



Final Report

Theories of Change for WFP Afghanistan's Contribution to the Triple Nexus

Lewis Sida and Tina Nelis

October 2022

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Lewis Sida and Tina Nelis
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Summary

Prior to the Taliban takeover in August 2021, the World Food Programme (WFP) Afghanistan had been working to see how its strategic outcomes in the 2018–23 Country Strategic Plan (CSP) were aligned with viable peace and development efforts nationally, and to investigate plausible pathways by which its interventions could support broader goals to contribute to the humanitarian–development–peace (triple) nexus. With the Taliban regaining control, these pathways have become less clear and difficult for WFP to make firm strategies.

This Theory of Change (TOC) document looks at each of the relevant strategic outcomes from the 2018 CSP in turn (temporarily rolled over as a result of the uncertainty) and proposes theoretical ways in which the interventions can be best aligned with medium- to longer-term goals. Whilst these can no longer be simplistically labelled 'development' and 'peace', preserving national systems and institutions remains vitally important to ensure minimum humanitarian suffering. The aim of developing these TOCs is to help best align current programming and develop future programming options, as well as better generating evidence on what works. The TOCs are also intended to be a bridge to the next CSP, generating evidence to inform future strategic outcomes and helping the organisation think through realistic contributions to national systems.

Keywords

Afghanistan; humanitarian; development; peace; Theory of Change; World Food Programme.

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Acronyms

CDC	Community Development Councils
CDD	community driven development
CFM	complaints and feedback mechanism
CSP	Country Strategic Plan
EPR	Emergency Preparedness and Response
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
FFA	Food for Asset
ILO	International Labour Organization
IDP	internally displaced person
IDS	Institute of Development Studies
IPC	Integrated Food Security Phase Classification
MAM	moderate acute malnutrition
NSP	National Solidarity Programme
OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
PLW	pregnant and lactating women
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SO	strategic outcome
TOC	Theory of Change
UN	United Nations
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
VST	Vocational Skills Trainings
WFP	World Food Programme
WHO	World Health Organization

1. Introduction

The Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in late 2021 shocked the country and the international community. Peace talks in Doha and the withdrawal of US troops were leading inexorably to a greater role for the movement in the governance of the country. A total collapse of the Ghani government was not foreseen, however, throwing the country into turmoil. A hasty and chaotic withdrawal of foreign troops was followed by near total economic isolation, effectively collapsing the country's banking sector and putting severe pressure on the currency. This in turn has affected the terms of trade, causing prices to rise in markets. Coupled with the second severe drought in three years and high levels of chronic poverty, these shocks have created conditions for a humanitarian crisis.

Moreover, whilst seeming total victory has brought an uneasy peace to the country after more than a decade, the underlying conditions for conflict have not disappeared.

The immediate priority of all aid actors in Afghanistan is to avoid further humanitarian suffering. A major humanitarian appeal has been launched alongside an equally substantial international appeal to prop up basic services. WFP is at the forefront of efforts to respond to and stabilise the humanitarian situation.

Beyond the immediate crisis, the medium term for Afghanistan remains highly uncertain. The Taliban has not been recognised by the US and its allies as the legitimate government and has consequently been locked out of global institutions and markets. Their track record in the coming year will most likely determine whether this changes. In the meantime, the UN and its funds, programmes, and agencies will need to maintain the flexibility to respond to crises whilst aiming to preserve the basic elements of a functioning state.

2. WFP in Afghanistan

The World Food Programme (WFP) has been a key humanitarian force in Afghanistan since 1963 and remains the largest agency in the Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP). In the last years, it has also managed a strong resilience portfolio in addition to ongoing humanitarian support.¹

The links between conflict and hunger have informed WFP's approach in recent years, building on the 2017 Zero Hunger Strategic Review (ZNSR). This set out how the country can achieve zero hunger by 2030. The previous government's second Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework (ANPDF II) was the over-arching framework in which all WFP actions in support of the SDGs and peace and development took place. This followed the first ANPDF and the National Priority Programs (NPPs).

The uncertainty following the Taliban takeover, and the drought, economic, and liquidity crises, have led to an immediate focus on emergency programming. However, WFP has maintained its focus on medium to long-term work to reduce hunger given the high levels of chronic poverty in Afghanistan. WFP leverages its humanitarian footprint to contribute to more than humanitarian objectives. For example, continuing to purchase wheat flour locally, despite the challenges of the liquidity crisis, to keep businesses running and people employed.

WFP is also working to ensure that all of its humanitarian programming is conflict sensitive, contextually grounded, and adopts a 'Do No Harm' approach.

WFP is an important part of UN effort in Afghanistan (UN Afghanistan *et al.* 2018). With the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), it co-leads the Food Security and Agriculture Cluster, and is an active participant in the Nutrition Cluster led by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). WFP also contributes significantly to nutrition, livelihoods, and climate change. As part of the wider United Nations Country Team (UNCT), it will continue to support efforts to stabilise key national systems as well as prioritising immediate help to the most in need.

¹ The 2018 Country Strategic Plan budget was: Crisis response: US\$205m (Strategic Objective 1) + US\$89m (Strategic Objective 6) = US\$294m. Resilience: US\$203m (Strategic Objective 2) + US\$171m (Strategic Objective 3) + US\$43m (Strategic Objective 4) + US\$7m (Strategic Objective 5) = US\$424m.

3. Purpose of the Theory of Change

Prior to the Taliban takeover, WFP had been working to see how its strategic outcomes in the 2018–2023 Country Strategic Plan (CSP) (WFP 2018) were aligned with viable peace and development efforts nationally, and to investigate plausible pathways by which its interventions could support broader goals.

With the change of *de facto* authority, the framework for national development is bound to change. Until this becomes clear, it is hard to make firm strategies for how WFP can contribute, and even the degree to which this might be appropriate. In the meantime, it remains vitally important to preserve national systems for food security as part of an expanded humanitarian effort. The same holds for contributions towards peace. Whilst this is unlikely to be a strategic priority in the medium term, it is important to recognise that underlying factors that can lead to conflict remain.

This Theory of Change (TOC) document looks at each of the relevant strategic outcomes from the 2018 CSP in turn (temporarily rolled over as a result of the uncertainty) and proposes theoretical ways in which the interventions can be best aligned with medium to longer-term goals. Whilst these can no longer be simplistically labelled 'development' and 'peace', preserving national systems and institutions remains vitally important to ensure minimum humanitarian suffering. The document then sets out the evidence in support of these theories. The aim of developing these TOCs is to help best align current programming and develop future programming options, as well as better generating evidence on what works.

The TOCs are also intended to be a bridge to the next CSP, generating evidence to inform future strategic outcomes and helping the organisation think through realistic contributions to national systems. This is particularly important in the current period of uncertainty, when political changes might complicate WFP's opportunities to access populations in humanitarian need.

4. Strategic outcomes if ... then statements

The humanitarian–development–peace nexus approach ('triple nexus') is an attempt to bring together the expertise of those working in the humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding fields, to find ways to overcome challenges, not only through programmatic changes but through more fundamental 'structural shifts across the aid system' (Oxfam 2019: 3). In theory, it appears straightforward; in practice, it is anything but simple, particularly to implement and operationalise.

Despite the ongoing structural shifts in the aid system addressing how aid is planned, financed, and coordinated to enable a more joined up approach, implementing the humanitarian–development nexus remains a challenge. The main challenges include separate funding modalities, different aid structures, divergent (and in some cases irreconcilable) ways of working, different time frames, and independent principles and mandates (Hövelmann 2020).

Implementing the nexus in Afghanistan currently is further compounded by the fluidity of the situation and the international non-recognition of the Taliban government. In the course of developing these TOCs, a short policy note was developed to define both development and peace in the current context, a short summary of which is set out below. Humanitarian work remains more straightforward (conceptually at least!) when focused on life-saving efforts.

Development

Decades of poor governance and conflict have created high levels of chronic poverty, a failing economy, and low levels of basic services. The extremely high levels of chronic poverty in Afghanistan mean extremely high levels of precarity. People will always be vulnerable to humanitarian shocks when their ability to cope is low. As ever, development is the long-term answer to alleviate humanitarian need.

