



# WE WILL DIE IN POVERTY BEFORE DYING BY COVID

## Young adults and multi-layered crises in Afghanistan

Orzala Nemat, Vidya Diwakar, Ihsanullah Ghafoori, Shukria Azadmanesh

August 2022





**Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit**

**Synthesis Paper**

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before dying by COVID”**

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Diwakar, V. (2022). Welfare of Young Adults Amid COVID-19, Conflict, and Disasters: Evidence from Afghanistan. Working Paper published by Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit.

We have to note that the author's views expressed in this present publication do not necessarily reflect the views of AREU, IDS, CPAN, ODI, FCDO or the UK government. As authors, we take full responsibility for any unintentional errors.

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# | ACRONYMS

CPAN	Chronic Poverty Assessment Network
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IDS	Institute of Development Studies
IE&LFS	Income, Expenditure, and Labour Force Survey
IFRC	International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
MoPH	Ministry of Public Health
NGOs	Non-governmental organisations
NSIA	National Statistic and Information Authority
ODI	Overseas Development Institute
REACH	Relief Effort for Afghan Communities and Households
SIGAR	Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction
UNAMA	United National Assistance Mission for Afghanistan
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

# INTRODUCTION

Afghanistan experienced an extraordinary situation in 2021 that presents a complex example of how an intensified level of conflict and the global COVID-19 pandemic of added to an increasing prevalence of drought due to climate change has been affecting people's livelihoods from different angles. In pre-August 2021, the country experienced record-level violence across the provinces.<sup>1</sup> This was followed by the gradual fall of districts, provinces and finally the capital Kabul into the hands of the current *de facto* authorities, the Taliban. Meanwhile, like any other part of the world, Afghanistan also experienced the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, which hindered people's access to jobs, health care and different sources of revenue. Alongside this, the second-worst drought in 4 years (IFRC, 2021) has widely affected the livelihoods of the majority of people who rely on agriculture and livestock as the sole source of income.

There has been limited research into how these situations have combined to affect livelihoods and wellbeing in Afghanistan. This article attempts to advance understanding of this issue and promote research that investigates overlapped crises. It is based on research that focused on how COVID-19 has affected labour market and livelihood stability for young Afghans and how they have coped (differentially) and what types of collective action and sources of resilience they have employed during this period.<sup>2</sup>

The article covers two key objectives. It first reflects on the research method and approaches employed, drawing on key lessons learnt from conducting research in time of overlapping crises, marked by a pandemic, in an intense conflict affected setting, and where there was increased economic uncertainty due to prolonged drought. Second, the paper assesses livelihood impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in the context of conflict and climate change in Afghanistan using field qualitative data from two provinces (Kandahar and Herat) and supported by quantitative research based on the Income, Expenditure and Labour Force Survey (IE&LFS) 2019/20, part of which overlaps with the onset of COVID-19. These research findings in turn are used to develop implications for policies and programming to better support livelihoods of poor and vulnerable Afghan people in the context of overlapping crises.

The next section highlights the context of intense conflict, introducing what characterises the overlapping crises (conflict, COVID-19 and climate-induced shocks and stressors) on the ground. This is followed by an overview of the methodology adopted for our analysis in Section 3. The next sections detail the study findings: Section 4 then provides an analysis of the triple nexus, Section 5 focuses on the wellbeing of young adults in Afghanistan, and Section 6 examines the resulting coping strategies adopted by households during these layered crises. Section 7 finally concludes with policy implications and recommendations stemming from the research results.

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1 UNAMA, 2021

2 This research was part of the Covid Collective partnership between Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit and Overseas Development Institute's Chronic Poverty Advisory Network (CPAN) that was funded by UKAid through Institute of Development Studies. More about the broader scope of research: <https://www.covid-collective.net/about/>.

# CRISES IN AFGHANISTAN, WITH A FOCUS ON KANDAHAR AND HERAT

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

## COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic reached Afghanistan in the earlier stages of its global spread during the spring of 2020 (Wu et al., 2020). Since then, there have been multiple pandemic waves variably affecting different parts of the country. Globally, by April 2022, there have been over 494 million people who are infected and over 6.1 million people that lost their lives due to COVID-19. One of the main challenges in countries with protracted years of violent conflict and weak management systems is the lack of reliable data; despite that, officials tallied 177,974 Afghans infected by COVID-19, with 7,671 having died so far in the country (WHO, 2022). The data collection for this study was conducted during April-July 2021, which was also one of the peak times for COVID-19 spread across Afghanistan; both Kandahar and Herat were among provinces with highest positive cases.

The challenges brought by successive pandemic waves were also reflected in Kandahar and Herat (CPAN, 2022), the two study sites of focus in the qualitative analysis. Herat province was where the first COVID-19 test was declared positive in Afghanistan (Mousavi et al., 2020). Herat became one of the worst suffering parts of the country during the very first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. At the same time, access to verifiable COVID-19 data in Afghanistan has been hugely problematic, due to socio-cultural stigma; many families would hide the positive cases to begin with, and those with weaker symptoms would rarely attempt testing or treatment (Khudadad et al., 2021:221). Therefore, the data for the two selected sites are often only an estimation of the active and confirmed cases of COVID-19 patients who may have faced severe health conditions that have been tested and or hospitalised.

