AFGHANISTAN
Information and analysis ecosystem

INTRODUCTION

This report analyses the current information and analysis ecosystem in the Afghanistan response. It highlights critical analysis needs and gaps and outlines recommendations based on ACAPS' expertise in humanitarian analysis. Understanding the information and analysis ecosystem in Afghanistan, with a focus on humanitarian analysis and information targeting humanitarian needs, provides decision makers with an overview of what information exists, where duplications lie, what information gaps are, and how that information can be gathered. The ACAPS analysis ecosystem approach recognises that analysis actors operate in complex, open systems and constantly adapt and change depending on external and internal inputs.

Understanding the crisis in Afghanistan and how to provide effective and principled assistance in line with the do-no-harm approach requires analysis that not only looks at humanitarian needs but also explores the underlying context at both the macro and micro levels. Programming informed by regularly updated conflict and political analysis is better able to maximise positive while avoiding negative impacts on the context.

Understanding how the current crisis interacts with pre-existing crises is critical to anticipating needs and planning an effective humanitarian response. The historical absence of the State and weakened governance have created a high dependency on humanitarian assistance. The deterioration of the humanitarian situation and the complexity of the humanitarian operating environment means decision makers need targeted and high-quality analysis to understand the evolving needs of affected communities and the intersecting vulnerabilities of different groups to be able to prioritise life-saving interventions and anticipate risks.

About this report: this report aims to analyse the current information and analysis ecosystem in the Afghanistan response. To do so, ACAPS analysed the data and analysis landscape for the humanitarian response in Afghanistan through a secondary review of the main humanitarian information management (IM) products (1,200) published between 2019–2021. Between October 2021 and January 2022, ACAPS also conducted 13 key informant interviews (KIIs) with IM representatives, analysis organisations, and individuals working on face-to-face and remote data collection and analysis in Afghanistan. For the full methodology, see page 12.

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KEY FINDINGS

Regarding data

- There are challenges to data collection specifically related to quality and inclusivity. Cultural, political, and physical access issues constrain data collection regarding the views of women, minority groups, and those in more remote areas.

- Significant data is collected despite many challenges, but data collected by different organisations is often incomparable. Issues include differences in methodology, scale, unit of measurement, or time frame.

- There is an overreliance on a few large-scale data collection exercises with little triangulation of information, reducing the reliability of findings.

- Challenges around data collection (and analysis) delay and reduce the usefulness of findings.

Regarding analysis

- The absence of an overarching analysis framework has resulted in a lack of understanding of data and information gaps and missed opportunities for maximising the use of collected data.

- Significant bias exists in data collection (sampling bias) and analysis (confirmation bias), compounded by a strong biased narrative from international media and Afghan diaspora, counternarrative from the Taliban, and the fact that foreign organisations conduct almost all humanitarian analysis (institutional and stereotyping bias).

- Western or donor-driven rhetoric influences much of humanitarian analysis, which provides simplistic conclusions concerning basic needs and confirming the prevailing humanitarian narrative.

- While a strong IM environment exists, there is a lack of data sharing and joint analysis and little coordination of analysis.

- Humanitarian impact analysis fails to consider the ways humanitarian assistance affects different Afghan population groups, the local economy, and socioeconomic norms.

- Little use is made of the wealth of contextual analysis beyond the humanitarian sphere.

- There is a lack of anticipatory analysis, especially on economic issues that influence the humanitarian response, such as cash and liquidity.

Regarding data collection and analysis actors

- International organisations do almost all data collection and analysis (as in most crises), meaning that findings are framed from a typically western perspective.

- There is a clear lack of Afghan perspectives in humanitarian analysis and in informing humanitarian decision-making.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- To maximise the use of available data and improve the quality of analysis, develop a more common structured analysis approach to reach common agreement on and the identification of information needs and gaps.

- Conduct deeper, more contextualised, and nuanced humanitarian analysis that draws from multiple sources – especially given the wealth of contextual analysis – to challenge assumptions about Afghanistan.

- Undertake more joint analysis.