However, in the current circumstances, where the Taliban is not recognised internationally, formal international development aid and loans will not be available to Afghanistan for some time. None of the major donors are currently willing to support a government that is headed by the Taliban. The United States, European Union, and individual European donors will not give aid to be programmed through government departments directly.

This is the same for the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund which cannot release its special drawing rights without international recognition, and its shareholders are not currently permitting this. International financial markets are

also not available as an option for the short to medium term, meaning borrowing will be impossible.

This means that most international assistance for the next two to five years will go through the UN system and various international organisations and non-governmental organisations (NGO). As we know from other similar contexts, for example, Yemen (World Bank 2019) and Sudan (Sida *et al.* 2022), the *modus operandi* of the major donors will be to allow the UN humanitarian system to support some of the basic services normally provided by government with humanitarian funds. Household economic activities are also likely to be supported at some level, constituting a half-way house in between genuine development aid (directly to and through government) and focused humanitarian aid targeted at life-saving interventions. One might call these 'life-sustaining' interventions, and they are variously given names such as 'humanitarian plus', 'resilience programming', or (previously) 'developmental relief' (European Commission 2021).

For WFP, livelihoods and employment generation projects will be important in the medium term. WFP already has a long-standing portfolio of asset-building programmes, as well as employment-generating activities.² Whilst such programmes are traditionally always more difficult to fundraise for, evidence from many similar protracted crises suggest that economic opportunities are always a priority for the population. Livelihoods programmes and economic opportunities may well be favoured by the *de facto* authorities, keen to stabilise the economy, and may be a more difficult conversation with donors as a result (Sida *et al.* 2022). Making a solid, robust, evidenced-based case will be important.

Peace

The victory of the Taliban has somewhat counter-intuitively led to a situation where peace is much more likely in the short to medium term. There has been much written in recent months about how the Taliban movement has prioritised internal cohesion, and should they continue to be successful in this regard, then there is currently little armed opposition of note (Felbab-Brown 2021; van Bijlert 2021). The Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) is a threat, but nowhere near on the scale of either the Taliban or the northern Alliance when the Taliban were last in power.

This does not mean, however, that peace will prevail in the medium term. The Taliban is largely mono-ethnic (i.e. predominantly Pashtun) (van Bijlert 2021), and if it stays this way, then it is likely an armed opposition will emerge (Humanitarian Outcomes 2021). With backing from regional powers (and global) an almost certain bet, this might once again lead to conflict. However, this is not

² See [WFP Afghanistan website](#).

a prospect in the next few years, with the most plausible cause of immediate conflict a schism in the Taliban itself.

For understandable reasons, the international Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Development Assistance Committee (OECD DAC) donors will not want to pay for 'stabilisation' in Afghanistan. In addition to the risk, politically there is an aversion to support that might legitimise any Taliban government. Bringing stability to Afghanistan under a Taliban regime is counter to the big political objectives of the major donors.

This in turn means that there will be no resources for peacebuilding or stabilisation-type activities.

However, there will still be the need for good practice. Throughout the last year, WFP centrally has emphasised the need for 'Do No Harm' to be a minimum operating principle. This should be a central part of the WFP approach to the triple nexus – ensuring that humanitarian activities do not cause conflict, for instance in the competition for resources.

The main theoretical framework used here when discussing conflict and peace is that they revolve around three key areas: **opportunity, grievance, and contact** (Brück *et al.* 2021). A report supported by the International Labour Organization (ILO), Peacebuilding Support Office (PBSO), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the World Bank Group (WBG) which examines the literature and aid interventions suggests that most are predicated on the idea that creating opportunities, reducing grievance, and creating contact (and through contact, understanding) between communities are all plausible routes to reducing support for violence (Brück *et al.* 2016).

This short report examines the WFP strategic outcomes in the strategic plan 2018–2023 and suggests TOCs connected to one or some of these areas.

4.1 Strategic Outcome 1 (SO 1)

SO 1: Vulnerable people in Afghanistan are able to meet their food and nutrition needs during and immediately after emergencies through to 2023.

Before the Taliban takeover, with the complex and protracted situation in Afghanistan, a key strategy for ensuring access to food and nutrition – and thereby achieving SDG 2 target 1 – was to enable vulnerable people to meet their food and nutrition needs during and immediately after emergencies.

As discussed in the introduction to this paper, the international response to the new regime in Afghanistan, which has been associated with economic sanctions and isolation and a reluctance to recognise the *de facto* authorities, has

contributed to the already significant numbers of food-insecure people in Afghanistan. Categories of vulnerable people have also expanded to include middle-class people in urban centres; they include but are not limited to women who are no longer permitted to work, and people, such as civil servants and teachers, whose salaries have been unpaid (or intermittently) paid for many months (Khorsandi 2022).

Between September and October 2021, the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) noted that there was a record high of nearly 19 million people experiencing high levels of acute food insecurity, classified in Crisis or Emergency (IPC Phases 3 or 4). Of this figure, 6.8 million people were experiencing critical levels of acute food insecurity, in Emergency (IPC Phase 4), mainly in the northern parts of the country (IPC 2021: 1). The winter lean season has contributed to a further deterioration of food security, with growing unemployment, inflation, and currency depreciation leading to increased prices for staples and fuel. Projections for November 2021–March 2022 suggested that those in IPC Phase 3 or above would increase to 22.8 million, a figure which represents a 35 per cent increase from the same season in the previous year. Of this 22.8 million, 14 million people would be in Crisis (IPC Phase 3) and 8.7 million in Emergency (IPC Phase 4) (*ibid.*: 7).

Aside from the shocks associated with the Taliban takeover, Afghanistan is also subject to climatic and natural hazard shocks, such as the impending La Niña with further drought conditions predicted. In January 2022, for example, a 5.3 magnitude earthquake shook Badghis Province (WFP 2022a). As with the rest of the world, the Covid-19 pandemic has also had significant economic consequences for Afghanistan, further exacerbating potential humanitarian and food security needs (OCHA 2021a). However, currently there is a rise in Covid cases and related deaths as a result of the closure of treatment facilities due to a lack of doctors and resources (WFP 2022a).

WFP has been supporting this current humanitarian response through scaling up its humanitarian operation. In December 2021, it called for US\$2.6 billion for 2022 to provide life-saving support and work towards long-term resilience (Khorsandi 2021). For this crisis, the focus has been on cash and in-kind assistance. In preparation for the winter season, WFP pre-positioned food across locations in the northeast and central highlands of the country where access is severely restricted by snow and road closures (WFP 2021a). In November 2021, WFP assisted more than 7 million people with over 50,000 metric tonnes (MT) of food (almost double the amount dispatched in September) (*ibid.*). In February 2022, WFP reached nearly 9 million people with food, nutrition, and resilience support, 11.2 million people since the beginning of 2022 (WFP 2022b).

WFP assisted **10.6 million** people in Afghanistan with emergency food and nutrition support in March 2022. Of this, **7.3 million** people have received in-kind

emergency food assistance, **1.8 million** people received cash or value vouchers, while **1.1 million** people received commodity vouchers. WFP has also provided specialised nutritious foods to **905,000** women and children for the prevention of malnutrition, while treating **354,000** women and children for existing cases (WFP 2022c). WFP assisted **148,000** people through asset creation and livelihoods activities in March, including the rehabilitation of a 14.5km road that improves access to more than 500 households in Khogyani District, Nangarhar. WFP also supported the construction of a 210-metre retaining wall that protects the village road and 50 houses, as well as assets, from flood risks. Participants from 330 households also received cash support from WFP for a total of four months for their work on this project. So far in March, WFP has distributed **402 MT** of High Energy Biscuits (HEB) to **454,000** primary-school students, including **206,000** girls who also received a total **937.48 MT** of fortified vegetable oil. In March, WFP has supported **13,455** women and children so far through its stunting prevention programme. Since January 2022, WFP has been supporting **158** mobile health and nutrition teams across **24 provinces**. In the coming months, WFP plans to support additional teams in partnership with UNICEF (*ibid.*).

