

**Policy Note**

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

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**Lewis Sida and Tina Nelis**

**October 2022**

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Lewis Sida and Tina Nelis

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## Summary

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 for Afghanistan. Whilst its focus has primarily been its humanitarian mandate, prior to the Taliban takeover, WFP had been working to see how its strategic outcomes in the 2018 Country Strategic Plan (CSP) were aligned with viable peace and development efforts nationally. The Taliban takeover has accelerated an already deteriorating humanitarian crisis. Drought in 2021 had left many in the west of the country in need of humanitarian assistance. The collapse of international support, and the freezing of the banking system and assets held overseas has exacerbated already very high levels of poverty and threatened the price of staples in the market. This has necessarily focused all external efforts on the humanitarian response. Despite the severity of the humanitarian situation, WFP is keen not to entirely neglect development and peace aspects, knowing that both are essential to the future of Afghanistan. This short note sets out the likely medium-term policy framework and some considerations for WFP in navigating this. This Policy Note should be read in conjunction with the longer document *Theories of Change for WFP Afghanistan's Contribution to the Triple Nexus: Final Report* (Sida and Nelis 2022).

## Keywords

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

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## Acronyms

ARTF	Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund
CDC	Community Development Council
IDS	Institute of Development Studies
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WFP	World Food Programme

# 1. Introduction

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) (OCHA 2022; Financial Tracking Service 2022). Whilst its focus has primarily been its humanitarian mandate, prior to the Taliban takeover, WFP had been working to see how its strategic outcomes in the 2018 Country Strategic Plan (CSP) were aligned with viable peace and development efforts nationally (WFP 2018).

The Taliban takeover has accelerated an already deteriorating humanitarian crisis. Drought in 2021 had left many in the west of the country in need of humanitarian assistance. Many of these populations had hardly recovered from the last severe drought in 2018. The collapse of international support, and the freezing of the banking system and assets held overseas has exacerbated already very high levels of poverty and threatened the price of staples in the market (ACAPS 2022; WFP 2022a). This has necessarily focused all external efforts on the humanitarian response.

Despite the severity of the humanitarian situation, WFP is keen not to entirely neglect development and peace aspects, knowing that both are essential to the future of Afghanistan. This short note sets out the likely medium-term policy framework and some considerations for WFP in navigating this.



## 2. Context

The Taliban takeover has clearly changed the political, conflict, and development landscape. There is now less emphasis on conflict resolution, and much more on preventing full-scale state collapse. This reframes the balance of emphasis within the triple nexus of humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding assistance. Previously the peace element of this triumvirate was as urgent for the country as both development and humanitarian aid; the government was most keen on development and assistance and not very keen on humanitarian aid. Now the most immediate focus must be on the humanitarian operation.

Despite the need for a full-scale effort to prevent a serious humanitarian catastrophe, however, the situation in Afghanistan also requires that development and stabilisation issues are not neglected (International Crisis Group 2021).

Politically this is difficult (UN 2022a). The US and its allies have frozen Afghan foreign currency assets and imposed sanctions. The Taliban has not been recognised as the Government of Afghanistan, making development aid and loans impossible, and much of the functioning of a state challenging too. Banking has been hardest hit, as the major international banks see the risks of operating in Afghanistan as high, and the rewards low. US anti-money laundering and anti-terrorism laws do not prevent these banks working in Afghanistan but were there to be problems, they would put much larger business in jeopardy. This has made global corporations unwilling to work in the country for the time being.

The US action against the Taliban has led to a profound liquidity crisis in the short term, itself a cause of humanitarian consequences. A recent survey by the Norwegian Refugee Council found that 85 per cent of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) had one or more international transfers blocked (NRC 2022). Given the importance of cash-based transfers in humanitarian operations (WFP provided US\$36m in cash-based transfers in 2021) (WFP 2022b), the liquidity crisis has a direct impact on humanitarian operations (OCHA 2021), as well of course as the wider implications for jobs, trade, and the essential networks of support in Afghan society.