- Carry out more anticipatory analysis, especially on the economy – including the financial impact of sanctions and cash and liquidity issues – and its impact on the prevailing humanitarian situation.

- Incorporate more analysis from Afghan perspectives into decision-making processes by increasing the agency of Afghans.

- Undertake detailed baseline studies in key sectors.

Since KIIs were conducted with key analysis actors in late 2021, Afghanistan's assessment and analysis actors have established the Assessment and Analysis Working Group and are working actively to address the issues they flagged to ACAPS.

1. CONTEXT

Weak governance and political corruption, high levels of off-budget funding (which worked against the strengthening of state institutions), a high dependence on international funding and technical assistance, and ambitious political reform have characterised the last 20 years in Afghanistan. Between 2001–2021, four presidential elections marred by violence and fraud took place. Despite significant international investment in the national security forces and central government, much of the country continued to be insecure (preventing development in some areas), the provision of state services remained poor, and poverty increased. Most Afghan state services highly depended on international support, much of which was channelled via the World Bank, bilateral investment programmes, and – predominantly the development arms of – humanitarian agencies (BBC 09/09/2019; AAN 29/05/2016; Al Jazeera 14/03/2021; Reuters 19/09/2019; CSIS 25/05/2021; NYT 29/02/2020; The Defense Post 25/02/2020; The Diplomat 13/10/2021).

For twenty years, violence and armed clashes forcibly displaced millions of people across the country. In April 2002, an estimated one million Afghans were internally displaced (Global IDP Project 26/09/2002). By February 2022, this number had increased fourfold to 5.8 million[1] (IOM 25/11/2021). Since the Taliban began its territorial expansion in July 2021, more than 300,000 people have been newly internally displaced (OCHA accessed 07/01/2022). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, climate- and weather-induced natural disasters, and increasing poverty further aggravated humanitarian needs caused by conflict.

At the beginning of 2021, chronic poverty, droughts, the primary and secondary consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, and decades of conflict and displacement left nearly half of the Afghan population dependent on humanitarian assistance. Since the collapse of the Afghan Government and resumption of national control by the Taliban on 15 August 2021, the situation across much of the country has changed. While active conflict has decreased and physical access has improved, many security threats remain.[2] The deepening economic crisis (directly linked to the freezing of national assets and consequent liquidity crisis), the Taliban's inability to maintain public services, a rapid exodus of skilled labour, and a sudden drop in international aid delivery have also amplified humanitarian needs (OCHA 12/01/2022 and 20/09/2021). The shock to the local economy has led to a cash shortage, which, with the disruption to public service delivery and development and humanitarian activities, has significantly increased the number of people requiring assistance and affected the type and level of assistance required. While humanitarian aid delivery has resumed, it remains insufficient to meet this increase (CFR accessed 04/07/2021; SIGAR 30/07/2017; BBC 01/05/2021; Foreign Affairs 17/08/2021; CSIS 17/12/2021).

The suspension in August 2021 of international development aid that funded 70–80% of basic services has had a devastating impact on service provision, including health and education, much of which remains lower than in early 2021 (WB accessed 10/01/2022; UNDP 01/12/2021; WB 29/07/2019). The second severe drought in four years also continues to threaten the livelihoods of more than 7.3 million rural Afghans, while unemployment and cash shortages are threatening the livelihoods of people in urban centres, including the former middle-class population (NRC 09/06/2021; IPC 25/10/2021; IFRC 01/12/2021; The Diplomat 10/12/2021; ILO 19/01/2022). The crisis is affecting everyone.

It is predicted that by June 2022, approximately 97% of the population, a 25% increase from 2020, will fall below the poverty line. Food access deteriorated between September–October 2021. 47% of the population faced Crisis or Emergency (IPC Phase 3 or 4) food insecurity because of droughts, unemployment, loss of income, limited access to savings, higher food prices, displacement, and continued sanctions. As economic hardships and drought conditions persist, this number is projected to rise to 55% between November 2021 and March 2022. The number of people in need of humanitarian assistance is projected to increase from 18.4 million by the end of 2020 to 24.4 million people in 2022 (UN 29/09/2021, 06/10/2021, 21/10/2021, and 25/10/2021; IPC 25/10/2021; HRW 11/11/2021; WB accessed 15/11/2021; UNDP 01/12/2021; The Guardian 21/09/2021; The National 18/11/2021; OCHA 02/12/2021 and 19/12/2020).