A combination of in-kind assistance and cash-based assistance has been used for crisis response. Cash-based assistance is the preference of the majority of the population and it has other advantages such as improving the dignity, flexibility, and choice it offers affected people (although it also has limitations in the most rural areas due to market access). Despite the promise of mobile money, however, uptake remains slow. WFP aims to scale up and reach nearly 6 million people per month from March to May 2022 with cash and voucher assistance. However, with the current cash liquidity crisis, WFP is providing different cash disbursement options depending on contexts (these include physical bank notes, mobile money, value vouchers, and commodity vouchers) (WFP 2022d).

The modalities considered the diverse nutritional needs of women, men, girls, and boys. For instance, a rationale for providing in-kind assistance in rural areas is that the basket is tailored to the nutritional needs of the household (e.g. wheat-soya blend (WSB) for women, ready-to-use supplementary foods (RUSF) for children, and fortified wheat, vegetable oil, pulses, and salt for the entire family).

TOC 1: If communities experiencing crisis get timely food and cash assistance, then their need for negative coping will be reduced, including distress migration.

Analysis

The primary aim of emergency humanitarian food and cash assistance is to save lives and prevent extreme suffering. In the context of Afghanistan, where household food security is threatened by price shocks, people also experience a

'diet quantity-quality trade-off' in the form of severe micronutrient deficiency (Oskorouchi and Sousa-Poza 2021: 137). There is clear evidence, both globally and in Afghanistan, that long before people die of starvation, they resort to negative coping (Subedi 2018). This includes buying food on credit, taking loans, debt accumulation, selling assets, migration – initially for work, then out of sheer desperation – and illegal activity (Oskorouchi and Sousa-Poza 2021). Other types of negative coping include taking children out of school (Norwegian Refugee Council 2018), child labour (*ibid.*), early marriage for girls (UNICEF 2021), and even more extreme measures such as selling body parts (Mursal and Nader 2022) or children as a last resort (Raghavan 2022).

Timely assistance can reduce the degree to which people have to resort to negative coping strategies and contributes to the prevention of livelihood asset stripping. The causes of displacement in Afghanistan are varied and range from food affordability, water availability, conflict, livelihood disruptions to debt burdens (OCHA 2021b). However, once distress migration has taken place, it is hard for people to return, and new tensions can arise in the places people have moved to. Tensions can also arise if people do return, as ineffective land restitution procedures prevent them from settling on the land that they once inhabited (Landlinks 2018; Jackson 2014). Evidence from a study on returnees to the eastern border province of Nangarhar in 2016 suggests that mass returns put a strain on the labour market, health, and education services as well as increasing property prices (rent and land), leading to further issues of land-grabbing and conflict (Muzhary 2017). Poor local absorption capacity in terms of support networks or government and international agency assistance places internally displaced people (IDPs)/returnees at heightened risk (Ahmadi and Lakhani 2016).

There are a number of significant assumptions with this theory. When people become internally displaced due to drought or conflict, they will try at first to go to areas they know they will be welcome. This often means cities and towns where people from their area are already living and are more likely to help. In this scenario, there is less likely to be conflict, at least initially. Factors that influence this pull to urban areas include safety (Majidi, van der Vorst and Foulkes 2016), access to urban labour markets (Willner-Reid 2017), and the fact that most aid was concentrated in urban areas for access reasons up until August 2021. As such, in order to influence these displacement patterns and put less pressure on urban areas already struggling with rapid population growth, displacement, rural–urban migration, and the negative impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on health and employment in urban areas (OCHA 2020), aid agencies need to provide timely humanitarian assistance at place of origin. Where people move without such kinship ties and find themselves wholly dependent on government or aid agencies, initially such settlements will be located in marginal and peripheral land.

Another significant assumption is that people will take up arms, or join armed groups, or resort to violence faced with extreme food insecurity. Whilst there is evidence that countries with low levels of positive peace (defined as the 'attitudes, institutions and structures that create and sustain peaceful societies') have higher levels of food insecurity (Institute for Economics & Peace 2020: 54, 75), the relationship between food insecurity and violence is more nuanced.

For example, the reasons why people join armed groups are multidimensional and often ambiguous. Some studies that explore Taliban recruitment suggest that there are two models that drive recruitment: (1) material and economic explanations – in the context of poverty, lack of opportunities and hope for future socioeconomic prosperity, paid salaries combined with improved social status through association with the Taliban contribute to recruitment; (2) religious, ideological, and cultural explanations – where adherence to Islam and traditional standards, particularly for those educated in conservative *madrassas* and who join as full-time fighters, drive recruitment. However, these models are not mutually exclusive and vary depending on position/cadre within the Taliban (Landinfo 2017).

Equally, a programme carried out by Mercy Corps in Helmand Province – Introducing New Vocational Education and Skills Training (INVEST) – which provided technical and formal education to young people, found that employment did not equate to less support for armed insurgents. For some youth, marginalisation, corruption by public officials, feeling humiliated/grievance, and a lack of social standing or alternative social networks is what drove them to join armed groups rather than mere economic incentives (Mercy Corps 2015a; Mercy Corps 2015b; Lakhani and Amiri 2020; Fazli, Johnson and Cooke 2015). Other studies suggest that the need for security and dispute resolution rather than ideological attraction plays a key role in support for armed groups (Lakhani and Amiri 2020; Fazli *et al.* 2015).

Food insecurity can encourage rebellion where it is linked to grievances, but in contexts of acute and severe food insecurity, it can constrain conflict. People who need food are more likely to spend their time searching for sustenance rather than engaging in active civil conflict. Equally, where food is scarce, there will be less resources – human and material – available to militant groups (Hendrix and Brinkman 2013).

A more complex assumption, but equally relevant, is that undernourished and marginal communities become engaged in armed combat. There is evidence to suggest that the poorest and weakest are less likely to take up arms, for fairly obvious reasons. It may be the case, sadly, that being very poorly nourished decreases your chances of being involved in armed violence because it requires certain physical resources.

As global food price crises of 2008 and 2011 have shown, high commodity prices led to food riots (or 'subsistence protests'), some of which were violent, as 'people took to the streets to protest government failures to protect the provision of basic essentials in country after country' (Scott-Villiers and Hossain 2017: 1–2). In 2008, the price of wheat flour doubled in Afghanistan as the country suffered from drought, regional export bans, and the repercussions from the global food price crisis. Nevertheless, a study carried out using data from 2007–08, shows that in Afghanistan, conflict and food security were negatively correlated with areas of high conflict experiencing relatively lower levels of food insecurity than those in more peaceful areas. Equally, an increase in wheat flour prices resulted in 'slightly smaller reductions in food security in areas with more conflict than in areas with less conflict', a finding the authors suggest 'is consistent with the interpretation that households in conflict-affected areas are less connected to markets and therefore may not be as affected by price increases as those households in less conflict-affected areas' (D'Souza and Jolliffe 2013: 39).

Whilst the conflict has ceased since the Taliban takeover, logistics and historical factors may still result in weak market linkages. The current economic collapse in Afghanistan is impacting all in society – wealthy, middle class, and poor – and leading to negative coping on a large scale. Individual households are going into debt while businesses are 'forced either to spend, sell or simply lose what was – and still should be – productive capital' (van Bijlert 2022). As a report for the Afghanistan Analysts Network concludes:

The longer this economic crisis lasts, the fewer resources Afghanistan's businesses and households will have to pick themselves up again, with the risk that some of the damage will be irreversible... It has been said before, but it bears repeating: This is not an economic crisis that has mainly hit the poor and the vulnerable and it cannot be addressed by emergency food aid alone. At its most basic level, the economy needs its cash to flow again – salaries, bank assets, remittances – as soon as possible.
(van Bijlert 2022)

TOC 2: If emergency assistance is distributed equitably, then there is less likely to be grievance arising from aid operations.

Analysis

The equitable distribution of aid forms part of the grievance-based discourse around violence and conflict. The principal theory is that equitable distribution of aid reduces or prevents grievance, and even the act of distributing aid to communities who are in need or feel neglected may restore some trust in society and the state. At the very least, this is a 'do no harm' approach to aid distribution

(WFP 2021b), with overwhelming evidence suggesting that unfairly distributed assistance can contribute to tension (Fishstein and Wilder 2012).