From the early days of COVID-19, there were different responses by various actors on the ground in Afghanistan. The nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), mostly working on community-based development, have designed awareness campaigns about health and hygiene preventative measures and provided some emergency protection kits to medical personnel. The governmental response, though not highly coordinated, was divided into two parts: the Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) took the lead on emergency health response by creating COVID-19 treatment and testing centres and providing Personal Protective Equipment to health sector personnel. The Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development and Independent Directorate of Local Governance jointly with financial support from the World Bank, opened a new project line called Relief Effort for Afghan Communities and Households (REACH) also known locally as Distarkhwan-e-Milli with a \$280 million

budget (August 2020-December 2021) (World Bank, 2022). According to a Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction report, USAID, the World Bank through the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund and the Program for Asia Resilience to Climate Change have collectively provided cash support worth \$253 million in response to COVID-19 and drought-affected families (SIGAR, 2021). Although the REACH programme has been operationalised, the anti-government armed opposition at the time opposed implementation in some parts of the country due to concerns about lack of coordination with them, corruption and not reaching the neediest people.<sup>3</sup>

## Insecurity and climate change

Parallel to the pandemic, Afghanistan in this period also experienced one of the most challenging phases of its history. First, the worst surge in violence across the country during the first half of the year resulted in massive displacement, job losses and limited access to markets. Second, by mid-August 2021, the whole government that was mainly depending on external aid funds had collapsed and the Taliban who operated as the key military opponent to the government had taken full control of the country. These developments were followed by the collapse of international development aid flow, closure or further restrictions on borders for trading and an even worse level of unemployment and humanitarian crisis during the summer of 2021.

Within Afghanistan, both Herat and Kandahar are a magnet for internally displaced persons who leave their homes mostly in western central highlands and southern regions arriving in Kandahar and Herat to get settled for seeking assistance and/or seeking jobs in the labour market (Mansfield, 2021), more intensely during the months of June and July 2021. With a record spike in violence in the country during the first half of the year 2021, Both Kandahar and Herat experienced several high-profile security incidents: On 13 February 2021, the main port, Islam Qala was set on fire which cost millions of dollars loss to businesses and traders. A United Nations office in Herat was attacked in July, which was reported in international media. Kandahar security deteriorated most significantly in the bordering city of Spinboldak with reports of 100 people being killed (Aljazeera, 2021). In both provinces, daily violence, kidnapping mostly traders and businessmen and their relatives for ransom and finally, both Kandahar and Herat were fully captured by the Taliban on 13 August 2021. The Taliban by that time already controlled the bordering points and most of the districts in both provinces prior to this date.

Another key stressor in Afghanistan has been the prolonged nature of drought, often attributed to climate change. The drought during 2021 was officially declared in January 2021 by the former president of Afghanistan. It is the second severe drought in 4 years. As a result, the wheat crop was estimated to drop by nearly two million tonnes and over three million livestock were considered at risk due to lack of fodder and water. This situation, combined with an increase in violence as mentioned before, also resulted in massive displacement of the population and by the first half of 2021, over 600,000 people were displaced due to both severe conflict and drought (IFRC, 2021).

## Livelihood strategies

The onset of COVID-19, increased insecurity, and climate change has contributed to changing livelihood strategies. In the last couple of years even prior to the pandemic, both provinces were severely affected by having reduced political influence in the capital as well as by severe drought; even in Kandahar, the cropping season has been reduced from four to two seasons. Hence, to reduce the effects of drought and limited access to resources, households in both provinces have diversified income sources including farm and non-farm, such as through migration and daily wage labour. Migration to Iran has been observed more from Herat than from Kandahar over the years, often

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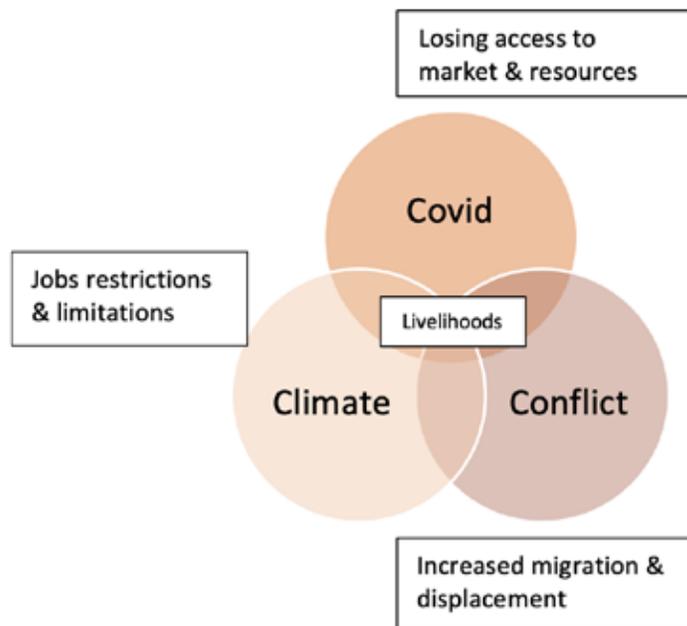
<sup>3</sup> Daily Afghanistan (2021) reported on 21.01.2021 that the REACH program was halted in some parts of the country by the Taliban. The daily quotes the Taliban spokesperson: 'In fact, our conditions for these programmes is that it has to be coordinated with us, there should be transparency and poor people should be identified by impartial people and distributions should be conducted by them. If these conditions are not met, there is possibility of theft, corruption and we will not allow it.' [translated from original text in Persian] [http://dailyafghanistan.com/national\\_detail.php?post\\_id=155365](http://dailyafghanistan.com/national_detail.php?post_id=155365) (accessed on 03.03.2022).

related to repaying past debts or in response to drought. Instead, the economy of Kandahar was boosted by the cash flow of reconstruction funds that immensely hyperactivated the economy (Huot et al., 2016).

Other kinds of income sources common in these two provinces were working in brick kilns, the construction market, seasonal wage labour in the agriculture market, selling vegetables for daily consumption, work in the NGOs, and in private and governmental sectors. However, there has been a growing reduction in all of these markets, and many times people could have limited access to daily wage labour, and migrating to Iran has become a very challenging and risky journey since the start of COVID-19. Therefore, in both provinces, the livelihoods, income sources and lifestyles of people changed tremendously.

Conclusively, as Figure 2 illustrates, the overlapping crises in Afghanistan, as observed in the two mentioned provinces, have resulted in further increase in migration and displacement, job restrictions and limitations and lost access to market and resources.

Figure 1: Overlapping Crises and Rural Livelihoods in Kandahar and Herat



Source: Authors.