The increase in humanitarian needs may increase internal and cross-border displacement over the existing 3.8 million IDPs and 2.2 million refugees. 2021 saw significant cross-border movement, with forced returns from Iran and increased movement into Iran and Pakistan starting in August (IPC 25/10/2021; UNHCR accessed 16/11/2021; UNHCR accessed 13/12/2021; IOM 23/09/2021; CSIS 27/09/2021; WFP 25/10/2021).

Many data collection activities were planned over the past 20 years, including a national census, but continued insecurity has severely restricted access to some areas. Geography and weather limitations and the limited road network have also compounded access issues. While increased mobile phone ownership has improved communications, limitations to data collection remain. The national census has been cancelled, and much baseline information remains outdated. Nevertheless, the humanitarian community has collected a significant amount of data. Physical access improved starting 2022. Face-to-face data collection became possible again throughout the country although bureaucratic impediments had also begun to increase. The challenge is one of priorities; with rapidly escalating needs, sanctions preventing funding to state institutions, and a reduced presence of international humanitarian staff, the focus on collecting data from previously inaccessible areas and response activities likely means that nationwide baseline data collection, including a census, will remain delayed.

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1 Of this number, 0.4 million were displaced by conflict and 1.4 million by disasters.
2 Aside from threats from extremist armed groups, security threats remain against specific individuals and groups, such as activists, ex-military members, media personnel, and some ethnic minorities.

Figure 1. ACAPS representation of the humanitarian analysis and information management ecosystem in Afghanistan
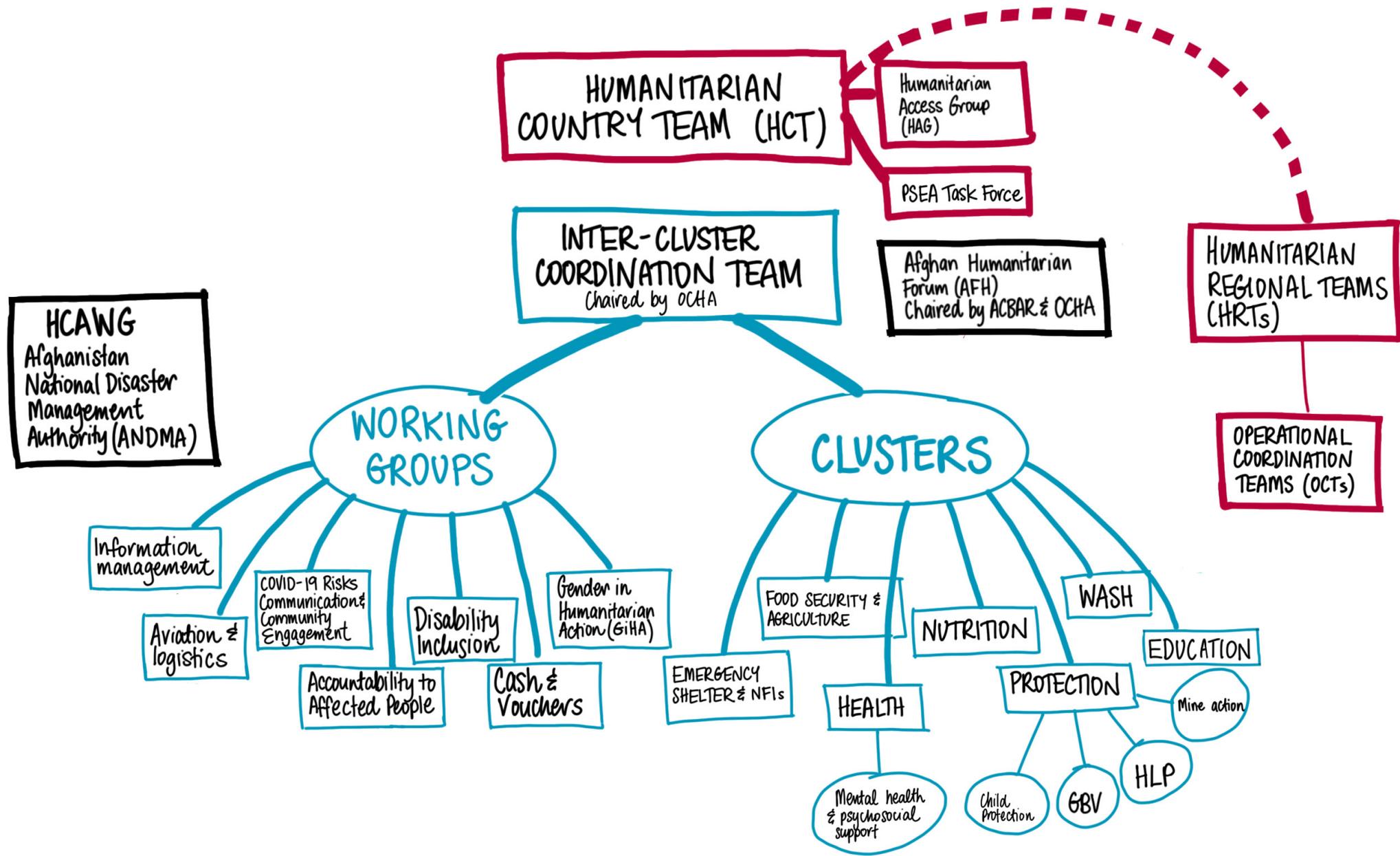
Source: ACAPS