The word 'equitable' needs to be defined carefully in this context. There is no perfect term that encapsulates the range of issues; rather it is more meaningful to create a bespoke definition for the purpose of this TOC.

Evidence indicates that the unfair distribution of aid and co-option of aid can lead to jealousy and instability (Horne 2012; Karell and Schutte 2018). In the last two decades, there have been consistent concerns about elite aid capture, both at the national and local levels, fuelling resentment in the wider population. Aid has also at times generated competition and conflict over aid resources, 'often along factional, tribal or ethnic lines' (Fishstein and Wilder 2012: 3). Thus, one aspect of 'equitable' distribution is avoiding elite capture, corruption, and competition and conflict over aid resources, either by careful and patient dialogue with communities (both to explain distribution and to understand their concerns), or by careful and patient analysis of local socio-political-economic conditions.

Equity in aid distributions has also been defined as 'Equal concern for people's needs' (Jones 2009: vi, 6). This is strikingly similar to the core humanitarian principle of impartiality that aid should be distributed according to need and need alone. The key here is that it should be perceived in this way by populations in receipt of aid, again suggesting the investment in dialogue with communities is extremely important.

A critical concern for WFP to consider is when needs are greater than resources available (sadly, too often the case). In many communities, even when aid is 'targeted' to a subset of those in need, it is often then redistributed around the village to avoid resentment and conflict later. Once again, dialogue with communities is key, and there is a need for some flexibility. Community-based targeting works on the principle that the criteria for selection of aid beneficiaries are developed together, and if communities ultimately decide they prefer a lower ration shared amongst all, then this should be taken seriously. 'Equitable' in such circumstances is a co-created definition.

A major assumption here is that WFP (or any organisation) can control the equitable distribution of aid resources in a country like Afghanistan that not only depends on aid but struggles with issues such as geographical and access disparities through social bias, a dependence on partners and being able to counter the influence of gatekeepers, social hierarchies, and competing patronage networks (Karell and Schutte 2018). Many of these factors are outside the control of WFP directly. However, being cognisant of the fact that the provision of aid can undermine local governance mechanisms through creating competition between new and established elites/elders could help to keep these shifting power dynamics in check in relation to the equitable distribution of aid (*ibid.*).

Moreover, and connected, is the fact that the type of aid delivered is important and plays a role in the occurrence (or absence) of violence related to grievance, particularly when developmental aid is used as a policy instrument for reducing violence and insecurity. A study by Karell and Schutte (2018) looking at the Commander's Emergency Response Program (CERP) projects in Afghanistan argues that instead of mitigating insurgency, projects that excluded certain groups were accompanied by insurgent activity and increased violence (*ibid.*). Therefore, understanding the dynamics around aid – the type and distribution – is important to avoid contributing to intracommunity conflict.

WFP adopts clear measures to ensure that aid is distributed equitably and reaches hard-to-reach areas. Country Office Risk Registers identify conflict sensitivity risks that might hinder operations (WFP n.d.a). WFP area offices, country partners, and Programme Assistance Team (PAT) monitors liaise with local government and communities to assess food assistance requirements and negotiate access. They also monitor food distributions (and post-food distributions) and other WFP programmes such as school-feeding programmes, asset creation, and food for training activities to ensure fair distribution of aid and resources (Sagmeister *et al.* 2016).

Alongside this, WFP ensures entitlements are understood by beneficiaries and targeting modalities are not only understood but accepted by communities. Key to this is communicating that aid is needs based. For WFP, community engagement through a participatory and locally led approach is key to preventing and/or addressing grievances. Complaints and feedback mechanisms (CFMs) are 'an effective way to build trust and maintain good relationships with communities' (WFP 2021b: 21) and WFP has developed clear minimum standards for implementing CFMs (WFP 2017).

With the Taliban takeover, some commentators have proposed that international organisations could use the structure of the Community Development Councils (CDCs) set up as part of the Citizen Charter Programme/National Solidarity Programme (NSP) for delivery and possibly monitoring and/or targeting.³ CDCs were an initiative funded by the World Bank to develop local democratically elected institutions linked to local and central government to carry out the process of local reconstruction. CDCs, however, have their own merits and limitations. For example, they did build infrastructure and other basic services but despite being elected, evidence suggests that they are prone to elite capture with elite interests driving decision-making processes. In such circumstances, CDC members demonstrated little accountability to their communities (Noori 2022).

In effect, the NSP created an institution which ran parallel with the customary system and as such, it was not uncommon for a village traditional leader to also

³ See **series of papers** developed as part of the Afghanistan Strategic Learning Initiative (ASLI).

be the head of the CDC, conflating two distinct structures (Pain *et al.* 2017), and raising questions about the role then of Maliks (village representatives), Shuras (village councils), and Mullahs (village-level religious leaders) in villages which traditionally governed and mobilised village resources (Pain 2016; Beath, Christia and Enikolopov 2015).

Where 'networks of access' (Jackson and Minoia 2018) reinforce patron–client relationships, they are less likely to ensure equitable distribution of services and complicate fair community-based targeting. Women's involvement in CDC membership has also been the subject of debate with some arguing that it was merely tokenistic, and others suggesting it had more enduring successes (Pain 2016; Beath *et al.* 2015). Pain *et al.* (2017) problematise this when they argue that:

Short term programming with technocratic models of how things should work and little understanding of the logic and practices that drive current relationships of accountability are unlikely to achieve the effects that they desire and may, through the resources they provide, be fuelling the very practices and behaviour patterns that they seek to address.

(Pain *et al.* 2017: 3)

This issue of elite capture is difficult to overcome and arguably a part of the fabric of society. In his work, Pain acknowledges the variability between villages in Afghanistan and the associated differing levels of elite capture in CDCs (Pain 2016). The relationship between CDCs and the Taliban will also need to be further explored and concerns around aid capture addressed. However, interestingly, a study carried out by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) and the Afghanistan Analysts Network (AAN) notes that in the past, when the Taliban permitted services to be delivered to those areas under its control, the Taliban 'were often perceived, according to local witnesses, as being more effective than the government in their ability to monitor the provision of these services and ensure their equitable distribution' – achieved through working closely with elders in local communities (Smith 2020: 7).

TOC 3: If communities work together to identify common needs, and collectively respond to these needs, then relationships will be fostered across ethnic/sectarian/tribal/other divides.

Analysis

A lack of contact between different groups can lead to negative stereotypes and exacerbate tensions. This can particularly be the case if people have been displaced and their presence is feared or seen negatively by so called 'host communities'. However, by bringing groups together to identify common needs, these barriers can be broken down, and communities can be exposed to the

hardship all are facing, creating common bonds and the potential for future dialogue and trust. As WFP notes, 'Strong social cohesion creates resilience to conflicts and enhances the ability to sustain long-term peace' (WFP n.d.b: 2).

By creating trust between communities, especially those who might be resentful of each other because of a lack of contact, it is plausible that the tolerance for violence might be reduced. In a scenario where communities fear and resent each other, they might well be willing to tolerate violence perpetrated against a perceived alien 'other'. By working together and understanding better each other's problems, such violence might well be rejected by communities and the more aggressive elements reigned in.

There are several practical assumptions associated with this theory. The most obvious assumption is that communities can be brought together. There is a great deal of emphasis placed on the social cohesion approach to peacebuilding, particularly at the local level (WFP n.d.b), but little evidence as to how social cohesion activities actually build trust (Brown and Zahar 2015). As a concept, social cohesion has two dimensions. Firstly, it has an inequality dimension where the goal is 'promoting equal opportunities and reducing disparities and divisions within a society. This also includes the aspect of social exclusion'. Secondly, it has a social capital dimension with the 'goal of strengthening social relations, interactions and ties and embraces all aspects which are generally considered as the social capital of a society' (Berger-Schmitt 2002: 406). In order to build social cohesion, however, there is a need for effective state institutions, a clear understanding of vertical (between state and society) and horizontal (between and among groups in society) linkages, and a deep awareness of the power relations within society (Brown and Zahar 2015).

