideas, rather than to provide a definitive account of these areas.

1.1 Key messages

- Chronic poverty and structural vulnerabilities are at the root of Afghanistan's current humanitarian crisis.
- These underlying factors have been compounded by a short-term liquidity and banking crisis at the same time as the second severe drought in three years.
- Although humanitarian aid is of paramount importance to alleviate immediate need, it cannot substitute for functioning basic services and rural institutions in the medium term.
- The Taliban¹ is responsible for providing for the population it controls – aid agencies should not unthinkingly substitute for government services when internal resources are available.
- There is a need to find creative ways to support functioning institutions, build trust and expand the political space for these kinds of interventions.

¹ Taliban is a loose term that describes the *de facto* coalition led by members of the Taliban movement in Afghanistan. It includes members of the Haqqani network affiliated to, but not controlled by the Taliban, as well as appointments from other factions. The *de facto* government describes itself as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

2. Poverty, economy, and food security

Poverty rates in Afghanistan remain high despite two decades of high volumes of aid investment. According to the World Bank (2021), 47 per cent of the population were living in poverty in 2020, but the report cautioned that this figure may have reached 70 per cent because of the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic. The Human Development Index ranking has increased by 22 per cent since 2005, though progress has been practically stagnant in the past three years (Afghanistan is still 169th out of 189 countries) (UNDP 2020b). The stalled progress most likely relates to the impact of conflict.

Despite rapid urbanisation, Afghanistan has a predominantly rural population with an estimated three-quarters of the population living in rural areas (Ahmadi 2019: 7). Poverty is highest in rural areas and lowest in the capital Kabul. A growing landless rural population do not derive much of a living from rural areas, surviving on remittances from local and distant migration (Pain *et al.* 2017: 2). Political settlements strongly influence access to resources and economic opportunities (*ibid.*) and consolidate power among a few wealthy families, further entrenching urban and rural divides, as well as between landowners and landless workers (*ibid.*). In the latest Integrated Expenditure and Labour Force Survey (2019–20) rural poverty had dropped quite significantly however from 59 per cent in 2016–17 to 47.6 per cent in 2019–20 (World Bank 2021: 1). Agriculture drove the improvement in living conditions, with a rise in production of 26 per cent (*ibid.*: 28). More land was taken into cultivation and more irrigation established. There was also growth in exports of fruit and vegetables. The (relative) decline in rural poverty was greatest in the south and southwest of the country. These were the same areas that had the highest rates of multidimensional poverty.

Poverty is highly correlated with lack of education and with certain occupations, and households that derive their main source of income from agriculture, livestock, or non-formal employment. Poverty also has a seasonal character as a result of higher food prices, combined with the decline of income-generating opportunities and availability of food in local markets during the winter months. The geography of poverty is highly uneven (see also below), potentially related to drought and intensifying drought cycles.

Urban poverty is a growing problem. The 2019–20 labour force survey showed poverty rates at an all-time high. In urban areas, both government and private sector workers have lost jobs; and those who have not lost jobs have not received salaries. Although the interim budget (January–March 2022) indicates

that salaries will be paid to teachers, government employees and health workers, their intermittent payment to date does not instil great confidence. Participants in the ASLI workshop felt that urban poverty was of great concern, with the economic shock of the Taliban takeover (and international sanctions) leading to dramatic urban impoverishment. The simultaneous withdrawal of jobs associated with the international presence and the impact on the private sector of constrained trading conditions accelerated the already growing urban poverty.

Overall, improvements have slowed in recent years and high chronic poverty in Afghanistan means the population is theoretically vulnerable to shocks. A recent United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) report modelled poverty resulting from the shocks outlined above, concluding that without a resolution to the crisis up to 97 per cent of the population could be living in poverty by mid-2022 (UNDP 2021: 9). Workshop participants suggested these predictions should be treated with caution, however, as the quality of the data and (basic) methodology could not be established, especially in a political context where urgent humanitarian calls have been made to focus international community attention on this humanitarian crisis.

In terms of livelihoods, half the population derive their living from agriculture and the rest mainly from small-scale business and trading. The illegal narcotics trade – mainly in opium – is the largest segment of the agricultural economy by value, worth US\$863m in 2018, employing around half a million people and accounting for 10 per cent of the overall economy. Exports of fruit and vegetables have picked up in recent years, supporting a small processing industry. Afghanistan's economy is characterised by boom and bust cycles dominated by periods of agricultural surplus and major deficits resulting from droughts.