2. MAPPING THE ANALYSIS ECOSYSTEM IN AFGHANISTAN

OCHA reported that 180 national and humanitarian organisations were active in 397 districts during the fourth quarter of 2021, up from 156 humanitarian organisations active in 394 districts during the second quarter (OCHA accessed 10/01/2022). The analysis landscape on Afghanistan comprises many different stakeholders, including many of these humanitarian responders.

How analysis comes together (coordination structure). The OCHA-led IM Working Group coordinates all IM-related activity, which has recently begun to gain more traction (KII 09/11/2021; KII 16/11/2021). While data and information are well organised, a dedicated Assessment and Analysis Working Group[3] was only established in 2022. The extent to which it will coordinate analysis, ensure the correct interpretation and use of available data, and consolidate analysis priorities remains unclear. Coordination bodies like the Inter-Cluster Coordination Team (ICCT) are key facilitators of joint assessment and analysis exercises, but large-scale joint analysis happens infrequently. The home page of OCHA's digital Humanitarian Response service is here.

No diagram of the overall humanitarian structure for Afghanistan exists. The representation above is ACAPS' understanding as described on Humanitarian Response.

There are seven clusters in Afghanistan, as well as subclusters and working groups. Most of these coordination bodies have a full-time IM officer who facilitates joint assessments and compiles 3Ws and other response-wide operation information. Sectoral analysis and collaboration among the different clusters is not always a priority, and there is a tendency for clusters to work in silos (KII 16/11/2021; KII 18/11/2021).

There is a large UN presence in Afghanistan. UNAMA, established in 2002, is, since 2008, an integrated mission with two main pillars – one political and the other dealing with development and humanitarian assistance. Included under these pillars are mission sections specialising in issues such as donor coordination and political analysis, reporting, and outreach, as well as the coordination of funds and programmes of UN agencies. One of two Deputy Representatives of the Secretary-General[4], who is also the Resident Coordinator and Humanitarian Coordinator (RC/HC), heads the development and humanitarian assistance pillar. The RC/HC no longer reports to UNAMA but to the UN Deputy Secretary-General and Emergency Relief Coordinator. The mission and role of UNAMA is to be reviewed in March 2022 when it is expected to be re-focused on overseeing the expanded humanitarian operations. The UNCT comprises 20 agencies, funds, and programmes with offices in Afghanistan (UNAMA accessed 30/11/2021; KII 25/01/2022; ICG 28/01/2022).