Additionally, sometimes prejudice and separation is too long-standing to be overcome through simple aid programmes – for instance, where there are long-standing ethnic tensions, it might be difficult to get people to work together. A study looking at displacement and vulnerability to recruitment to violent extremism in eight provinces in Afghanistan (Balkh, Ghazni, Helmand, Herat, Kabul, Kandahar, Kunduz, and Nangarhar) found that across all provinces, displaced groups experienced more social exclusion than host communities, with host respondents in Kandahar reporting no feeling of social exclusion (Lakhani and Amiri 2020). In such circumstances, inter-community bridging would be difficult to achieve. As discussed earlier, equally challenging, and practically an optimistic assumption, is that the resources would be there to serve both communities equitably. If communities are brought together and define common needs and then the resources do not materialise, this could cause the opposite to the desired impact. Often donor funds are prioritised for IDPs at the expense of host communities (as an example) which might well create this sort of situation.

Interventions in Afghanistan, as argued by Schetter, have at times been counterproductive – highlighting social inequalities and compounding existing conflicts (Schetter 2013, cited in Vincent 2020). They have also failed to take into account the complex dynamics at regional and village levels and varied local authority structures present across rural areas of Afghanistan (Pain and Kantor 2010; Vincent 2020), where villages with high levels of inequality suffer from a lack of social solidarity whilst low levels of inequality promote social solidarity (Pain and Kantor 2010).

A longitudinal study of livelihood trajectories in Afghanistan emphasises the variability in village economies. Using the example of villages in Herat Province, it highlights that villages that are geographically close and share the same irrigation system experience differing degrees of access to productive resources such as land and water. In the absence of economic security, rural households rely on family and 'personalised reciprocal commitments' with members of the wider community to survive (Pain 2022). The importance of these networks cannot be underestimated. However, the inability to reciprocate, when needed, can lead to a reliance on 'hierarchical or dependent relationships with more powerful patrons' that result in exploitation (*ibid.*).

With such variability in regional and local social orders, it is not surprising that social cohesion is difficult to achieve. Relatedly, local dynamics aside, without a social contract between the state and society, attempts to build social cohesion as a means of contributing to peace are likely to fail (Brown and Zahar 2015).

Nevertheless, the process of actively bringing people together, to work on projects that will improve their common services (Bachmann and Schouten 2018), and that are timely and tangible, can contribute to peace (Hendrix and Brinkman 2013). In some sense, the 'functionality of infrastructure is ultimately secondary to its singular capacity to engender stabilization outcomes by forcing people together during construction work' (Bachmann and Schouten 2018: 396). Through WFP's portfolio of work in Afghanistan, it should actively seek to better understand these contextual factors and village-level dynamics and variability, to enable it to play this important mediating role in community cooperation.

There is an opportunity for international aid agencies to work with local government structures (Jackson 2018). For example, CDCs set up under the NSP will continue to be used in some form by the new *de facto* authorities. However, bearing in mind notable CDC shortcomings identified under the NSP (such as lack of inclusion of women and elite capture), it will be incumbent upon the international community to nurture these relationships and work with structures already in existence rather than creating parallel processes.

4.2 Strategic Outcome 2 (SO 2)

SO 2: Vulnerable people in Afghanistan are increasingly able to meet their food and nutrition needs on their own by 2023

Vulnerable people benefit from nutrition-sensitive livelihood support to enhance self-reliance, reduce disaster risk, and adapt to climate change (SDG 13), create employment (SDG 8) in urban (SDG 11) and rural areas, and support stability (SDG 16).

Following the Taliban takeover and the economic shock driven by international sanctions, the goal of achieving food security has been set back by some years. High levels of pre-existing chronic poverty will exacerbate the compound shocks of drought and a sudden contraction of the economy. Afghanistan has become dependent on high levels of food imports of which wheat is the most important. The war in Ukraine will complicate this further as it will disrupt the availability of grain globally and lead to a significant rise in energy prices, which will have an impact on the domestic food prices in Afghanistan (WFP 2022e), at a time when the liquidity crisis is already complicating purchasing power. Afghanistan's economy is characterised by a boom/bust cycle dominated by periods of agricultural surplus and major deficits resulting from drought cycles.

Afghanistan is already facing severe climate-change-related flooding. This has mainly been caused by a combination of heavy rainfall over a short period and rapid melting of snow and ice in highland areas during the spring. In 2017, the food security of 7.8 million Afghans was negatively affected by climate shocks (floods and droughts) (FAO *et al.* 2018). In addition, Afghanistan's agricultural production is particularly climate sensitive. From 2011–16, the country suffered from climate extremes in the form of inter-seasonal variability, frequency, and intensity (*ibid.*).

Therefore, whilst emergency responses will dominate the immediate response, work on longer-term food security must continue. There are a number of key activities associated with this strategic outcome:

- **Food for Assets (FFA)** is a mechanism whereby WFP provides food as an incentive to support community self-help initiatives in food-insecure areas. It is used to meet immediate humanitarian needs and in the longer term to restore livelihoods, protect and improve productive assets, and rebuild community infrastructure. For such asset creation activities, WFP prioritises multi-year and multi-phased interventions.
- **Vocational Skills Training (VST)** aims to increase equal access to life skills opportunities in order to improve human and financial capital in vulnerable households and ensure sustainable development. It focuses more on eligible IDPs and returnees, female-headed households, and food-insecure households and operates on a ratio of 70 per cent women and 30 per cent

men. Special attention is given to the inclusion of female participants as a means of promoting women's economic empowerment, something WFP is keen to continue in whatever way possible given the change in context. To enable women's continued participation, WFP will adapt training and asset spaces to enable safe access for women, and will look to partner with women's associations for training purposes. Vocations are selected based on demand with a focus on sustainable marketable skills across the country. WFP also intends to add a business support and mentorship component to each VST project. The success of these programmes is measured not through the number of recipients or amount of food or cash-based transfer distribution but through a closer look at improving the quality and sustainability of these programmes.

- **Emergency Preparedness and Response (EPR):** EPR activities are carried out on the premise that vulnerable people benefit from improved emergency preparedness to meet their food and nutrition needs and support stability. It is a corporate responsibility of the Afghanistan Country Office and as part of the Emergency Preparedness and Response Strategy. Prior to the Taliban takeover, WFP provided capacity strengthening to emergency preparedness institutions in the form of technical training, financial support, and table-top simulation exercises (TTX). In 2018–19, more than 200 participants from government agencies, NGOs, and civil society organisations participated in the TTXs.

TOC 1: If food security is improved overall in Afghanistan, then there is a greater resilience in the face of future shocks.

Analysis

Resilience can be understood as 'the capacities of households and communities, to deal with adverse events in a way that does not affect negatively their long-term wellbeing and/or functioning' (Béné 2020: 806). Improving food security (food availability, food accessibility, food utilisation, and stability) contributes to building resilience to future shocks and removes some of the need to adopt negative coping strategies (such as selling assets, withdrawing children from school, or diverting spending away from health care), but it is only part of a complex equation (see TOC 2). Resilience is, after all, a multi-scalar and multidimensional concept that has been useful to bridge shorter-term humanitarian interventions with longer-term structural development work (Béné *et al.* 2016). Being food secure is only one aspect of what contributes to resilience, with social capital, asset base, and livelihood resilience interconnected tangible components. Less tangible but certainly important to recognise are subjective psychosocial factors such as risk perception, self-

efficacy, and aspirations to name but a few (Béné *et al.* 2019). As Béné *et al.* (2020) argue:

In order to accurately capture why, when and how individuals engage in particular behaviours in response to shocks or stressors, one needs to account for the *subjective* factors that underlie individuals' decisions in the face of those adverse events. The way this subjective resilience, along with its causal psychosocial factors, and the other, more, tangible elements (e.g., household socio-economic and demographic characteristics such as age, education, assets, social and human capitals, etc.) are linked together, how they determine the type of responses adopted (absorptive, adaptive or transformative response) and eventually the type of final outcome [emphasis in original].
(Béné *et al.* 2020: 191)

Subjective resilience, then, is equally important for TOC 2 which points to the role of resilience-strengthening programmes in contributing to food security outcomes.