Remittances accounted for 4 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) in 2020, worth around US\$800m, with 5.8 million Afghans overseas (IOM 2021). The currency – the afghani – has lost perhaps 10 per cent of its value since the Taliban takeover and imposition of sanctions by the United Nations (UN) and United States in 2021.² This in turn has affected both trade and remittance flows, which are major sources of revenue for the country and individual families.

Government revenue was highly aid dependent before the Taliban takeover, with foreign grants making up nearly 45 per cent of GDP in 2019 (World Bank 2019a: 6). Some 75 per cent of government expenditure was paid for with aid (World Bank 2019b). The situation has become much more critical following the sanctions, freezing of Afghan government assets, and suspension of Afghanistan's access to International Monetary Fund resources and to disbursements from the World Bank's US\$1bn Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust

² Rate at 12 May 2022: 88 afghanis to US\$1, compared with 80 afghanis prior to August 2021. The afghani initially plunged following the Taliban takeover, falling as low as 109 in late December 2021. It has subsequently recovered to its current level.

Fund (ARTF). The suspension of aid will dramatically affect the government's ability to pay teachers and civil servants. At roughly 10 per cent of the formal workforce, a complete absence of government salaries will also adversely impact the economy generally.

Food security has deteriorated since 2013. According to the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, which describes the severity of food emergencies, in November 2021–March 2022 an estimated 55 per cent of the population were classified as being in either an 'emergency' or a 'crisis' (IPC 2021). This was a major increase from a year earlier when this figure was 35 per cent. As with chronic poverty, the picture of deterioration should be treated with caution or at least circumspection. Other measures paint a more nuanced picture. Stunting (chronic malnutrition) has improved over the past 20 years, from 60 per cent of children to 40 per cent. At the same time, wasting (acute malnutrition) has not changed overly, at around 9 per cent nationally, although this is highly concentrated in a handful of provinces and among marginal groups such as the Kuchi pastoral nomads. Factors affecting food insecurity in the country have been multifaceted and include exposure to shocks such as loss of employment, floods or droughts, and conflict-induced displacement. Since the Taliban takeover, however, the country has experienced significant price rises related to the value of the afghani and its trading role.

Migration to Iran and onwards to Turkey and Europe is a well-established option for young Afghans (mostly male) looking for work outside the country. In 2019, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) reported 451,073 Afghans returned during the course of the year (IOM 2019). The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates as many as 2 million Afghans may work illegally in Iran (UNHCR n.d.). Turkey hosts as many as 400,000 Afghan refugees and asylum seekers, most of whom aim to travel to Europe.

Finally, while the impact of the immediate economic shock is negative, participants in the ASLI workshop recognised that the consequences are unpredictable in the medium term. Urban areas will feel the immediate impact of currency and salary crises; rural areas also depend on markets and cash transfers, including remittances. Prolonged currency instability may have major negative consequences for trade, as traders will have reduced power to purchase imports priced in international currencies.

3. Structural vulnerabilities

Structural vulnerabilities embedded in systems of power in Afghanistan have resulted in extreme inequality and social exclusion, leaving people more exposed to shocks and instability. According to the UNDP's Gender Development Index (GDI), Afghanistan ranks 166th out of 167 countries (UNDP 2020a). Within Afghanistan, the main forms of social exclusion have been identified as gender, age, ethnicity, migrant status, location, and health (GCAP 2016). Inequalities arising from these factors are woven into the structural fabric of society in Afghanistan, resulting in power imbalances and unequal life chances, and impacting on people's ability to meet their basic needs. As forms of social exclusion, these structural vulnerabilities vary within the country according to a range of factors, and affect people differently according to context and how they intersect with one another.

Highly gendered public and private spaces mark contemporary gender dynamics in Afghanistan. Gendered identities strongly shape men and women's domestic and professional roles, and their corresponding participation in paid work. Maintaining gender boundaries is seen as key to preserving male, family and community honour: there are strict constraints on female physical mobility (Ganesh 2017). According to the Global Women, Peace and Security Index 2021/22, Afghanistan ranks 170th out of 170 (GIWPS and PRIO 2021). Some 87 per cent of women and girls have experienced at least one form of intimate partner violence (Cone 2021).