OCHA resumed its operations in Afghanistan in 2009. Its work as chair of the ICCT focuses on coordinating the delivery of effective humanitarian aid. OCHA coordinates IM and contextual analysis and facilitates access to quality and timely data and information from different actors. Some UN agencies like IOM, UNHCR, and WFP have large permanent research and data collection teams, who often collaborate with specialist assessment and IM organisations.

- **IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM):** IOM activated its DTM programme in Afghanistan in January 2017 in response to the substantial increase of Afghans returning home from neighbouring countries and record levels of internal displacement. DTM in Afghanistan regularly and systematically captures, processes, and disseminates multi-layered information about population sizes, locations, geographic distribution, movements, vulnerabilities, evolving multi-sectoral needs, and the drivers of migration of returnees, IDPs, migrants, and mobile populations (IOM accessed 30/11/2021).

- **WFP Vulnerability Analysis and Mapping (VAM):** this unit provides geospatial and economic analyses, food security monitoring and assessments, post-shock assessments, and thematic analysis. One of the main products of VAM is the Afghanistan: Countrywide Weekly Market Price Bulletin.

- **WHO:** WHO collects data on the status of health centres and health workers with the Ministry of Public Health and produces the Weekly Epidemiological Bulletin in coordination with the Health Cluster.

- **UNDP:** UNDP has been working for more than 50 years in Afghanistan on challenges related to climate change and resilience, gender, governance, health, livelihoods, and the rule of law. UNDP also collects and analyses data related to the economy, including the status of the banking and financial system.

- **UNICEF:** UNICEF collects data on education, protection concerns, and nutrition (it undertakes a periodic national nutrition survey with the Ministry of Health).

- **UNHCR:** UNHCR conducts protection monitoring and (inflow and outflow) border monitoring to understand the triggers, intentions, and reasons of Afghans' movements to Pakistan and Iran.

- **UNAMA:** UNAMA monitors civilian casualties and other violations of international humanitarian and human rights laws stemming from the armed conflict in Afghanistan. UNAMA investigates reports of civilian casualties by conducting on-site investigations wherever possible and consulting a broad range of sources that are evaluated for their credibility and reliability (UNAMA 26/07/2021).

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3   REACH Initiative and IOM jointly lead this group under the auspices of the Deputy Humanitarian Coordinator.
4   The other is the head of the political pillar.

International and national NGOs commonly collect large amounts of primary data through programme staff, both on behalf of the Clusters and for their own response strategy.

The **Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief** is an independent national NGO established in 1988 that provides a platform for information-sharing and -networking for national and international NGOs in Afghanistan. Together with OCHA, it chairs the monthly Afghanistan Humanitarian Forum.

Specialist assessment, IM, and analysis organisations also support Clusters and frontline data collection agencies:

- **REACH** has been present in Afghanistan since 2016, conducting sector-specific and multi-sector assessments. Since 2018, REACH has been conducting the Whole of Afghanistan assessment. Timed with key milestones in the Humanitarian Project Cycle, the assessment aims to capture perennial trends that can support longitudinal analysis of vulnerable populations and provide representative data to humanitarian decision makers and implementers to inform the Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO) and multi-year Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) (REACH 21/12/2020).
- **iMMAP** provides technical expertise and capacity-building in assessments, IM, and geographic information services supporting the Cluster System.
- The **International NGO Safety Organisation (INSO)** collects and analyses data on security incidents and humanitarian access to support the safety of humanitarian staff.
- **Alcis** provides innovative geographic information services that enable better understanding and decision-making for specific clients by providing access to unique data and harnessing emerging technologies.