However, there are a number of assumptions associated with TOC 1. Firstly, serious consideration needs to be given to the idea that in a food-deficit country like Afghanistan, food security can actually be improved. In Afghanistan, where agriculture plays a significant role in the country's economy, but the proportion of arable land is limited (World Bank 2014), and where small farm sizes mean that the country can only grow a proportion of their cereal needs and therefore relies on imports (FAO 2021), the expectation that aid interventions can address these more structural and systemic issues is optimistic.

There have been attempts to address these resources issues and increase the amount of arable land. For example, the National Development Corporation (NDC) expects that the first phase of Qosh Tapa, a 280km-long and 100m-wide water canal project that will begin in Kaldar District of Balkh and go through Jawzjan and Faryab, will be completed by the end of 2022. The canal is expected to irrigate 580,000 acres of land (Musavi 2022). However, as Pain argues, 'Climate change will undermine the viability of the country's irrigated and rainfed agriculture and further expose an already vulnerable rural population to setbacks from which they may never recover' (Pain 2019: 2).

Afghanistan's land administration is complex and 'not considered inclusive or pro-poor' with formal (statutory) institutions and governance structures, and informal (non-statutory) institutions who are involved in dispute resolution (Landlinks 2018: 8). The country has long suffered from land-grabbing alongside informal development in rural and urban sectors by armed actors, powerful elites, and returnees (Landlinks 2018). Historically, such land-grabbing has brought

personal gain for those carrying out the activity and maintained patronage networks (Jackson 2014). Alongside that, small agricultural holdings of less than one hectare leads to land fragmentation which 'has implications for both demand for land for agricultural expansion and the risk of lower land ceilings for those who rely on land for food security and livelihoods' (Landlinks 2018: 10–11). In Nangarhar, for example, arable farmland has also been sold to returnees at high prices and converted into residential homes, thus reducing the amount of arable land in one of the country's most fertile provinces, and encouraging further land grabs (Muzhary 2017).

It is here that broader discussions around the resilience of food systems needs to be explored beyond primary production to incorporate environmental and social factors along the food value chain (Meyer 2020). WFP's contribution to sourcing food items in Afghanistan from smallholders, millers, and transporters and thereby creating market opportunities is a positive but limited contribution. Relatedly, evidence suggests that climate shocks (such as floods) in Afghanistan negatively affect household food security. Looking at the flood–food security nexus, Oskorouchi and Sousa-Poza suggest that flood exposure in Afghanistan not only decreases household calorie consumption but also contributes to a higher probability of deficiency in iron, vitamin A, and vitamin C (Oskorouchi and Sousa-Poza 2021).

Rather, there is a need for a more long-term outlook which seeks to improve the structural resilience of states through economic growth, domestic stability, and a strengthened agricultural sector, against a backdrop of more frequent (and anticipated) climate shocks. Yet, in Afghanistan, it is unlikely that there will be significant agriculturally led economic growth; the country has a growing landless rural population that relies heavily on migration and remittance incomes to survive and who are 'trapped in a failing rural economy' (Pain *et al.* 2017: 1). Structural constraints, as argued by Pain, mean that 'markets are not a solution to these constraints, since Afghanistan's rural economy is structured and regulated more by social relationships than by market relations. A much more politically informed and context-centred approach to economic development is needed in Afghanistan' (Pain 2019: 2).

Certainly, WFP's programmes do provide a safety net for overall food security, but they are less likely to address the more structural needs associated with an over-reliance on agriculture and low state capacity to overcome these challenges. This is something that will need to be addressed, particularly in the current context of global shortages of grain. As part of its development mandate, WFP should work with the *de facto* authorities and communities to foster viable food systems (see also SO 4) and provide resilience-building activities in areas and communities that are food insecure.

WFP historically supported planting trees in Badakshan, with an estimated total of 6 million. This clearly has important implications in the fight against climate change, and for flood management in at-risk

areas. Such activities could form another important part of a development-type portfolio, building resilience and supporting long-term food security.

TOC 2: If poor and vulnerable people acquire new skills, diversify their livelihoods, and increase income, then they are more likely to preserve their food security in uncertain economic conditions.

Analysis

In a country like Afghanistan, with high rates of unemployment and where employment in agriculture dominates the labour market, poor and vulnerable people are disproportionately affected by climatic shocks and at risk of food insecurity. Figures suggest that 44 per cent of the total workforce is in agriculture and 60 per cent of households derive some income from agriculture (World Bank n.d.). As such, the availability of decent jobs and livelihoods is limited. This situation has dramatically worsened following the change in administration in August 2021 with the International Labour Organization estimating that job losses totalled more than half a million in the third quarter and may reach 900,000 by mid-2022 (ILO 2022: 1). These changes have been disproportionately felt amongst women but also affect other critical sectors of the economy such as agriculture, public administration, construction, and social services (*ibid.*).

Even before the Taliban takeover, Afghanistan was facing a broader employment crisis, structural in nature and therefore difficult for aid agencies to address. Under the new circumstances, this will be even harder to do, amid significant funding cuts. Improving food security is complex and necessitates conducive conditions which can be negatively disrupted by climate change, poor economic development, disruption in supply chains, reduction or reallocation of aid, water resources, technology, instability, and poor resilience within societies (Institute for Economics & Peace 2020). Nevertheless, as section 4.2 has shown, the importance of resilience and in particular identifying ways to nurture people's subjective resilience, might be important under such dire economic conditions.

Now more than ever, access to WFP activities that promote livelihood diversification, training, and micro-enterprises development will go some way to improving food security, but they are unlikely to bring about significant economic improvements in the short term. For example, studies suggest that a narrow focus on vocational training, which does not create long-term jobs, should give way to investments 'in the social and economic infrastructure needed for structural transformation' – more and better jobs for all that enables upwards mobility (Sumberg *et al.* 2021: 623).

An important assumption here is that the range of WFP activities offered – FFAs and VST – have the potential to improve livelihoods in such difficult circumstances. There is little evidence in support of this. Despite the fact that WFP has been implementing essentially the same suite of activities for two decades⁴ (and perhaps longer), there have been few sustained evidence-gathering exercises to understand outcomes and effectiveness, nor targeted evaluations.

The latest available poverty analyses (before the Taliban takeover) indicate a worsening of chronic poverty over this time period. Clearly, the main factors involved in this deterioration have been the conflict and the mismanagement of aid and government resources. However, it must also be hypothesised that over this period of time, WFP livelihood activities have not prevented the general slide in living conditions. Obviously, scale is the main issue here, with some 148,000 people being helped with asset creation and livelihoods activities in March 2022 by WFP compared to the nearly 19 million Afghans estimated to be below the poverty line.⁵ However, some more critical examination of these programmes is long overdue, with this set of TOCs arguably presenting an opportunity to do this.

As section 4.2 has shown, resilience for food security requires an integrated approach and an enabling environment where physical, human, and financial capital combine with access to basic services, markets, income diversification, and reliable information (Tefera, Demeke and Kayitakire 2017).

TOC 3: If livelihoods are strengthened through an inclusive participatory process, then the community will work together, which signals a positive change in circumstances, reducing a sense of marginalisation and strengthening resilience.

Analysis

This theory builds on the contact framework by proposing that if communities identify needs, work together to build shared assets such as infrastructure (like roads, irrigation canals, and flood defences), and take ownership over these common assets, this positive experience will help build community resilience and generate a sense of purpose. Moreover, as part of this inclusive participatory approach, women are encouraged to take part in irrigated kitchen gardens where they can then sell their produce in local markets and contribute to family income.

⁴ One of the authors of this analysis led on an Afghanistan country case study for the two-year CERF evaluation in 2006, visiting WFP projects in Herat. The case study describes '60% of WFP food distributed as food for work, repairing canals, roads and walls'. See also an evaluation of WFP's portfolio in Afghanistan from 2010–12 (Bennett *et al.* 2012).

