



Running out of time

A looming drought in Afghanistan

As Afghanistan faces yet another season of uncertainty, a potential disaster looms. Amidst worsening conflict and the ongoing adverse impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, Afghanistan may also be headed for another drought.

Background

More than three million Afghans are likely to be acutely affected by a drought this year that could be even more devastating than one three years ago. Millions of vulnerable Afghans have lost livelihoods and face food insecurity due to conflict and the damaging socio-economic effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. 12.2 million Afghans, 32% of the population, now face 'crisis' or 'emergency' levels of food insecurityⁱ – placing Afghanistan among the top three countries in the world with the highest number of people in emergency food insecurity and already exceeding levels seen during the 2018-19 drought. Afghans are taking on catastrophic levels of debt just to pay for food, rent, and healthcare even before the impacts of a drought fully hit.

The 2018-19 drought in Afghanistan affected more than two-thirds of the country, leaving some four million people in the worst-affected provinces in need of life-saving assistance and more than 371,000 displaced as drought conditions devastated livelihoods and pushed millions into food insecurity.ⁱⁱ Many Afghans displaced during

this period remain in protracted displacement, unable or unwilling to return to their areas of origin and facing reduced assistance.

This is a disaster that can be prevented but time is running out. It is estimated that if humanitarian actors had responded early to the 2018 drought, placing their focus on vulnerable communities, over 160,000 Afghans would likely have avoided being displaced.ⁱⁱⁱ Lessons learned from the 2018-2019 have informed planning on the ground whereby humanitarian partners will today seek to support people where they live now to prevent displacement as well as ensure we are better prepared to respond with emergency assistance to those who may be forced to move.

It is critical that donors provide sufficient support to enable an effective, principled, and needs-based humanitarian response. Funding is urgently needed so that partners can plan and respond in order to prevent and mitigate displacement, respond to emergency needs, and enhance communities' ability to cope, adapt and prepare for this year and future climate-induced shocks.

Preparing for the worst

More than three million Afghans are likely to be highly impacted by the current drought conditions across northern and western Afghanistan, with millions more affected across the country,^{iv} if timely sustainable livelihood support is not provided during the early stages of drought to prevent further displacement. Across Badghis, Faryab, and Sar-e-Pul, three of the provinces most likely to be significantly affected, nearly 2.3 million people's livelihoods depend on rain-fed agriculture, livestock, and natural pastures.^v

The socio-economic impacts of conflict and Covid-19 have left millions reliant on inconsistent daily labour jobs and reduced rates of remittances from family and community members in other countries. Opportunities for casual labour are 20% lower than pre-pandemic rates and wages are at the lowest levels in the past four years.^{vi} Meanwhile prices for food and basic items remain high, so that families reliant on casual labour are earning less, spending more, and taking on crippling debt just to survive.

Recent assessments undertaken by NRC in Badghis, Sar-e-Pul, and Faryab provinces indicate urgent needs for livelihood support and water, sanitation, and hygiene assistance in order to prevent displacement and save lives. The assessments undertaken in March 2021 through a combination of key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and desk reviews of 26 villages across the three provinces paint a stark picture of the situation. Agriculture and livestock are the main source of income for Afghans across these three provinces, putting them at high risk from drought. Conditions are exacerbated by poor infrastructure due to years of conflict, limiting access to markets and other critical services.

Vulnerable Afghans, many of whom faced drought three years ago, are well aware of its effects – nearly all of the participants of focus group discussions in Badghis reported a lack of food and drinking water during the 2018 drought, lost agriculture and livestock and lost livelihoods. Participants spoke of displacement, selling livestock and household assets and borrowing

large amounts of money just to survive as their fields dried up and livestock died due to lacking food and water. Few respondents stated that they received aid.

Afghans in the worst affected areas are already worried about a potential drought this year and taking preparations. Many focus group participants indicated they would be unable to cope if government, national and international organizations did not provide them with support. Interviewees expressed concern about the risks of lost livelihoods and potentially having to sell livestock, land, and productive assets at a low price should they face a drought. In Badghis and Herat provinces, livestock prices have already decreased significantly by roughly 40% from March to April 2021.^{vii}

More than three-quarters of respondents in Badghis indicated that they would go to displacement sites to seek assistance if they lost their livelihoods. Notably among these respondents, only 2% mentioned that they would go to Herat to seek livelihood opportunities, preferring instead to stay at informal sites in Badghis province. This is likely related to a desire to stay as close to their area of origin as possible with participants citing concerns about leaving their land unattended. This may be particularly relevant for households dependent on agriculture for whom close proximity to land and property is especially important to protect their properties and tend to their fields with the intention to return as soon as conditions improve. However, historical displacement trends indicate that those households more dependent on livestock are more likely to displace to nearby urban centres using income from selling off their livestock.

18% of respondents indicated they would travel to Iran or send one of their family members in search of work. Other likely coping mechanisms mentioned by participants included migration to Iran, child labour and early marriage, as well as joining armed forces and armed groups.

Left Behind



"The sky stopped raining on us, the earth has stopped growing grass for us and eventually the government has also stopped helping us." – Abdul Baqi, 67, displaced to Qala-e-Naw, Badghis in 2018. Photo: NRC/Enayatullah Azad

As humanitarian actors prepare for drought-related displacement this year, we cannot forget those still displaced by the last one for whom durable solutions remain a distant prospect. Protracted IDPs in Herat and Badghis, many displaced by the 2018 drought, feel left behind as conditions have deteriorated and humanitarian assistance phased out.