Gender norms vary widely across Afghanistan. This variation is driven by regional, ethnic, religious, cultural and security differences. Participants in the ASLI workshop suggested that under the new *de facto* Taliban government, women are experiencing a rapid reversal of their rights. According to UN Women (2021: 3), this is impacting on their 'freedom of movement and expression, access to life-saving services, information, protection, education, employment and livelihood opportunities'. Workshop participants also worried that gains made since 2001 in areas such as health care and education are at risk of being lost, in some cases quite rapidly. While gender-specific restrictions arising from Taliban edicts – as well as patriarchal social structures and cultural and historical attitudes – directly inhibit the ability of Afghan women and girls to realise their rights, with the deteriorating humanitarian situation they also face unique vulnerabilities and risks as gender inequality is interwoven with humanitarian needs (*ibid.*).

Child labour is also common in Afghanistan. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) estimated that in 2019 around 30 per cent of children were engaged in child labour (UNICEF 2021: 86). This most often results in exclusion from

education and limits children's opportunity for social, political and/or economic empowerment, leading to the reproduction of poverty. Children are also particularly vulnerable to internal trafficking and various forms of modern slavery including forced labour (Rights Lab 2021). The rapid deterioration of the economy increases the likelihood of child labour, marriage, and trafficking.

Finally, Afghanistan is ethnically, linguistically, and culturally diverse. The population of 37 million people is nearly entirely Muslim, predominantly Sunni Hanafi. Due to their Shia faith, ethnic Hazaras have a long history of suffering targeted persecution and marginalisation, being excluded from core social, political and economic positions within Afghanistan (Chioyenda 2014). The (Sunni) Taliban has been responsible for numerous attacks on the Hazara population, including as recently as August 2021: according to a report by international human rights organisation Amnesty International, Taliban forces killed 13 Hazaras in Daykundi province (Amnesty International 2021a). Islamic State-Khorasan Province has also targeted the Hazara community, killing almost 100 Shia Muslims during attacks on mosques in October alone, amounting to what international human rights organisation Human Rights Watch has described as crimes against humanity (Sinno 2021; HRW 2021a).

Overall, ASLI workshop participants recognised that these structural vulnerabilities are societally imposed risk factors, which result from socioeconomic, political and cultural/normative hierarchies. People are subject to these structural vulnerabilities 'when their location in their society's multiple overlapping and mutually reinforcing power hierarchies (e.g. socioeconomic, racial, cultural) and institutional and policy-level statuses (e.g. immigration status, labour force participation)' prevent them from accessing resources and opportunities (Bourgois *et al.* 2017: 300). Such power hierarchies and institutional statuses are closely linked to social identity and location, which can provide a helpful framework to understand the differing dimensions of structural vulnerabilities. Despite aid agencies in Afghanistan making progress in addressing these underlying vulnerabilities – most notably, gender inequality – their cultural and normative dimensions mean change is often slow, while incentives to change are also lacking.

4. Basic services

Health and education have markedly improved since the fall of the first Taliban government in 2001. However, despite efforts to increase access to basic services in rural areas and improvements in indicators such as maternal mortality rates after 2002, studies have indicated that there is still a vast divide in quality and access to health care and education among rural communities – particularly as a result of local political settlements (Pain *et al.* 2017: 4). Moreover, both sectors remain heavily aid dependent.

The Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) in 2003 introduced the Basic Package of Health Services (BPHS) and in 2005 the Essential Package of Hospital Services. Their implementation brought about an improvement in health indicators. However, coverage figures need to be treated with caution as it became increasingly difficult to staff BPHS services in Taliban-controlled areas. In fact, as early as 2011, a study by the Agency Co-ordinating Body for Afghan Relief (ACBAR) noted that the dash for quantity had been at the expense of quality and that ‘the increased coverage claims of the government are not representative of the percentage of Afghans that actually have access to those services’ (ACBAR 2011: 6).