# METHODS AND APPROACHES

## Qualitative data collection and analysis

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

The qualitative tool formed part of a Q-squared approach tried and tested by the Chronic Poverty Advisory Network to investigate poverty and well-being dynamics (see summary in da Corta et al., 2021). This toolkit was selected to inform the key research questions which focused on understanding wellbeing, its dynamics, and the livelihood trajectories that affected these. The qualitative toolkit comprised key informant interviews in Kandahar and Herat, and life history interviews with women and men in the study sites. Key informant interviews were undertaken to understand the context in relation to the different crises, as well as programmatic and policy constraints and enablers to livelihoods in the study areas, and how these took into consideration the crises contexts. Life history interviews, in turn, were selected to understand in-depth sequences and processes through which individuals and households experienced changes in wellbeing and how these in turn affected and were affected by livelihood trajectories. A gender balance in interviews was sought to understand commonalities as well as differences in perspectives by women and men. A subset of life history interviews furthermore revisited households that were previously interviewed in past studies on livelihood trajectories noted above, to understand changing wellbeing in more detail over time where a baseline had already been established.

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

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

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

## Quantitative insights from data during COVID-19

In addition to the in-depth qualitative data collection described above, we have also been able to make use of the IE&LFS 2019/20 to quantitatively analyse poverty and welfare loss in Afghanistan. This survey was undertaken between September 2019 and August 2020, thus overlapping with the early months of COVID-19. Not only is it representative at national and provincial levels, but the stratification design employed also enables analysis by season (NSIA, 2021) and accordingly an assessment of welfare changes during COVID-19. The quantitative data sets were obtained from the relevant government authority in full discretion.

An initial analysis of poverty and welfare based on the IE&LFS is provided in Diwakar (2022). The analytic model relies primarily on a series of logistic regressions to understand key correlates of poverty and welfare loss experienced by the Afghan population. As noted in Diwakar (2022), our logistic regression is employed to understand the correlates of poverty and welfare mobility:

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

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

*Welfare<sub>i</sub>* as the probability of the household being under the poverty line in model 1, and the probability of the household experiencing reduced welfare over the year leading up to the survey in model 2,

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

*Region* is a set of dummy variables stating in which region the household resides, and

*H* is a vector of household specific controls.

We also adopt simultaneous quantile regressions to further assess changing relationships across the welfare distribution. The analysis of compounding stressors within the nexus of poverty and welfare loss, and of the welfare of young adults, both as detailed in Diwakar (2022), is summarised in this article. It should be noted that the quantitative analysis offers a general snapshot of correlates of poverty and welfare loss across the country.

## Iteration and data triangulation

Where possible, we ensured that research findings from the qualitative and quantitative data were triangulated. This has been done through the tools, methods and discussions of emerging findings. For example, the tools for qualitative data in this study have been developed in close collaboration with the joint team comprising field researchers who conducted the qualitative data collection as well as researchers who led the analysis of quantitative data. This way, the qualitative tool had elements drawn from some aspects of the quantitative data for further elaboration. Once the field research had taken place, additional debrief sessions were held with all researchers to discuss emerging issues, with a focus on the overlapping crises, that were then further probed in the quantitative analysis. For example, the qualitative findings pointed to compounded shocks and stressors in a period of insecurity as well as climate change-related shocks and stressors. These in turn were interrogated in the quantitative data in the sister study (Diwakar, 2022). This iteration enabled detail from the two sites of qualitative data collection to be generalised to the Afghanistan-wide quantitative analysis.

Even so, there are limitations to our approaches. First, the quantitative dataset referred to in this paper covers mid-2019 until mid-2020, whereas the qualitative data collection took place in the following year (April-July 2021), just before the shift in power. This is particularly important given the significant changes in COVID-19, as well as the security situation in Afghanistan in the last 2 years. There are also risks of endogeneity in the quantitative dataset that are mitigated through relying

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

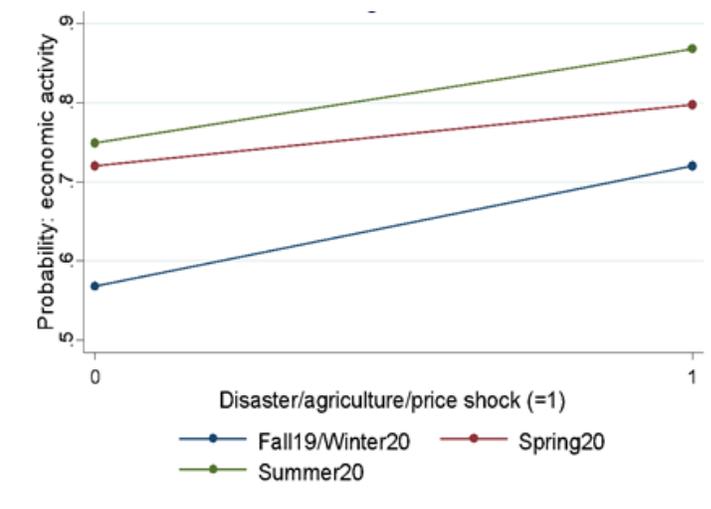
# MULTI-LAYERED CRISIS AND PEOPLE'S IMPOVERISHMENT

This section outlines the application of the methodologies above, in terms of the research results on overlapping crises and coping strategies to these crises. Findings from the mixed methods data point to the series of long-term impoverishment factors that affect the households on the three levels. Macro-level issues clustered in three major challenges of COVID-19 pandemic, weather instabilities exacerbated by climate change and political instabilities associated with transition of power and escalating conflict. The macro-level issues associated with the overlap of COVID-19, climate change and political instabilities create sets of synergies that pose a unique type of impoverishment factor that affects livelihoods in Afghanistan.