Think tanks, independent activist groups, academics, consulting firms, and peace-building and development actors have been working in Afghanistan for decades. But while they have a good understanding of the historical, economic, social, environmental, and geographical contexts in Afghanistan, the information remains difficult for humanitarians to absorb and use because of its size, scope, and complexity. According to some key informants (KIs), the collaboration between humanitarians and these entities should be strengthened – although most left the country in late 2021 and are unlikely to return while sanctions remain in place. Better collaboration between humanitarian and non-humanitarian actors would contribute to an improved understanding of the regional context and quality of aid delivery. Among the actors most often mentioned by KIs were:

- the Afghanistan Analysts Network
- The Asia Foundation (through the annual Survey of the Afghan People from 2004–2019)
- Mixed Migration Centre Asia
- the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit
- Samuel Hall.

National institutions have varying analysis capacities. The Ministry of Public Health, together with UNICEF, publishes a national nutrition survey, although the COVID-19 pandemic has put this and other population-based surveys on hold (Nutrition Cluster 28/02/2021). The Central Statistics Organization has undertaken the Afghanistan Living Conditions Survey six times since 2003, with the most recent from 2016–2017 (CSO 2018). There is no reliable population data for the country as a whole. The last national census was in 1979, and the 2008 census has been postponed indefinitely (UNFPA accessed 21/01/2022). With the current lack of funding, government ministries lack resources to undertake significant data collection or analysis (KII 08/02/2022). There is no indication of whether joint state-UN projects will resume and how they might look if so.

3. THE DATA AND ANALYSIS ECOSYSTEM IN AFGHANISTAN (2019–2021)

In many ways, Afghanistan is a very data-rich country. Over the past 20 years, there have been many in-depth publications on the Afghan economy, health system, conflict, and politics. The issue is that many are not easily accessible to the humanitarian community. Some are subscription-only, others overly academic, and most require significant searching to unearth, meaning that much of the contextual understanding that exists is not informing humanitarian practitioners.

3.1. Data availability

Most KIs noted a wide range and amount of available data but with significant gaps. Among the main information gaps highlighted in the 2022 HNO are inconsistent sex and age disaggregated data across sectors, a lack of education data, and incomprehensive data on the protection needs of children living with disabilities (OCHA 01/2022). The real-time collection of country-wide or representative data is also rare.

There is a wealth of non-humanitarian information (policy, think tank, media, development, peace-building), but it is rarely used robustly by humanitarians. ACAPS found 51 readily available in-depth analysis papers published between 2001–2021 on the internet. Of these, 19 were on climate or food security and livelihood, eight were on health and nutrition, five on the economy and drugs, and four on education (KII 08/11/2021; KII 09/11/2021; KII 09/11/2021; KII 19/11/2021; KII 26/11/2021; KII 26/11/2021).

Aside from numerous data sources aiming to provide reasonably objective and evidence-based information and analysis on Afghanistan, there is a wealth of misinformation spread by all parties and observers to the conflict primarily through social media. While humanitarians do not directly use this information, it does influence the prevailing narrative confirming stereotypes and institutional bias. Very few individuals or organisations seek to verify such information (KII 24/11/2021).

In November 2021, ACAPS reviewed and collated into a meta-database over 1,200 products published between January 2019 and November 2021. This meta-database includes assessments, situation reports, humanitarian research, and other information sources. See section 4, methodology, for more information.

Key observations

- Most of the reports analysed were multi-sectoral reports, followed by thematic products on WASH, humanitarian access, and contextual information (see figure 2). It is important to note that multi-sector reporting does not imply joint analysis, which continues to be lacking.
- In terms of the geographical scope, the analysis of (non-national) products shows an unbalanced coverage between provinces. Some areas, specifically Badghis, Ghor, Herat, and Takhar, are better covered than others (see figure 3) – possibly because they were most affected by the droughts.
- Almost all large-scale national data collection exercises are on hold. Only the Whole of Afghanistan Assessment was undertaken in 2021. The plan is to undertake this assessment twice a year from 2022.