Whilst formal international development aid and loans are impossible, at its core, Afghanistan's crisis is one of chronic poverty and poor governance. This will not change overnight, and most likely not for decades. The Taliban have fought a successful 20-year insurgency and currently face no opposition of any meaning. There is no appetite for international intervention, and the most likely scenario is one of status quo. Whilst global attention was fleetingly focused on Afghanistan, and both the UN humanitarian and basic services appeals have been well supported, this will not last. Even now, the crisis in Ukraine has relegated

Afghanistan to a second-order concern, and if the European situation deteriorates further then Afghanistan may receive even less attention. Even if things sharply improve in Europe, the key takeaway is that international support will be capricious at best in the coming years.

### 3. Development in the new context

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.

As set out above, however, formal development aid 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. Recent policy conversations within a series of thinktank seminars<sup>1</sup> have made it abundantly clear that the US, EU, and individual European donors will not give aid to be programmed through government departments directly. This is even true for education, despite it being well supported previously and the fact that aid might be an inducement for the Taliban to keep girls in school (Wintour 2022). The risks are simply too high for government donors – they cannot afford the negative press that would accompany a Taliban atrocity were they seen to be directly ‘supporting’. This is the same for the World Bank, which although it could technically give loans directly to the government, will not do so. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) cannot release its special drawing rights without international recognition, and its shareholders are not currently permitting this. And the international financial markets are basically off-limits 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 NGOs.

There is the possibility of aid from sources other than the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) nations (Loft 2022). Pakistan most obviously has already indicated its willingness to help its neighbour and hosted an Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) conference at the end of 2021 to raise funds for the new regime (NPR 2021). China too may eventually support the *de facto* government, given ongoing mining interests, but it will adopt a calculated stance in the short term (Ahmadzai 2022).

Whether or not aid materialises from such sources, it will be small in comparison to previous flows, and small in comparison to humanitarian resources.

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<sup>1</sup> The Afghanistan Strategic Learning Initiative (ASLI) was convened by the UK Humanitarian Innovation Hub (UKHIH) in partnership with leading thinktanks: the Center for Global Development (CGD), Chatham House, the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development-Development Assistance Committee (OECD-DAC). The ASLI carried out a series of workshops and publications to make a coherent and evidence-based contribution to emerging and ongoing work aimed at addressing the situation in Afghanistan (post-Taliban takeover).

As we know from other similar contexts,<sup>2</sup> 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. In fact, the new UN basic services appeal is a sensible and strategic progression of this trend. In essence, many of the major donors want education and basic health care to continue, and they understand the dangers of creating parallel systems, so the UN becomes a hands-off way of supporting. This makes it a half-way house in between genuine development aid (directly to and through government) and focused humanitarian aid targeted at lifesaving interventions. One might call these 'life-sustaining' interventions, which are variously given names such as 'humanitarian plus', 'resilience programming', or (previously) 'developmental relief' (European Commission 2021).

This has increasingly become the default of the World Bank too, and moves to redirect Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF) funds to WFP and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) suggest a similar pattern will be followed in Afghanistan (World Bank 2022a). Through the World Bank's expanded approach (*ibid.*), the World Bank and ARTF Management Committee recently approved three off-budget emergency projects that will provide food, livelihood, and health services to Afghanistan: the Afghanistan Emergency Food Security Project, the Afghanistan Community Resilience and Livelihoods Project (through the United Nations Office for Project Services, UNOPS), and the Afghanistan Health Emergency Response Project (World Bank 2022b).

The World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF will try and work with state-provided basic services (health and education); WFP's mission means it will be focused at the intersection of poverty and food insecurity. In practice, for WFP, this will largely mean continuing long-established programmes of emergency food, cash, and voucher assistance as well as more developmental-type food security programmes.

The current emphasis is very much on the emergency caused by a mix of drought and economic collapse. If previous drought cycles are any guide, this may well be followed by flooding as the snow melts, but eventually there will be some stability. Most likely there will be an increased caseload in chronic poverty, perhaps manifested as additional internally displaced people (IDP) settlements on the edge of the large cities. IDPs in turn will find it harder to find work in a constrained economy.

This will make livelihoods and employment generation projects important in the medium term. WFP already has a long-standing portfolio of asset-building programmes, as well as employment-generating activities.<sup>3</sup> Whilst such

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<sup>2</sup> For example, Yemen (World Bank 2019) and Sudan.

<sup>3</sup> See [WFP Afghanistan website](#).

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, who are keen to stabilise the economy, and there 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.