## Drought and climate change during the pandemic

The quantitative data analysis pointed to a nexus, whereby disasters, insecurity and a range of negative shocks and stressors during the pandemic months was not only associated with a higher probability of poverty, but also with a higher probability of households self-reporting income loss in the year leading up to the survey (Diwakar, 2022). For example, as illustrated in Figure 3, shocks related to disasters, agriculture or food and farm prices were associated with an even higher probability of poverty and welfare loss (compared to the absence of these shocks) into the summer where COVID-19 and insecurity was mounting (Diwakar, 2022).

Figure 2: Predicted Probabilities of Welfare Loss, by Disaster and Season



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

In the qualitative study sites in Kandahar and Herat, too, there was a strong relationship between climate change and poverty, primarily through the role of its impact on agricultural livelihoods. For example, drought has had an immense effect on water, which is the main source for agricultural activities. In the last couple of years, drought has harshly condensed the yield and harvest in the

agriculture sector and the wheat harvest forecasted in the lower status comparing with the last 5 years (OCHA, 2018), leading to the intensification of relying on other income sources such as daily wage labour and migration. A respondent said:

*Due to drought and lack of irrigation resources, I was losing my income, COVID has obliged people who were working in the factory and other manufacturing companies to quit their job as the companies are shut down. The income that we had from outside is now stopped. As a result, it has severely affected our livelihoods and economic situation.<sup>4</sup>*

On the one hand, the policy response for COVID-19 reduced the accessibility of the labour market for families that relied on the daily wage labour; the closing of the borders and lockdown of commercial hubs and areas also caused an increase in food prices. These policy responses exacerbated the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic on households that were already suffering due to drought. Indeed, the combination of disasters, as well as agricultural and price shocks observed in the quantitative analysis, was associated with a heightened probability of poverty during COVID-19 as noted above. In the qualitative data in Herat and Kandahar provinces, this combination, in turn, limited the ability of workers to support their families. For example, one interviewee noted:

*The drought had affected our harvest and it was a big problem especially in Herat. The rain was so rare; it means that during winter season until the month of April, we had no rain in Herat.*

The same respondent also acknowledged:

*Nowadays the COVID pandemic is a problem that affects people's income. Sometimes the market is good but when the disease increases and during the quarantine, markets get closed which has also affected people's economy especially farmers and livestock. When we take our dairy product to the city, we know when COVID is increased the demand will decrease. Because people are not coming to Bazar and the demand of buying and selling is decreased or even totally stopped.<sup>5</sup>*

## Rising instability and insecurity

In addition to this, rapid change in the security situation, especially over the pandemic period, and an increase in local crime reduced access to work in the agriculture sector that was already affected by the drought and rising food prices. Furthermore, political instability and regime change destabilised the economic sector and reduced income, work opportunities, and access to national and international grain and fruit markets, eventually paving the way for even further impoverishment.

One respondent noted how these various shocks converged to heighten food insecurity, economic precarity, and mortality:

*COVID had a severe effect on the spirit of the people and they were under a lot of stress. In addition to this, in the time of COVID, insecurity has increased in the area... In the last one year, the case of theft, robbery and other*

4 Files\HH Interviews\05\_Sardar\_M\_HH\_HRT

5 Files\HH Interviews\17\_M.Khan\_M\_HRT

*criminal activities has reached its peak. We did not have such insecurity in the past. At the village level, people are stealing a mobile from a person... Looking to the economic situation, the insecurity, drought, lack of work, we may have people who died because of hunger.*<sup>6</sup>

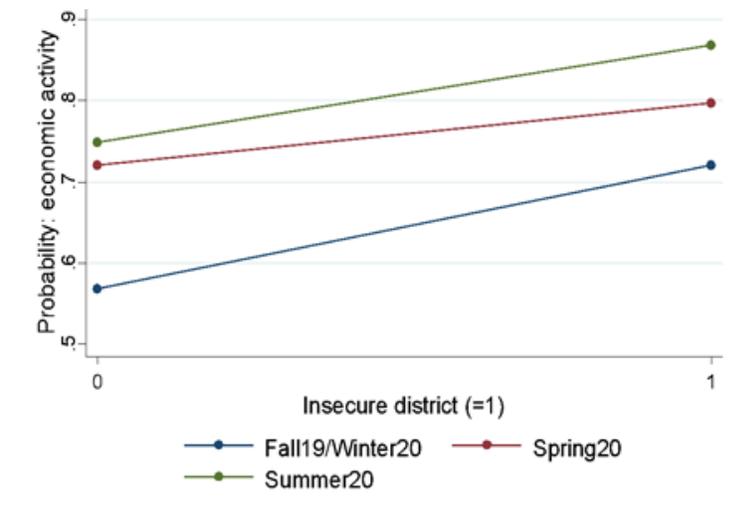
This impact of insecurity and an increase in local crime not only broke the working cycle for farmers, but also limited their access to the market. As a result, farmers were unable to sell their harvest on time, causing low returns from their land and in many cases loss of fixed assets. Restrictions in food trading due to local COVID-19 lockdowns put additional pressure on people’s livelihood and access to the market for their day-to-day consumption and most importantly for daily wage labour:

*After the start of COVID, the price of petrol has reached AFN57. When we ask shopkeepers why the price is so high, they said that borders are closed. There is no transportation between the countries that has an impact on the import and exports. Therefore, the prices are getting higher day by day.*<sup>7</sup>

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

Just as we see these processes in the qualitative data in Herat and Kandahar, we also observe a relationship between insecurity during COVID-19 and welfare loss more generally across the country. Indeed, Figure 4. indicates that households in the country residing in an insecure district during the summer of 2020 marked by the onset of COVID-19 had a particularly high probability of welfare loss relative to those residing in safer areas of the country. The qualitative data above show that COVID-19-induced price volatility also interacted with this insecurity, suggesting that the price shocks channel observed in the quantitative data analysis above would also apply to contexts of insecurity.