Nevertheless, some authors propose that the coverage of health services, for example, expanded from 12 per cent to 90 per cent of the population. As reported by Jain *et al.* (2021: 1852), access to health care within a two-hour radius had expanded to 87 per cent of the population by 2018. Correspondingly, the maternal mortality rate decreased to 638 deaths per 100,000 women in 2017 (WHO 2019: 12); and life expectancy increased by about a decade to 63 years for both women and men between 2007 and 2017 (Cousins 2021: 197). While the maternal mortality rate has improved over the past two decades, Afghanistan continues to have the world’s worst infant mortality rate (estimated at 110 deaths per 1,000 live births in 2022) (World Population Review 2022). Furthermore, despite improvements in the provision of prenatal care, attended births and the use of modern contraception, even before the Taliban takeover in August 2021 women and girls’ access to health care was below international standards (HRW 2021b). Afghanistan also continues to suffer from low vaccination coverage, leading to outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases such as polio and measles.

The regime change has alerted the international community to the danger that progress made, especially in terms of access to basic services, may be in jeopardy. Public health experts have identified two key areas of concern (see Jain *et al.* 2021 and Safi *et al.* 2021). Firstly, in the short term, regime change has created displacement and migration, including of many healthcare workers;

those who have remained have not received salaries for months. This was, in theory, remedied at the start of 2022 by the International Committee of the Red Cross stepping in to support hospitals, providing salaries and running costs, with UNICEF and the World Health Organization (WHO) taking over Sehatmandi, a performance-based funding mechanism implemented by the former MoPH and funded by the World Bank, whereby non-governmental organisations were contracted for three-year cycles to run medical facilities in 31 of the country's 34 provinces. Furthermore, economic instability has jeopardised access to medicines. Secondly, when the Taliban ruled Afghanistan in 1996–2001, they showed little interest in public health. For example, in 1997 women were only allowed to receive treatment in one dilapidated women-only clinic in Kabul, while the Taliban also banned female medical workers from working in Kabul's other 22 hospitals (Reliefweb 1997). Unsurprisingly, maternal mortality rose, reaching 1,450 deaths per 100,000 women in 2000, the highest rate globally.

Health care in Afghanistan has mainly been financed by private contributions, with 72 per cent coming from out-of-pocket expenditures and 21 per cent from donors. The former MoPH provided only 5 per cent of total health expenditure and other ministries 2 per cent. Since 2018, donor funding has been channelled into the health system through Sehatmandi. When the Taliban seized power, the health system was already severely underfunded and under-resourced, with 4.6 medical doctors, nurses, and midwives per 10,000 people. WHO's definition of a critical shortage of health-care professionals is 23 per 10,000 people (HRW 2021b: 2).

In terms of education, figures from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) suggest that there has been a tenfold increase in school enrolments, rising from 1 million students in 2001 to 10 million students in 2018: students enrolled in primary school rose from 773,000 to 6.5 million; in lower secondary school, from 202,000 to 2 million; in upper secondary school, from 160,000 to 1 million; and in higher education, from 26,000 to 0.4 million (of whom 7.6 per cent were studying abroad) (UNESCO 2021: 5). Between 2011 and 2018, the female literacy rate almost doubled from 17 per cent to 30 per cent; and while the number of teachers increased from 143,000 in 2007 to 226,000 in 2018, a 58 per cent increase, the number of female teachers increased by 105 per cent in the same period (*ibid.*).

Access to education has been a long-standing issue in Afghanistan. Despite a decree issued in 2011 by Mullah Mohammad Omar, the leader of the Taliban and the emir of Afghanistan between 1996 and 2001, which instructed his followers not to intimidate children or attack schools (IRIN News 2011), a joint United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan and UNICEF report noted that in 2015 there were 132 conflict-related incidents affecting education and education-related personnel. This figure represented an 86 per cent increase

compared to the same period in 2014 and a 110 per cent increase compared to 2013. The report stated: 'This trend is attributed to the increase in the number of incidents involving threats and intimidation against education and healthcare personnel (182 per cent more than in 2014 and 376 per cent more than in 2013)' (UNAMA and UNICEF 2016: 6). More than 369 schools were closed partially or completely throughout 2015, affecting 65,057 boys and 73,991 girls (*ibid.*).