WFP is amongst the largest of the UN agencies in Afghanistan in financial terms, and with the current emphasis on emergency food security support, WFP will likely be the most significant agency. If WFP can work in ways that do not undermine state institutions, or that support credible and active local governance, this will go a long way towards retaining some small optimism amongst ordinary Afghans. Policies that work with local governance, perhaps also identifying community bodies that will advocate for the inclusion of women and marginalised groups in community-driven programming, may ensure some equity in the distribution of aid.<sup>4</sup>

In fact, this local-level focus could be a key strategic advantage for WFP in the coming years and may go a long way towards navigating the difficult line between the authorities and the donors. Afghanistan has arguably had more coherent governance locally than nationally for some time, and the majority of Afghans look to their family and community for economic security rather than the state (Pain 2022).

WFP has better local presence than other UN entities. The World Bank will be keen to preserve the investment in CDCs it has made for over two decades, and is currently using the CDC capacity for its Afghanistan Community Resilience and Livelihoods Project (World Bank 2022b). The Taliban will be keen to be seen as a provider at local level. Whilst it might take some adjustment to the current Country Strategic Plan, there are few other UN agencies well placed or with the mandate to support this important national institution. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has the mandate but not the reach. Cash grants to communities to work on basic economic and food security is well within both the WFP mandate and the reduced ambition of being life-sustaining.

The performance of CDCs over time has been subject to significant study, and the scorecard is mixed, particularly with reference to women's inclusion in decision-making processes (Pain 2016; Beath, Christia and Enikolopov 2015). The longer Theory of Change document as part of this study sets out some of

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<sup>4</sup> There has been a debate over the efficacy of CDCs for some time, and whilst by no means a universal success, or without issues, they are an existing network that offers potential. Whether they will be best placed to continue implementing aid, or act as some kind of monitoring function is still quite open to debate, if they do continue to survive in their current form. See Vincent (2020) for ideas on how the current system could be improved.

this evidence in more detail (Sida and Nelis 2022). In essence, whether it is CDCs or some other mechanism, the idea is that the structure of CDCs, which enables local community-based groups capable of navigating a more restrictive environment to further community-based approaches, can also help to improve targeting and monitoring activities. Community-based monitoring works similarly to community-based targeting and can be a powerful complementary tool alongside more quantitative measures.

This note cannot be overly prescriptive in terms of how local approaches might be used to further local-level economic and food security programming. Local institutions are inherently more contextually appropriate, especially in Afghanistan at this current period of time. They are also complex and influenced by the local political economy, which offers both opportunities and challenges. Immediate relief will inevitably transition over time into something more like care and maintenance – ‘protracted relief operations’ in old WFP language. In terms of the current Country Strategic Plan, this might also be thought of as a shift in emphasis from Strategic Outcome (SO)1 to SO2 over time. Thinking of transition strategies now will help that process, and gathering evidence and analysis on the best institutions, the best approaches, and how current programming (especially under the SO2 rubric) might be expanded or enhanced would greatly help.

Whilst more complex, and not within an obvious WFP skill set (or not as obvious as local focused programming), the same economic security linked to food security logic could be applied at a national level. Working with the Ministry of Finance to work out how to stabilise the price of basic staples, for instance, could be a new focus for WFP and the Food Security and Agriculture Cluster under its fifth strategic objective, looking at policy measures to support food security. This too might fit within the ‘reduced ambition development framework’, whereby the UN helps technocratic elements of the government function without this aiding the political objectives of the new regime.

## 4. Peace, stability, and humanitarian access

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

In the short term, this likely means that access will be better than it has been for the previous decade.<sup>5</sup> There will be a period – which might be quite brief – where humanitarian access will be possible throughout the country – infrastructure (roads) and weather permitting – but this will also rely on better coordination among the *de facto* authorities at the local level and also at the policy level to ensure unimpeded access for operations.

This opportunity should be capitalised on by operationally focused agencies such as WFP. It is a period in which trust can be built with communities, knowledge enhanced about local conditions, and partnerships forged with local actors. This will be important should the operational space reduce again in the future.

Whilst access will certainly be better for large humanitarian agencies like WFP in the short to medium term, this may not be the case for local NGOs, or for local populations. Most obviously, there is concern that female aid workers will not be able to move freely, and definitely not without a *mahram*<sup>6</sup> (UN 2022b). Security will be tightly controlled by the Taliban for the foreseeable future, given this is the core of their expertise. Whilst it is unlikely that bribes and corruption will be extracted at checkpoints, there may over time emerge a bureaucratisation of movement (papers needed for moving through major checkpoints), and some

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<sup>5</sup> See discussion on access in Loft (2022).