⁵ The 2019–20 Income, Expenditure and Labour Force Survey (IE-LFS) was administered by the National Statistics and Information Authority (NSIA) between October 2019 and September 2020. A nationally representative household survey, the IE-LFS collected critical information on households' livelihoods and living conditions to update key indicators of socioeconomic development in Afghanistan. Preliminary results are quoted in the World Bank poverty report. April 2021.

By doing so, these activities not only help to empower women, but they also help other more marginalised members of the community to participate in more productive activities, acting as a deterrent to engaging in adverse behaviour.

The argument is that if communities take part in decision-making by collectively deciding on investment priorities, this will encourage people to work together, change power dynamics, promote more accountability, and increase ownership of projects (King 2015). In the crudest sense, community driven development (CDD) interventions can be understood as attempts to build social cohesion, which, in turn, promotes sustainable development and growth (King, Samii and Snilstveit 2010). As such, WFP interventions such as FFA and VST fit within that categorisation. By empowering local communities to directly participate in development activities to improve their livelihood outcomes, such interventions do increase 'contact' between members. WFP has also included Community Based Participatory Planning as an essential component of its new three-pronged approach (3PA) resilience strategy.

Yet over the years, there has been ample evidence to suggest that CDD interventions do not build such cohesion but are more successful in achieving quantitative goals such as the construction of infrastructure or economic outcomes (World Bank 2005; King 2015).

There is the assumption that infrastructural projects such as building irrigation canals and flood defences not only promote resilience but have the ability to foster relations between those communities that live upstream and downstream by remaining responsive to community needs. There is also the assumption that there is a connection between local-level village disputes and the wider conflict. Just as with the previous discussion around the connection between employment, youth, and peace, it might be unrealistic to expect CDD to contribute to social cohesion and peace just as it is unrealistic to expect employment to bring about peace. As such, WFP should concentrate on process as well as outcomes, as set out, for instance, in the new 3PA. As Fishstein and Wilder have argued elsewhere, that 'the process of development, especially in building and sustaining relationships, despite being time-consuming, is as if not more important than the product of development' (emphasis in original) (Fishstein and Wilder 2012: 5).

At the same time, however, there is a need to unpack what is understood by a participatory process. There is also the opportunity to look more closely at the role that women can play.

4.3 Strategic Outcome 3 (SO 3)

SO 3: Vulnerable people at each stage of the life cycle in target areas have improved nutrition by 2023.

WFP seeks to address both the immediate nutrition needs of nutritionally vulnerable people alongside their longer-term needs by adopting a life cycle approach, informed by gender, age, and protection analyses. In particular, WFP seeks to reduce wasting and where possible, stunting, in the target areas through a combination of nutrition-specific work under SO 3 and nutrition-sensitive activities under SOs 1, 2, and 4. In the CSP (2018–2023), WFP describes these outputs as being gender-transformative if they are able to help girls reach their full potential (mentally and physically), improve their livelihood and education opportunities, enable girls to adopt a more decision-making role in the household, and promote gender equality through delayed marriages.

There are a number of activities associated with this strategic objective. WFP carries out school-feeding programmes which includes providing specialised nutritious snacks (HEB) to primary-school children and take-home rations of fortified vegetable oil to girls to improve school enrolment attendance, retention, and reduce gender disparity in schools. WFP has also started a Bread+ project with selected local bakeries, providing nutritious locally produced bread to school children. For secondary-school level, adolescent girls are provided with cash-based transfers (CBTs) in the hope that it will encourage attendance and delay early marriage.

Women and girls currently face increased restrictions on their freedom of movement, education, and employment opportunities (WFP 2021c). The Taliban suspension of the return to school of secondary-school girls on 23 March 2022 has been met with widespread condemnation from the international community (UN 2022; OHCHR 2022). Education is important to bring about long-term change but in the immediate term, as UNICEF notes, schools are 'more than structures where children learn; they are a safe space that protects children from the physical dangers around them – including abuse and exploitation - and which can offer them much-needed psychosocial support' (UNICEF 2022). In partnership with UNICEF, UNESCO, and Save the Children, WFP will continue to support the Interagency Action Plan to protect educational gains (WFP 2021c) and is committed to continuing its programmes in those provinces where girls can still attend secondary education.

In the past, as part of the national deworming campaign, WFP trained Ministry of Education staff and facilitated the distribution of deworming tablets in public schools nationwide. Across the school-feeding programmes, WFP coordinated at

central and provincial levels with relevant stakeholders such as the Ministry of Public Health and the Ministry of Education.

To prevent moderate acute malnutrition (MAM), as part of emergency blanket supplementary feeding programmes (BSFP), children aged 6–23 months and pregnant and lactating women (PLW) at risk of malnutrition in the emergency-affected areas receive Specialised Nutritious Foods (SNFs) for the prevention of acute malnutrition. To treat MAM, moderately acute malnourished children aged 6–9 months and PLW in targeted areas receive a targeted supplementary feeding programme (TSFP), combined with key messages about nutrition and health topics to PLW and caregivers of MAM children. This programme was carried out across approximately 30 provinces and was implemented through the existing health services provided and NGO partners who were contracted by the Ministry of Public Health.

As part of its package, WFP also provides nutrition-sensitive social and behaviour-change communication (SBCC) for both girls and boys but places a strong emphasis on men, boys, and older relatives in households who can promote behaviour change. It also provided capacity strengthening to government and service providers and contributes to technical working groups such as the Afghanistan Food Security and Nutrition (AFSeN) group where it provides technical assistance and supports AFSeN implement its agenda to scale up nutrition. WFP also collaborates with UNICEF, the World Health Organization (WHO), and FAO in Afghanistan.

With regard to stunting prevention, WFP intends to focus more on stunting prevention and will carry out more evidence generation activities to ensure quality programme design. This will include a National Nutrition Survey (NNS), Cost of Diet (CoD), Fill the Nutrient Gap (FNG), and operational research linked to stunting prevention. It does, however, carry out a stunting prevention programme in selected high-burden locations which provides SNFs to children aged 6–23 months and PLW with a focus on 1,000 days' window of opportunity, but this programme is still very much in its infancy.

For both MAM and stunting prevention activities, WFP will continue to provide support by taking a multisectoral approach for the prevention of MAM and nutrition improvement for the people of Afghanistan by collaborating with UNICEF, WHO, and stakeholders, in line with the integrated approach to child wasting.

TOC 1: If there is an emphasis on livelihoods, malnutrition prevention (rather than reactive treatment to malnutrition) based on the life cycle approach and systemic approaches, these will help to foster hope in communities and contribute to medium-term food security.

Analysis

Stunting and undernutrition are a deep-rooted problem in the poorest Afghan families and communities. Numerous studies show the link between poor early childhood nutrition and educational outcomes (Alderman and Fernald 2017; Glewwe, Jacoby and King 2001; Grantham-McGregor *et al.* 2007). This in turn has long-term negative consequences for society generally, where an under-educated population cannot help the country achieve its full potential.

The current crisis in Afghanistan necessitates a full-scale, immediate emergency response. But longer-term, careful nutritional work, if neglected, risks harming an entire generation. Some studies suggest that youthful populations with low educational achievement and therefore job prospects are more prone to destabilisation and conflict (Sahar and Kaunert 2021).

Scientifically, there is a clear link between nutrition in children and educational outcomes, and between educational outcomes and future income. However, given the lack of availability of schooling and the economic pressures that keep higher grade children out of schools, nutrition is clearly not the only factor at play (although WFP school-feeding programmes are another important part of this equation).

There are some very big assumptions that need to be considered when exploring this potential TOC. First, and most obviously, there is an assumption that WFP can influence nutritional outcomes. As has been documented extensively, these rely on a multitude of factors, including access to clean water. WFP alone does not have the resources to solve national under-nourishment, so is dependent on partners and contextual factors.

TOC 2: If vulnerable people throughout the life cycle (children aged 6–59 months, school children, adolescent girls, and pregnant and lactating women and girls) receive nutrition services and appropriate specialised nutritious foods, then it can help to prevent and treat malnutrition and contribute to gender equality (SDG 5).