Figure 3: Predicted Probabilities of Welfare Loss, by Insecurity and Season



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

6 Files\KII Interviews\02\_Ahmad\_M\_HRT

7 Files\HH Interviews\09\_Rasool\_M\_HRT

The overlap of climate change, insecurity, and the pandemic discussed above has created several factors which drained household resources and contributed to poverty and welfare loss. Indeed, while the poverty rate from the 2019/20 survey stood at 47.1% of the population, it was higher during the onset of COVID-19 in the spring seasons, when poverty rose to 52.3% of the population. Self-reported welfare loss was also much higher during COVID-19. For example, 34.3% of the population interviewed in the summer of 2020 felt that their economic situation at the time of the survey was much worse compared to the preceding year. In contrast, just 19.7% of the population interviewed during the fall of 2019 felt that their situation was much worse compared to the year preceding their survey (Diwakar, 2022).

# LIMITED OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUNG ADULTS TO IMPROVE WELL-BEING

In the context of these overlapping crises, young adults in and near poverty were faced with particular challenges that limited their present and future welfare.

## Lack of labour

Young heads of households in Afghanistan were generally more mobile, more likely to be engaged in salaried employment, and had fewer dependents, all factors which have been noted in the wider literature, including in South Asia, as important pathways out of poverty (Diwakar and Shepherd, 2022). At the same time, though these were important correlates, they were quite precarious, particularly during the months of COVID-19 as a result of public policy responses. Indeed, one key challenge aggravated during the pandemic months was the absence of job opportunities. Slightly less than one-third of household heads in the 2019/20 survey were not working in the week preceding the survey. Of those who did not look for work, there were various reasons for this. Amongst young heads of households, a lack of jobs dominated their reasons for not looking for work. This was also the second most common reason that household heads in general did not look for work during the COVID-19 period. In addition, over 17% of young household heads who did not look for work in the 2019/20 cited a temporary layoff as the reason for this (Diwakar, 2022).

In the qualitative data too, COVID-19 heavily undermined the work and work opportunities for young adults in urban and rural areas. Daily wage labourers could not access the labour market. People working in the industrial sector could not go to work because of the lockdown. By default, farmers could not sell their harvest, reducing their ability to cope with hardship. Furthermore, the only area that gave work opportunities was agriculture; however, it had a very limited capacity and only household elders engaged in it. In the semi-urban area, available options for people were daily wage labour, work in the brick fields, and construction if available. Some of the respondents who were older adults were complaining about not getting daily wage labour for weeks. The only option for survival was looking for support from some organisation.

*Our own family and neighbours, who worked in manufacturing companies, have lost their jobs because the factories were shut down due to the COVID. While I am jobless, my son is also becoming an extra burden by losing his job.<sup>8</sup>*

*Before COVID, we had up to AFN25,000 monthly salary. When the schools are closed, we do not have that income and only I am left with my salary of AFN7,500. So, our income has reduced to ANF7,500 now.<sup>9</sup>*

*I lost my job and salary. As I was contracted to be a school teacher, I don't get a salary anymore since schools are off due to COVID.<sup>10</sup>*

8 Files\HH Interviews\05\_Salam\_M\_HRT

9 Files\HH Interviews\07\_Maqsood\_M\_HRT

10 Files\HH Interviews\08\_Wajid\_M\_HRT

By gender and poverty, results from the quantitative analysis point to a potential narrowing of the gender differential in engagement in economic activities during COVID-19, including in areas experiencing overlapping shocks and stressors due to disasters and insecurity. This is both due to a decline in men's engagement in activities, and women's marginal increase in economic activities in insecure areas and in areas facing disaster-related shocks. At the same time, the engagement of women in these activities may be a sign of destitution processes and a survival strategy, including in low-paid work, rather than offering a pathway out of poverty through economic empowerment.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, as the qualitative data indicates, many women like men also lost jobs during the pandemic:

*We have women work in different industries like women working in other people's homes. In the time of quarantine, they were not working, and they lost their jobs. We have women who produce different commodities for the Kandahar market. When the market is closed, these women cannot sell their products in the market, so these women have lost it.*<sup>12</sup>

In the qualitative data, many young men in and near poverty in the study sites in Kandahar and Herat started looking for other available options as detailed above. In addition, in many households, children began to collect used metal, papers and plastics to sell in the market to support their families. Women who were employed either lost their job and started supporting their male members in the agriculture sector, or worked in other income-generation activities like tailoring, embroidery, and other handcrafts. There was no specific job market available for them.

*Even after the death of my father, we left our own village in Zhari District and came to Kandahar city and started working in the city as labour and Tinsmith. In fact, losing the leader of the family is impacting negatively in terms of social, economic and fiscally every family.*<sup>13</sup>

*The prominent market for daily wage labour in Kandahar city and particularly in Dand district are the brick kilns.*<sup>14</sup>

*I cannot support my family. Because I do not have savings or other income sources. My children collect used metals, papers and plastics daily and earn up to AFN40 or AFN50 per day.*<sup>15</sup>

This forced migration and child labour resulted in households engaging in heavy work for little pay, rendering their economic wellbeing precarious.

## Lack of resources

Young heads of households in poverty were also disadvantaged in terms of owning fewer assets, according to the quantitative data analysis. The value of their consumer durables was less than half that of older household heads aged less than 65 years. Young household heads in poverty, compared to older heads less than 65 years, also had fewer livestock, were less likely to own cultivable farmland, and had less access to electricity (Diwakar, 2022). In the qualitative data, too, young adults were

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11 V. Diwakar. (2022). *Welfare of Young Adults amid Covid-19*. Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit. Retrieved April 15, 2022, from <https://areu.org.af/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Welfare-of-Young-Adults-amid-COVID-19-working-paper5.pdf>

12 Files\KII Interviews\09\_Qadoos\_M\_KDR

13 Files\HH Interviews\12\_Sajid\_M\_KDR

14 Files\HH Interviews\19\_Ibrahim\_M\_KDR

15 Files\HH Interviews\WDP04\_Delbar\_M\_HRT

typically not owners of land, especially when the father was alive. This typically reflected the joint family structure and shared livelihood income. In other cases, this also applied to newly acquired land where for example:

*My son-in-law who was living in Iran sent me money for buying agricultural land for him. And I bought agricultural land for him in our village. Currently I am cultivating his land where the half of the harvest goes to him and half to me.*<sup>16</sup>

The lack of work opportunities and a reduction in income sources, however, prompted some households to further draw down on their resources. For young adults who did have land, due to the depressed labour markets, many were forced to mortgage their plots to meet daily needs:

*Mostly people are giving their lands or gardens on Garawi (Mortgage) or lease when they need money. Due to the low economic situation, one day before the HHH has given one of the vineyards to his father in laws on mortgage for AFN90,000. The Vineyard was given on mortgage because he was short of money which he needed for buying fertilizers for the gardens and house expenses. He said that one vineyard contains 50 vines, and the income of each vineyard is around AFN10,000 per year, normally people are not taking one vineyard on AFN90,000, but I give this vineyard to my brother-in-law, therefore he gave me more than the lease price in this village.*<sup>17</sup>

Distress asset sales were especially prevalent when households were faced with health shocks:

*When my father was ill, beside the income that we have, we spent on his treatment. In the same way, we had one Jirib of land, we sold that land for his treatment. Additionally, we have grape orchard, half of that garden we give it on mortgage and still that is on mortgage. Financially, we got so weak and are in debt now.*<sup>18</sup>

Moreover, increased prices of essential food items had a massive impact on people's food intake, daily food consumption, and overall wellbeing, resulting in increased poverty and food insecurity, particularly in remote areas.

*Well, it is not good to say that what is happening in the family but I can tell you this that before we could eat good food like meat at least twice in a month but it is difficult right now to eat even once in a month. We should manage to spend our time with meagre amount of cereal and vegetables.*<sup>19</sup>

In the quantitative data analysis, too, young adults were much more likely to experience food insecurity compared to older heads of households (Diwakar, 2022).

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16 Files\HH Interviews\15\_Wahid\_M\_HRT

17 Files\HH Interviews\12\_Hafiz\_M\_HRT

18 Files\HH Interviews\07\_Sadiq\_M\_HRT

19 Files\HH Interviews\16\_GulWali\_M\_KDR

## Thinning of social networks

The most common strategy used to cope with the household level crisis is to access the capital via social networks from family and friends. Traditionally, this type of coping strategy is well established throughout Afghan communities. During the time of COVID-19, besides economic hardship, the closing of borders, and lockdown in the region, people faced another unexpected situation in which they lost access to social connections and networks. Previously, when people faced shortfall of food or other economic hardships, they utilized their social networks;<sup>20</sup> however, COVID-19 drained these networks and connections and put people in an uncertain status where they hardly had access to credit. In some cases, people who had access to credit; they receive credit from a limited number of relatives particularly their close relatives like cousins and siblings. The youth who lost their access to credit started working in the agriculture sector.

*There is poverty, and joblessness has increased now. People do not have hope for each other because all of them are jobless and poor. If someone gives money to a person then the lender thinks about how the person will pay back the money. That is the reason why people refuse to support each other. In the time of need, if someone has financial means, they do not help each other, because the lenders do not think that they will get their money back.<sup>21</sup>*

*The financial ability of people has reduced a lot. We have a culture that if someone needs food, as neighbours right, we support them in a difficult time. However, COVID, insecurity, and drought have reduced people's financial ability. The people cannot treat their patients and pay AFN1,000 to AFN2,000 to another person as a credit, which is difficult for them. But very few people may lend to their close relatives and friends.<sup>22</sup>*

Thus, the only option was for people to get informal credit. To do so, they often mortgage their land as a coping strategy, which resulted in a lack of access to gardens for extended periods and reduced income.

Migration of young adults and displacement of entire households were also common factors that reduced people's social networks.

*However, when displaced to Herat province, everything has changed. I don't know anyone in this place. Therefore, in the time of need, I cannot ask for help or a loan. In the last five or six months that we came here, I only knew the Malik of this village. Sometimes, when he finds a daily wage, they ask me to go and work. Apart from him, no one knows us in this area, and they are not aware of our financial situation.<sup>23</sup>*

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20 Shah, T. & Ghafoori, I. (2019). *On Borrowed Time: The Limits of Informal Credit for Livelihood Security in Herat, Afghanistan*. London: Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium. Retrieved March 31, 2022, from <https://areu.org.af/publication/on-borrowed-time-the-limits-of-informal-credit-for-livelihood-security-in-herat-afghanistan>

21 Files\KII Interviews\08\_Mohammad\_M\_KDR

22 Files\KII Interviews\02\_Walikhani\_M\_HRT

23 Files\HH Interviews\WDP04\_Delbar\_M\_HRT

*I am 27 years old. I got married 5 years ago. A year ago, my father was killed in Shindand district. As a result, I face a difficult life. Since my father has passed away, I have the responsibility of taking care of 10 family members. I face with a lot of problem such as no work, weak economy I do not have social connection to get support from the people here.<sup>24</sup>*

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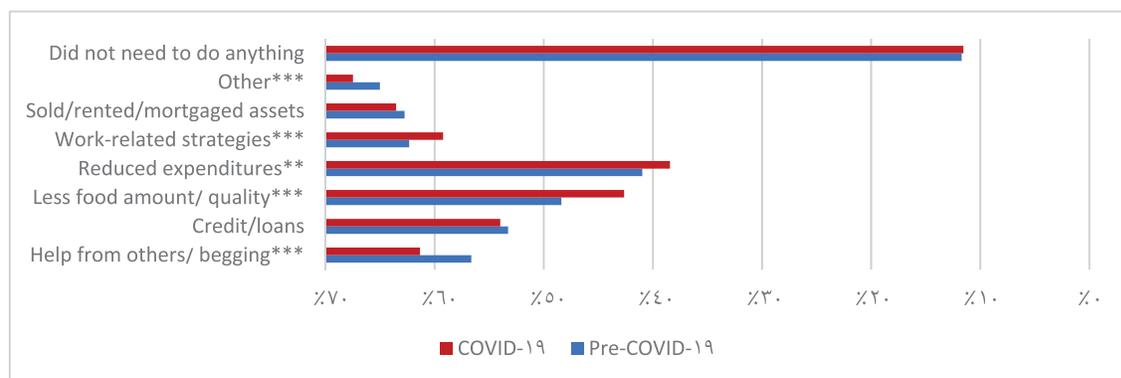
24 Files\HH Interviews\IDP01\_Hastigul\_M\_HRT