## Figure 2. Count of reports by sector.
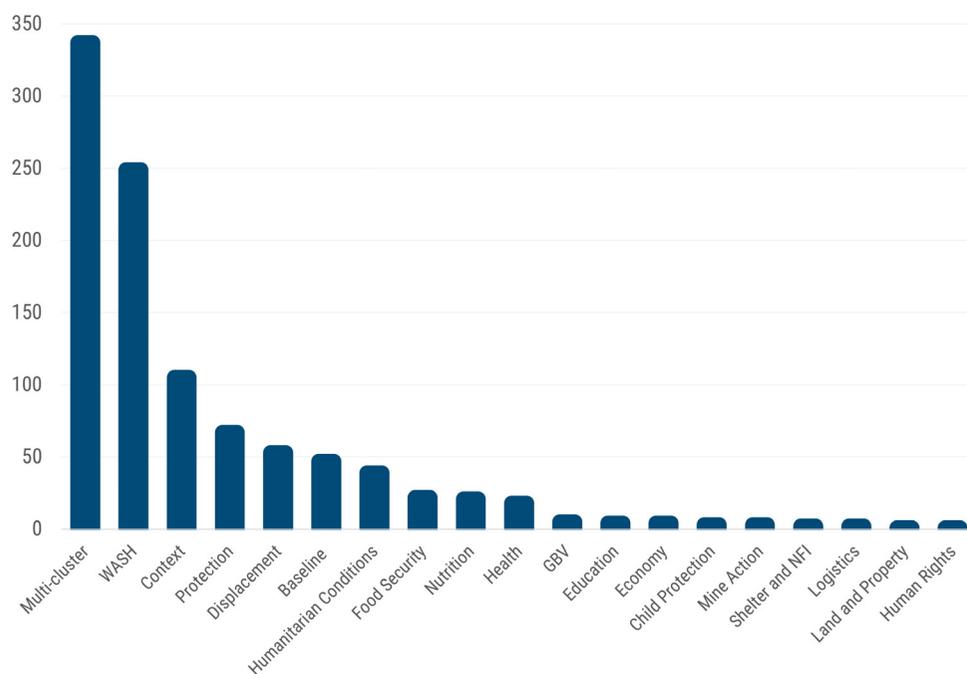
Source: ACAPS. Note: baseline and humanitarian conditions are reports that focus on data that is relevant across all sectors such as severity of need and demographic data.

Main data and information sources

- Population estimates – 2021 estimates based on the 2017 study conducted by Flowminder/UNFPA
- Whole of Afghanistan Multi-Sector Needs Assessment, REACH Initiative – published October 2021
- Informal Settlement Assessment, REACH Initiative – published February 2021
- Conflict-Induced Displacements, OCHA – dashboard, last accessed February 2022
- Countrywide Weekly Market Price Bulletin, WFP VAM –latest February 2022
- Emergency Event Tracking, IOM DTM – latest December 2021
- Baseline Mobility Assessment (BMA, IOM DTM) – latest June 2021
- Joint Market Monitoring Initiative, REACH Initiative and Cash Voucher Working Group – latest December 2021
- Seasonal Food Security Assessment, Food Security & Agriculture Cluster – latest 2020
- Biannual Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC), Food Security & Agriculture Cluster (FSAC) – latest October 2021
- Nutrition SMART surveys by province, Nutrition Cluster – latest 2020
- Health Management Information System data, WHO and Health Cluster
- Weekly Epidemiological Bulletin – latest December 2021
- Attacks on Health Care – latest December 2021
- The Global Health Observatory - dashboard, last accessed February 2022
- The annual perception survey conducted by The Asia Foundation (not conducted in 2020 and 2021) – latest 2019
- Awaaz, data from the humanitarian helpline, implemented by UNOPS – dashboard, last accessed February 2022
- Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict, UNAMA – latest June 2021
- Safety and security incidents data, INSO – dashboard, last accessed February 2022