According to UNESCO, the education system in Afghanistan is highly dependent on aid. Figures suggest that in 2020, education accounted for 12 per cent of government spending, of which 49 per cent was financed by aid (UNESCO 2021: 5). Government expenditure on education by 2019 represented 3.9 per cent of GDP (lower than the recommended 6 per cent but higher than in neighbouring countries such as Pakistan) (*ibid.*: 7). Before the Taliban takeover, it was estimated that between 2020 and 2025 the education budget would need to increase by 50 per cent to allow the country to increase student enrolment by 2.5 per cent (*ibid.*: 8). In the two decades following the fall of the Taliban, significant progress was made in terms of education provision, with girls' education touted as a government success story. However, although Afghanistan's 2004 constitution guaranteed the right to education for all citizens, access was unequal, with progress concentrated in urban areas. There were also large disparities in girls' access to education, with fewer schools for girls than boys at primary and secondary levels, and a limited number of female teachers.

Participants in the ASLI workshop discussed worrying signs of Taliban attitudes towards education for women and girls. Despite the constitutional right to education for all citizens, the Taliban has rolled this back in terms of girls' education. The Taliban's approach to education has always been very localised, with major variations at district level. Tension also exists between 'traditionalists and hardliners', and 'those who recognise that Afghanistan needs more diverse and modern ideas and approaches within its education system' (Amiri and Jackson 2021: 1). Workshop participants hypothesised a repeat of the Taliban's stance from 1996 to 2001, where girls' safety' was used as an excuse to prohibit women and girls from obtaining an education. Other participants suggested that the Taliban might use international concern around girls' education as leverage to ensure diplomatic recognition and access to financial assets and aid, all the while ensuring that hardline supporters do not defect over this issue (see also O'Donnell 2021).

A recent series edited by Kate Clark at the Afghanistan Analysts Network and participants in the ASLI workshop highlights the variation in schooling since the Taliban takeover and key issues of concern (Clark and Reza Kazemi 2022a, 2022b). Firstly, the Taliban is reluctant to let older girls attend school. Secondly, proposing that girls can only be taught by female teachers is unsustainable given

the national shortage of teachers. Equally, segregation and separate facilities, the latter requiring physical infrastructure, would hinder girls' attendance at school. Thirdly, issues around lack of payment of salaries, with reference to female teachers, removes the autonomy earning a salary affords them. Fourthly, older girls' attendance at school has always been met with unease among more conservative and mainly rural communities who support the Taliban. This stands in contrast to more urbanised areas.

ASLI workshop participants also debated the potential of aid conditionalities to affect policies on education. There was no consensus on how effective conditionalities might be, and the degree to which the international community should use persuasion and diplomacy or take a harder stance.

5. Shocks and disaster risk reduction

Conflict, natural disasters, and livelihood challenges all cause people to uproot themselves and lead to displacement. This, in turn, has enormous repercussions as it affects community cohesion and stability, humanitarian needs and development challenges. In December 2020, there were an estimated 2.9 million internally displaced people (IDPs) in Afghanistan, with an additional 570,000 conflict-induced IDPs since January 2021 (UNHCR 2021).

Participants in the ASLI workshop highlighted the potentially dramatic impact that further waves of drought-related displacement could have on an already weakened urban and humanitarian infrastructure. The drought in 2018 displaced 250,000 people, who ended up in shanty towns around Herat and Qala-i-Naw in the west and northwest of the country. The drought in 2020 (caused by a La Niña effect) led the previous government to declare a national disaster in June 2021, estimating the potential loss of 2 million metric tons of wheat and 3 million livestock. Without the ability of the urban economy to provide jobs, workshop participants highlighted the dual worry of competition for already scarce casual labour and a reduction in social networks to provide support in times of crisis.

Globally, Afghanistan is the country most severely affected by disasters in terms of their impact on the population. The country's protracted conflict has eroded people's coping mechanisms, making them more prone to hazards. Over the past three decades, nearly all 34 provinces have been affected by at least one natural disaster (NEPA and UNEP 2015: 34). Since 1980, disasters have affected on average more than 200,000 people each year and claimed more than 20,000 lives (GFDRR 2017: 5). In 2017, economic damage from earthquakes, floods and droughts was estimated to be more than US\$400m (Mena and Hilhorst 2021: 193). The co-occurrence of natural disasters and conflict has further impoverished people. Droughts are periodic and increasing in frequency, occurring in 1995, 2001, 2011, 2018 and 2020–21.