# BLOCKED COPING STRATEGIES

These crises and their impacts on young adults were met with international and local responses that were often inadequate to address their compounded nature. Despite a range of international and programmatic funding being dedicated as outlined in Section 2, the research team on the ground found very limited evidence of what was actually received by people in the project sites. Widespread corruption, deterioration of security situation across the country and, to an extent, politicisation of the national REACH program by the president’s office have resulted in limited outreach of the government-led, donor-funded COVID-19 response in the pre-August context of the country. It is worth noting that the military opposition government at the time when the field research was conducted did not have any specific response or programmes to support COVID-19 and or drought-affected communities.<sup>25</sup>

As a result, in response to negative shocks and stressors, households were sometimes forced to adopt a variety of often erosive coping strategies that further prompted welfare loss. As summarised in Diwakar (2022), many households in Afghanistan in 2019/20 reduced expenditures, contributing to heightened food insecurity especially during the period corresponding to COVID-19 (Figure 5). Other differences in coping strategies disaggregated by months prior to and during COVID-19 included a reduced reliance on potentially diminishing community-level social capital, and a corresponding increase in work-related strategies, perhaps in response to this (Diwakar, 2022). However, migration as a work-related strategy itself was constrained given lockdowns and border closures.

Figure 4. Primary Coping Strategies of Households to Negative Shocks, by COVID-19 Period



\*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

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

We further examine these coping strategies in the qualitative data below. Some of these strategies relate to themes already identified above amongst young adults, but are specifically interrogated here as a coping response to crises.

25 Based on the field research team observation and interview with key informants. See footnote no 3.

## Credit in a context of reduced social networks

As noted above, there was a thinning of social networks due to increased financial distress. This often prompted substitution towards informal credit that increased household debt profiles. Wedding costs, bride price, funeral cost, medical expenses or treatment, daily expenses, and some cultural-religious practices are issues for which people take loans. Respondents from Kandahar and Herat provinces elaborated their reasons for taking loans:

*We got AFN150,000 to pay the pishkash (bride price) of our daughter in law. Her total pishkash was AFN500,000. We took loan of AFN50,000 for our daily expenses, we had no money to provide daily expenses (including food, medicine, etc).<sup>26</sup>*

*I am in debt of AFN210,000. I took AFN100,000 for my father's funeral, AFN50,000 for my children treatment and AFN60,000 for my wedding ceremony.<sup>27</sup>*

*When my father was ill, besides the income that we have, we spent on his treatment. In the same way, we had one Jirib of land, we sold that land for his treatment. Additionally, we have a grape garden, half of that garden, we gave it on mortgage and still that is on the mortgage. Financially, we got so weak and are in debt now.<sup>28</sup>*

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

## Substituting work strategies and risky work strategies

In the time of hardship, economic constraints, and COVID-19 families identified other sources of income such as female-based handcraft work, families sending their children to collect plastic bags; some families who could not find daily wage labour in other sectors like agriculture and construction migrated to the brick kilns. This transition has reduced their hardship, though there are negative consequences like child labour. Such strategies were helpful in the short term, but the consequences are catastrophic and exacerbate their livelihood in the long term; for instance, working the brick kilns requires intense physical force and would cause permanent physical injuries long-term, meaning children cannot attend school.

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26 Files\HH Interviews\02\_Marzia\_F\_HRT

27 Files\HH Interviews\WDP01\_Hastigul\_M\_HRT

28 Files\HH Interviews\07\_Zareef\_M\_HRT

*I know how to tailor, so I am tailoring at home. My sisters-in-law do not have the skills to start any activities at home. They are jobless. They can do embroidery, so sometimes they do it and can earn some amount of money. When we were in the Adraskan district, we were getting wool from other people and spinning for them, and getting our wage, we could get 200 AFN per kilogram in Adraskan, but here we get only 160/ 170 AFN per kilogram.<sup>29</sup>*

*I went to find daily wage labour yesterday. I found wage labour, in which I have to take soil from a person's home. In the end, he gave me 150 AFN for the whole day. First, it is pretty challenging to find daily wage labour. Second, when I see wage labour, the wage is meagre. My other brothers are small, but during the day, they collect used papers and plastics and sell it.<sup>30</sup>*

*Since we have come here, our problems have increased. My husband doesn't have a proper and regular job, my sons are going to the streets to collect plastics. If they could collect some, they can get at least AFN10 per kg. Some people say not to send my sons on the streets, it is not good for their health. But, what can we do? If I don't send them what to eat, we will die in poverty before dying by COVID.<sup>31</sup>*

## Displacement and migration

Migration has been one of the best ways to accrue funds for debt payments. Indeed, remittance from Iran and other countries is considered important in the time of family crisis, marriage and other events. People, mainly from Herat, go to Iran to work there and support their families. However, since the first inception of COVID-19, the Iranian government has deported thousands of migrants back to Afghanistan (Rahimi, 2021). This has limited their access to the resources and the labour market.