<sup>6</sup> A male family member chaperone.



ethnicities may find it more difficult to move around than others. Local NGOs may be viewed with suspicion depending on their history.

The challenge for women to move without a *mahram* may further constrain the provision of basic services for the population, particularly in areas such as emergency obstetric care and similar. A lack of female workers combined with a lack of local provision may mean that women need to travel for care, but this becomes more difficult. Other less obvious barriers to the local population accessing aid and services may emerge over time.

For understandable reasons, the international (OECD DAC) donors will not want to pay for 'stabilisation' in Afghanistan. In addition to the risk aversion outlined in the section above, 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.

This leads to an important question around targeting and how inevitably scarce humanitarian resources can best help communities. As has been noted above, the community and family are the support network in Afghanistan, and this will be even more the case in testing times ahead. From one valley to the next, the social structure can change radically: from dominant feudal landowners to shared ownership and management. Understanding such micro-dynamics is impossible for an agency operating rapidly and at national scale. Creating the policies that allow communities to have choice and voice, however, is possible and can be beneficial in minimising the potential for conflict.

Community-based targeting is a long-established practice and expertise within WFP, and there will certainly be institutional expertise within the Afghanistan operation. Given that there is a tension between targeting via a criteria-based system and allowing communities to share aid resources as they do with other income streams, a flexible approach is required. This may be as simple as working with communities to establish who is neediest (an already established way of working). It could also involve a more complex appraisal of which communities are more suited to which type of approach, perhaps using the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) findings or context analysis such as that under the WFP 'three-pronged approach'.



Trying to prevent powerful people from capturing aid is difficult (Mahendru 2021) – involving the community as much as possible is as good a way as any. Combined with the observations about CDCs, a renewed emphasis on 'local' approaches will serve WFP well. This will have the added advantage of assuring donors that the organisation is not legitimising the new regime through 'central' support.

As this short paper makes clear, going 'local' (acknowledging that WFP is already well established across the country!) is not a universal panacea. The local context is as often the problem as it is the solution. Powerful landowners and community-level leaders in both rural and urban areas capture aid to reinforce their positions, one of the major flaws of the aid programme in the last two decades.<sup>7</sup> However, this is a fact of aid operations whether the community is involved or not – there is no quick and simple way to bypass powerful interests locally. As a result, working with the best of the local institutions that have emerged to counterbalance such forces is a progressive strategy, and one of the few available in the current situation.

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<sup>7</sup> For more on elite capture see SIGAR (2021).

## 5. Conclusion

The short analysis suggests that whilst all elements of life in Afghanistan have been affected (and mostly negatively) by the Taliban takeover, the work of WFP will largely continue, with some programmatic adjustments, in response to the current context. In fact, it will be even more important given the emergency context.

The respite from outright conflict is the one marginally positive aspect of the current situation. However, this does not mean that WFP and the UN generally should completely downplay the pressures that could lead to renewed conflict. Preserving where possible the remaining functional parts of the state and helping local governance will be very important in preventing future strife. This is not the same as supporting the Taliban but only about helping ordinary people cope with the increased stresses of the current situation. This is also true of employment and livelihoods work which will grow in importance as the current emergency (hopefully) subsides.

The most important aspect of WFP's work in the immediate term is its emergency humanitarian relief. Getting food and cash assistance to those affected by drought and the economic crisis will help prevent a further decline in food security.

However, it is also important to help with economic security at the local level for those most at risk, as this will further reinforce food security. This is not development *per se* but is about helping people with basic livelihoods and assets-building activities.

Given donor reluctance to do anything that might help the new Taliban regime, working at the local level seems to be the most advantageous strategy for the immediate term. There are strong institutions of family and community within Afghanistan, and networks such as the CDCs could also play a part in preserving this basic economic security for the poorest households. There is potentially strong support from the World Bank via the re-purposed ARTF for something like this. Community-based targeting is another good, practical option to consider enhancing in the current crisis, with the potential to avoid unnecessary local competition for resources. Finally, WFP as a major operational agency should be quick to expand its footprint in previously neglected areas, taking advantage of the new access.

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