Despite the HCT's March 2019 decision to phase out humanitarian assistance in the informal settlements in Herat and Badghis, both government and development interventions for this population have remained absent and insufficient while conditions had deteriorated.

IDPs regularly report that basic needs are not met – food, water and shelter are consistently prioritized as urgent needs, along with access to health and education services and livelihood opportunities. As a result of the deteriorating situation for protracted IDPs, exacerbated by the socio-economic impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, IDPs have reported increased criminality and resorting to negative coping mechanisms.

According to NRC's protection monitoring in Herat from November – December 2020, 79% of respondents reported child labour, 72% engaging in hazardous work, and 67% borrowed money to cope with the lack of livelihoods.^{viii} Borrowing money was also the most commonly and

consistently cited negative coping mechanism in Badghis with more than 70% of respondents reporting taking on debt in the last quarter of 2020.^{ix} For children the situation is equally dire, with boys often being sent to work, including hazardous labour, and girls offered for early marriage. As families are also less able to afford basic necessities, parents have reported giving their children sleeping pills to avoid them asking for food. Others have resorted to onward migration, for example to Pakistan, due to lack of employment and daily labour opportunities and lack of humanitarian assistance.

The threat of eviction is a consistent threat for many of the families who remain displaced – among them, 300 families in Shaidayee IDP settlement recently received threats of forced eviction. In Herat, eviction monitoring undertaken by NRC teams found that 95% of respondents lived in rented houses, 25% of those having received threats of eviction and 27% at risk of forced eviction. Existing programming in Badghis indicates similar conditions for displaced families there.

Yet, for this population, the prospect of a durable solution is remote – most IDPs have indicated that they are unable or unwilling to return to their area of origin, yet have no intention to relocate and are prevented from being able to locally integrate. As a result of restrictions by host communities and local authorities, IDPs and humanitarian organizations are unable to construct more sustainable solutions, such as transitional shelters and additional bore wells.



"We are stuck here. We can't go back home and neither do we work here." – Mullah Mohammad Ayub, 42, displaced to Herat from Badghis in 2018. Photo: NRC/Enayatullah Azad

As the situation for this population deteriorates, there is a significant risk that a new wave of displacement would further exacerbate social tensions, particularly if assistance is status-based and not on the basis of needs and delivered in a conflict sensitive manner.

Drought across borders

The use of water is a regional issue with shared rights over freshwater coming from mountains, lakes or ground water sources between Afghanistan, Iran and Turkmenistan. Water resources are limited in many provinces across Iran, especially those bordering Afghanistan. The decrease in water supplies which leads to lack of drinking water has also led to a sharp decline in agricultural production, unemployment and drying of wetlands, adding additional burden to host communities and additional challenges to an already vulnerable Afghan refugee population in Iran.

A preventable disaster

To meet immediate needs and reduce further drought-related displacement, there is an urgent need to provide timely support to affected communities while not forgetting those left behind by past crises.

NRC recommendations:

- The humanitarian community in Afghanistan must step up coordination and planning as drought conditions worsen and early displacement accelerates in the coming weeks. Continued monitoring and analysis should be undertaken and shared in a timely manner to all relevant institutions, particularly ANDMA and MoRR.
- International donors should support a needs-based response so that partners are able to act early and in line with the revised humanitarian response strategy to prioritize emergency needs while also supporting vulnerable people to prevent them from slipping into more serious humanitarian need.
- Local and national authorities must be empowered to lead the drought response and, accordingly, ensure that timely humanitarian access is facilitated for response actors by, for instance, accelerating project approvals and permissions.
- Humanitarian and development partners should promote integrated approaches to prevent displacement and build communities' resilience to cope, adapt and prepare for climate-induced shocks, including through sustainable livelihoods and access to safe water.

ⁱ OCHA, The Cost of Inaction: Afghanistan Humanitarian Crisis, 25 May 2021, <https://bit.ly/3vIGY53>.

ⁱⁱ IMDC, Global Report on Internal Displacement, May 2019, p. 36, <https://bit.ly/3pawp8m>.

ⁱⁱⁱ ADSP, Re-Imagining the Drought Response: Lessons Learned and Recommendations, January 2021, p/ 3, <https://adsp.ngo/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/LessonsLearned.pdf>.

^{iv} Global Drought Observatory, Analytical Report: Drought in Iran, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Pakistan – May 2021, 27 May 2021, p. 2, <https://bit.ly/2TCnlba>.

^v According to the Emergency Plan of Action for Afghanistan, Emergency Plan of Action (EPoA) Afghanistan: Drought-IFRC, 19 March 2021.

^{vi} FEWSNET, Afghanistan Food Security Outlook: February to September 2021, 1 March 2021, p. 3, <https://bit.ly/3pbfZwi>.

^{vii} FEWSNET, Afghanistan: Key Message Update “Conflict intensifies in May, displacing tens of thousands in east, south, and northeast”, May 2021, <https://bit.ly/2S2oyxr>.

^{viii} NRC, Protection Monitoring in Herat, November and December 2020, <https://bit.ly/3fX6vkc>.

^{ix} NRC, Protection Monitoring in Badghis, September and October 2020; November and December 2020, <https://bit.ly/2TzHaFw>; <https://bit.ly/3fl7aaf>.