*The situation was worse for daily labour workers. There were some jobs, but due to war, people were not able to work. So, people were jobless most of the time. All over Shindand had the same situation. He [her husband] just came back some months ago. He stayed in Iran only for 3 months last time. He came back because his father was killed, and there was no man at home. So, he had to be back.<sup>32</sup>*

*One of my sons went to Iran for work but was deported back. He returned home at the end of March 2021. He was deported after 40 days. He went to work in Iran to earn some money, as we got AFN150,000 as loan to pay the pishkash of his wife. So, we are not able to repay that loan up to now.<sup>33</sup>*

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29 Files\HH Interviews\08\_Sheeba\_M\_HRT

30 Files\HH Interviews\NDP03\_Hameed\_M\_KDR

31 Files\HH Interviews\NDP04\_Khatira\_F\_HRT

32 Files\HH Interviews\NDP01\_Shukria\_F\_HRT

33 Files\HH Interviews\15\_Balqees\_F\_HRT

*There are two reasons, first is insecurity but the most important reason is economic hardship in Afghanistan; this hardship obliged people to migrate to Iran with their families.<sup>34</sup>*

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34 Files\KII Interviews\03\_A.Malik\_M\_HRT

# CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This discussion paper highlighted the overlapping crisis caused by COVID-19, conflict and climate challenges that affected rural livelihoods in Afghanistan, and how young adults in particular were affected. The paper elaborated how rural and semi-rural populations' livelihoods strategies have evolved and changed during a very traumatic period in their lives, with a widespread prevalence of the COVID-19 pandemic, an intense level of violence and an ongoing drought situation in 2021. The factors added by the aftermaths of regime change at a later phase (post-August 2021) created a unique environment in which the usual system of coping strategies, such as the system of credits based on social networks, alternative work strategies and migration, are also severely restricted, further causing impoverishment throughout the population. Above all, this paper highlights the already grim and tense situation that Afghans were living in before the mid-August 2021 changes. The aftermath of the political shift since last year, on top of economic restrictions, border closures and massive collapse of the development aid has even further worsened the situation in the country.

The article highlighted the unique nature of Afghanistan's experience with COVID-19 that was also combined with overlapping crises such as intense conflict and ongoing drought. The study found that these multiple crises have not only broken the cycle of work for most of the rural livelihoods of people, it also deprived them of basic access to market, trading and social networks. The paper identified key factors that converged to drive impoverishment in study sites in Kandahar and Herat. This included not only the overlapping crises, but their consequences as seen through effects of inflation, increase of food prices, family level crises, coping strategies and displacement and migration effects. These examples all point to strong linkages and intersections between the triple challenges of conflict, COVID-19 and climate that affected people's livelihoods.

The analysis and findings from this study are also important for humanitarian and development policy makers and programme-implementing agencies. Therefore, we present several recommendations:

**First, there is a need for acknowledging the overlapping crisis and a collective crisis management response to the issues**, especially when dealing with humanitarian crises in the context of protracted violence and instability. Already, the 2022 Humanitarian Response Plan acknowledges a “simultaneous focus on those needing emergency assistance as a result of conflict and disasters, in addition to ‘vulnerable people with humanitarian needs’” (HRP, 2022). Moreover, there is also a strong humanitarian operational presence in Afghanistan, with 191 organisations (107 national NGOs, 72 international NGOs, and 12 UN agencies) actively providing humanitarian assistance between January and March 2022, the highest number in the last 5 years (OCHA, 2022).<sup>35</sup> These organisations mainly operated in the sectors of food security and agriculture, and in protection. However, as our analysis indicates, **there is a strong need for multi-sectoral interventions including these sectors but also extending to access to education and health services, livelihood support, and inclusive finance to counteract the high levels of debt that many households resort to as a negative coping strategy**. More holistic responses will not only help with better understanding of the context and responses, they will also address the issues over a longer term and more effectively.

Relatedly, **donors are encouraged to use the overlapping crises such as COVID-19, conflict and climate as a framework for analysis in commissioning poverty monitoring studies**. This will highlight not only the linkages and overlaps between the three, but also will help with a deeper

<sup>35</sup> This includes: “partners that have an active project funded by the Afghanistan Humanitarian Fund (AHF); organisations reporting activities against the Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) through ReportHub; and those that are directly implementing a humanitarian programme or carrying out assessments or monitoring (operational presence) as reported to OCHA sub-offices and the Humanitarian Regional Teams (HRT)” (OCHA, 2022).

understanding of poverty and informing tailored poverty reduction strategies. In this process, relying on mixed methods data that can offer generalisations through quantitative analysis of correlates of poverty and vulnerability, and in-depth insights on combinations, sequences and processes that can contribute to improvements in wellbeing through qualitative data would be important. The present study is a step in this direction, though updates with further insights, particularly into the present period since 15 August 2021, are needed.

**Second, looking at the evidence from this study in the current context, there is a clear need to further strengthen linkages between humanitarian and development response to the crisis.** While the present priority for Afghanistan's people is a humanitarian response by most of the international aid agencies, this alone will not succeed without addressing longer-term development aid-focused responses. Related to this, COVID-19 is still not over, and aid and assistance programs need to consider addressing its long-term impacts on people's livelihoods.

Afghanistan has largely focused on social protection within the humanitarian-development-peace nexus though no collective outcomes have yet been identified (IASC, 2021). Going forward, the nexus could also more strongly integrate social protection with other pro-poor economic growth and human development initiatives that support "growth from below" (Shepherd et al., 2019).

**The third area is to draw attention and develop policy and programming responses to improve welfare and inclusion of young adults.** The findings from this study highlighted how youth headed households had fewer assets and were more prone to food-insecurity and poverty during COVID-19 time. Therefore, future humanitarian and development programs need to keep youth headed households in consideration. A recent study which analysed pathways to youth inclusion in Afghanistan made the following recommendations: strengthening dialogue in the government to develop a shared commitment to youth inclusion, mainstreaming youth inclusion across projects through development of sub-objectives; complement economic inclusion with social cohesion efforts; engage youth as agents of change, expand skills-based training in rural areas complemented with links to job creation; and consider specific disadvantaged stemming from intersecting vulnerabilities (World Bank, 2020). Related to this, **aid providers need to consider key characteristics of each context before planning delivery of services, a better and clear understanding of young people's livelihoods can help in better provision of immediate, short- and longer-term assistance.**

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