Since 2002, nearly 5.3 million Afghan refugees have returned to Afghanistan through the UNHCR's Voluntary Repatriation programme. However, this figure is not indicative of actual numbers as the overwhelming majority of returnees are undocumented (UNHCR 2020). There is also a hazy distinction between voluntary and forced returns (IDMC and NRC 2017). Many Afghans have experienced multiple displacements or repeated migrations, as well as returns from neighbouring countries. Migration is a common coping strategy for Afghans, leaving when security deteriorates and returning to Afghanistan to re-establish livelihoods when conditions improve (WFP 2017). Cycles of displacement and return create or worsen tensions that could potentially exacerbate conflict and undermine social cohesion.

Aside from potentially contributing to levels of insecurity, IDPs and returnees face a range of humanitarian and development challenges, as they struggle to build sustainable livelihoods. Afghanistan has one of the highest unemployment rates in the world at over 20 per cent of the labour force, and this rate is likely to be higher for IDPs and returnees (CSO 2018). As highlighted in an ODI study, many displaced people settle in urban centres assuming that they will be more secure and have better prospects, especially in terms of access to services such as health and education – yet many encounter significant hardship (Metcalf and Hayson 2012). Returnees are at greater risk of falling into debt, forcing them to rely on negative coping mechanisms, such as child labour or early marriage for money (Ferrie 2018; IDMC and NRC 2017). These challenges have been exacerbated by economic decline, leaving already struggling displacement-affected communities to face severe food insecurity, and housing and livelihood risks (NRC 2020).

In Afghanistan, out of 170 disasters recorded between 1970 and 2016, floods accounted for 46 per cent of all disasters (SESRIC n.d.), with around 400,000 individuals displaced and around 5,000 killed by flooding between 1988 and 2006 (Hagen and Teufert 2009: 182). According to a report by the World Food Programme and UN Environment Programme (WFP and UNEP 2016), Afghanistan already experiences severe climate-change-related flooding caused by heavy rainfall over short periods, and rapid melting of snow and ice in highland areas during the spring. In 2017 alone, climate shocks (floods and droughts) negatively affected the food security status of millions of Afghans (FAO *et al.* 2018: 59). Afghanistan is classified among the nations with the most climate-sensitive agricultural production; in 2011–16, the country faced high exposure to climate extremes in terms of interseasonal variability, frequency and intensity of temperature (*ibid.*).

Despite these statistics, and links between hazards and food security and other poverty indicators, disaster risk reduction has not been viewed as a key priority. Two factors principally explain this. The Afghanistan National Disaster Management Authority was established in 2012, along with a Disaster Management Action Plan, which was updated in response to the requirements of the UN Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030, but the central government did not internalise the framework's policies. Secondly, community leaders see basic services such as electricity, health and better road access to other areas as more important than disaster risk reduction or disaster management. The challenge, therefore, is how to develop projects in a way that is better integrated with people's everyday needs and vulnerabilities.

Besides the difficulties of getting disaster risk reduction onto the policy agenda to address various forms of vulnerability, it is important to see hazards in relation to differentiated forms of social vulnerability. Disasters do not affect people equally

(Enarson and Morrow 1998; Mileti 1999). According to several studies, women are more vulnerable than men to natural hazard-induced disasters (Enarson and Morrow 1998; Ariyabandu and Fonseka 2006; Gokhale 2008). Data from recent disasters around the globe show that there are twice as many female victims as male victims (Enarson and Meyreles 2004); and women and children are 14 times more likely to die in a disaster than men, especially in developing countries. For example, during the Hindu Kush earthquake in Afghanistan on 26 October 2015, 70 per cent of victims were women and young girls.

6. Conclusion and recommendations

The Taliban takeover has temporarily cut Afghanistan off from the international order,³ with severe consequences for the country's financial sector and banking services. Against the backdrop of a severe drought in 2021, and ongoing economic effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, the situation for the poorest and most vulnerable has dramatically worsened, at least in the short term.

However, the current crisis is playing out against a much longer and more enduring context of rural poverty and structural vulnerabilities. Aid policymakers ignore these at their peril – short-term fixes to Afghanistan's development problems have been the norm for the past two decades and have achieved much less than was hoped.