Analysis

There is an assumption that aid programmes which provide conditional CBTs in return for the attendance of girls in secondary school or SBCC to households can challenge gender norms or the power dynamics within households and the wider community. Positive accounts of women attending clinics or girls going to school are often cited by WFP colleagues as contributing to gender parity; but these examples are a long way from Western notions of transformative gender interventions and international norms and expectations around human rights protections.

Firchow and Urwin's work in rural Eastern Afghanistan shows that girls' access to education and women's ability to work, undertake training, or enjoy economic opportunities are key components of both women and men's understanding of peace in their communities. Interestingly, however, there was no emphasis on women being able to take on decision-making roles or take up political positions, despite the fact that the 2004 Afghan Constitution guarantees women equal rights under Article 22 and 50 per cent representation in the House of Elders (Firchow and Urwin 2022). Under the Taliban, it seems even less likely that women will be able to take up decision-making or political positions within formal governance structures.

Even before the Taliban takeover, some argued that 'much of the donor-assisted programming in Afghanistan is based on a flawed and fragmentary understanding of gendered power relations and priorities, to the detriment of the goals of both peace and women's rights' (*ibid.*: 59). To improve programming and lead to longer-term change and sustainability, the authors argue that the international community should focus on those programmes that address areas of concern identified by and for Afghans.

WFP's programming on school feeding and training does address these priority issues around women's rights to education and employment, and its nutrition work with children throughout their various stages of development speaks to a key concern for families generally.

With the prospect of improving equal rights for women in the public space much diminished in the short term, WFP can usefully concentrate its efforts more at family and community level. Understanding the bottom-up lived experiences of women and men in which these interventions are introduced will be extremely useful for tailoring and improving interventions. What are the local gender perspectives and how do they feature in food security and nutrition efforts? Such an examination could also explore in more detail women and men's perceptions of training and sustainable (and meaningful) employment activities.

4.4 Strategic Outcome 4 (SO 4)

SO 4: People throughout the country have a wide range of fortified, nutritious food products available to them at affordable prices by 2023.

In order to achieve the SDG 2 targets on ensuring access to food and ending malnutrition, Afghanistan needs food systems that are resilient to shocks, including the current crisis but also longer-term climate change and other challenges. Food systems ultimately need to provide people throughout the country with access to fortified, nutritious food products at affordable prices. WFP has supported, based on commercial principles, several value chains that produce local nutritious products.

The two main activity areas in this strategic outcome are to develop food systems, working with the private sector, and to work on the strategic grain reserve. This is in many ways a progression of the former policy on working with farmers to produce quality grain that WFP could purchase for aid operations. Whilst purchase for progress (P4P) could help selected farmers, a more strategic approach has been to develop commercial value chains such that there are better markets for most farmers, in turn increasing their profitability and production.

The theory for this strategic outcome is that by boosting value chains generally, farmers can produce more, at better quality, and consumers get more nutritious food at better prices. This is clearly an important food security activity and as such fits the triple nexus concept. Any potential contributions to peace are almost certainly associated with potential economic benefits.

TOC 1: If there are improved value chains and therefore food systems, then these will improve food security in Afghanistan, improving farmer profitability, livelihoods generally, and mitigate negative coping.

Analysis

Employment in agriculture dominates the Afghan labour market. Almost half of all jobs are in agriculture, and the rest are mostly casual labour (restaurants, construction). Over 90 per cent of the private sector is small and medium enterprises (SMEs) with employees under five people. The few large employers, including agricultural processing, were badly affected by Covid lockdowns and disruptions (Tessitore 2020).

Poverty is worse in rural than urban areas, and worse in marginal groups (not surprisingly). In the latest survey of Income, Expenditure and Labour Force (2019–20), rural poverty had dropped quite significantly, however, from 59 per cent to 48 per cent. Agriculture drove the improvement in living conditions, with a rise in production of 26 per cent. More land was taken into cultivation and more irrigation was established. There was also growth in exports of fruit and vegetables. The decline (relative) in rural poverty was greatest in the south and southwest. These were the same areas that had the highest multidimensional poverty.

This analysis suggests that there is a link between farmers being able to sell produce, more land being taken into production, and an improvement in rural livelihoods. Many of WFP's activities in this SO, as well as SO 2 are aimed at the causal links in this logic chain. FFA work and VST can help improve production; processing, storage, transport, and market improvements can help farmers gain improved revenue. The virtuous circle created can lift rural livelihoods, and the more economic activity generated, the more likely it is we will see food security improved generally. Policies that ensure foods brought to market are nutritious,

through the fortification of wheat flour, for instance, will add to these positive reinforcing effects. As theories under SO 2 suggest, an improvement in livelihoods decreases the need to resort to negative coping strategies.

The thesis that work on value chains will lead to enhanced rural livelihoods depends on markets, particularly in the urban areas (and the limited export market). Given that the economic shock has potentially weakened urban purchasing power, and the liquidity crisis makes exporting very difficult, in the short term, this theory may not hold. However, work on value chains is longer term in nature than the potential time frame for the current economic shock. Optimistically, if there is an easing in the current economic crisis, then this work may once again prove fruitful.

However, as with TOC 1 in SO 2, attention needs to be paid to the fact that Afghanistan is a food-deficit country, and even under the best circumstances where there is no conflict, food security might remain precarious. As such, aid interventions are limited to address such systemic and structural concerns. In the past, WFP worked closely with the government and private sector in developing, strengthening, and expanding nutritional value chain activities through sourcing food items in Afghanistan from smallholders, millers, and transporters. This activity will need to continue and will involve engagement with the *de facto* authorities. However, it is important to note that WFP will only be able to do so much.

4.5 Strategic Outcome 5 (SO 5)

SO 5: National and subnational institutions have a strengthened policy approach to food security and nutrition by 2023.

To achieve this strategic outcome of greater policy coherence, WFP works closely with AFSeN and other similar bodies to ensure better coordination at national and local levels to achieve zero hunger. The outcome will be achieved through the following two outputs:

1. Vulnerable people benefit from improved zero-hunger policy coherence, including on social protection, in order to improve their food security and nutrition and support stability (SDG 16).
2. Vulnerable people benefit from greater recognition of zero hunger as one of the main development priorities, in order to improve their food security and nutrition and support stability (SDG 16).

This outcome is closely linked with SDG 16 – to promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all, and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels. It is also aligned with SDG 17 – strengthen the means of implementation and revitalise the global

partnership for sustainable development. The outputs contribute to SDGs 16 and 17 as they seek to make institutions more accountable, effective, and transparent at the same time as promoting inclusive, responsive, participatory, and representative decision-making at all levels, and with a gender-transformative approach.

There are a number of activities associated with this SO. Primarily, to ensure zero hunger is recognised as a development priority, WFP provides support to government and partners in promoting the zero-hunger policy and places a strong emphasis on those aspects relating to social protection. Historically, there have been a number of fragmented social protection programmes carried out in Afghanistan by international partners and NGOs, but the country has lacked a national social protection programme. It does this through capacity strengthening, carrying out public awareness and communication campaigns, and commissioning research to support evidence-based advocacy.

TOC 1: If there is a functioning safety net of last resort, there will be a reduction in negative coping strategies.

Analysis

Whilst the emphasis is currently on humanitarian life-saving activities, it is likely that Afghanistan's crisis will persist into the medium term. Humanitarian agencies, and WFP in particular will become – effectively – the safety net of last resort for an increasingly large cohort of extremely vulnerable families and communities.

The more predictability that can be ensured for both WFP and these extremely vulnerable people, the more that WFP will be able to help them bridge the gap between barely coping and becoming resilient. Schemes elsewhere in the world, such as Ethiopia's safety net, demonstrate that predictability can help the poorest from 'falling off the edge' – preventing the worst, rather than forcing humanitarians to react only when the worst has happened. This is not only the morally right thing to do; it is arguably also more cost-effective.

Whilst WFP cannot support the *de facto* authorities, or work on national policy in the absence of a formally recognised government, it can work towards predictable transfers that allow people to plan and prevent the worst ahead of time. In practice, this will involve the same modalities as SO 1, but where possible, longer-term funding and delivery cycles.

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