The ASLI workshop that IDS led examined the themes outlined in this short paper, bringing deep contextual, historical and policy expertise to bear, as well as recent experience. Workshop participants concluded that although there are plenty of data on the current drivers of vulnerability in Afghanistan, their reliability and limited availability since the Taliban takeover makes scenario-planning a difficult exercise. Despite these conceptual and methodological limitations, it is clear that Afghanistan faces multiple and interrelated crises, linking rural and urban poverty with food insecurity and access to basic services.

The liquidity crisis has further exacerbated these problems. Liquidity problems in the banking system cause problems for importers and exporters. Workshop participants identified other consequences, however, such as declining access to agricultural inputs potentially eroding recent productivity gains. Trading of favours, reciprocity and social credit – whereby buyers can pay later because vendors know them – are traditional coping mechanisms, but workshop participants worried that the liquidity crisis is putting these under huge pressure. During droughts, a major coping mechanism is migration into urban areas for casual and manual work; for instance, in construction. But with urban work also negatively affected by the economic and liquidity shocks, this avenue is less readily available.

Workshop participants saw migration as a major consequence of the current humanitarian crisis and a coping mechanism. While we are already seeing internal migration in the west of the country because of the drought, and from border areas into Iran where work opportunities are perceived to be available, there is also the prospect of migration further afield. Even before the current

³ Defined by a lack of formal recognition by international governments and the imposition of sanctions against the Taliban and the Haqqani network, which has chilled financial flows. However, UN and other donors continue to provide humanitarian assistance.

crisis, significant numbers of Afghans were trying to enter Europe, with Turkey hosting hundreds of thousands. These numbers could grow; but evidence suggests that there may also be pushback, with deportations from Pakistan, Iran and Tajikistan increasing since August 2021.

Social networks and social ties, including remittances, may become even more important. Workshop participants identified the potential for social networks to break down when debts cannot be paid. Overall, the potential for urban poverty to increase – linked to a lack of jobs because international agencies have left, and medium-sized industries not being able to obtain credit and liquidity – could complicate the provision of humanitarian aid as the obvious response is to provide cash, which is itself a major challenge.

The new *de facto* Taliban government still gets significant income from customs and other tax revenue collection, and from trade including narcotics. Workshop participants suggested that the Taliban has policy choices to make in terms of providing state services and poverty reduction measures, as well as providing income to finance services. In its budget for the first quarter of 2022, the Taliban's intention appeared to be to pay civil service salaries based on realistic revenue projections. However, salaries only seem to have materialised sporadically (Byrd 2022). Workshop participants were clear that aid actors must not simply assume the Taliban's social obligations and responsibilities. The workshop highlighted the danger that the Taliban will promote a policy of aid agencies paying for services such as girls' education; and when donor resources dry up, blame the lack of provision on the international community.

Finally, the workshop participants were united in suggesting that parallel new systems are unsustainable in the long term, but may also struggle to deliver in the short term. UN agencies cannot achieve national coverage of health care and education outside of government-run systems, especially over any length of time given the voluntary nature of funding. At community level, workshop participants identified institutions such as community development councils as being able to deliver assistance and development projects, despite long-standing flaws. National-level services require functioning banking payment systems. The participants urged policymakers to protect the functioning of institutions, but to make sure systems are in place to stop funds being diverted. Many worried that we are now seeing a wilful abandonment of vital institutions that took considerable time and resources to build.

Tackling the drivers of vulnerability in Afghanistan will require a shift in mindset from the current emergency focus. These are the first steps for policy recommendations:

1. **Any engagement on vulnerability needs to be based on building trust.** A transparent sector-by-sector approach would provide the first steps in building this trust.
2. **Addressing vulnerability should not be at the expense of the various institutions that have benefited from heavy investment by the international community.** If vulnerability is systemic, we need systems responses. Addressing symptoms but not causes will only alleviate very short-term suffering and may store up problems in the medium to long term. In particular, rural (local) institutions can and should be supported in the medium term as the best way of reaching people, especially if central government is off limits.
3. **Heightened expectations among Taliban ‘foot soldiers’ is going to heavily influence any proposed action on vulnerability.** Aid programmes should be designed realistically, underpinned by sound political economy analysis and an understanding of the drivers of vulnerability as set out above and in the rich literature this paper draws on.
4. **Finally, we need to broaden the definition of how structural vulnerabilities are constructed,** to deal with the perpetuation of an aid-dependent economic system.

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