Figure 3. Geographic spread of non-national reports.
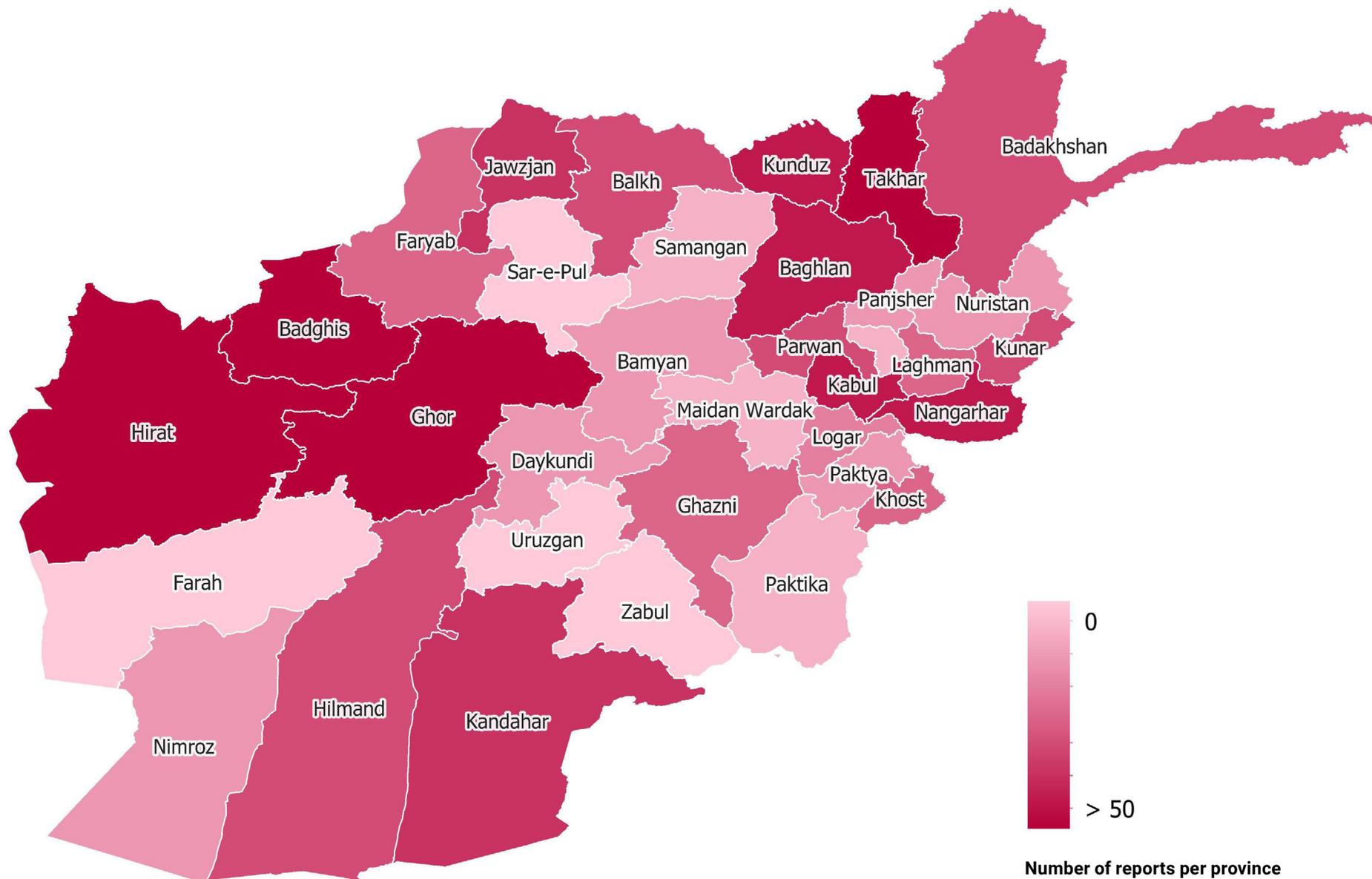
Source: ACAPS

3.2. Data collection

Data collection challenges are mainly linked to physical access, gender, weather conditions, and the political situation, although cultural norms also constrain data collection from some groups. When organisations manage to collect data, limitations around the way it's collected raise questions about data reliability and quality (see section 3.3). Prior to 15 August 2021, areas under Taliban control were considered hard to reach, so remote data collection methodologies were often employed.

Security

Historically, security has been a major constraint to data collection, but as at January 2022, the security situation appeared to have significantly improved (provided Taliban-administered rules were followed). This improvement has enabled data collectors to reach selected populations more safely, although security threats from the Islamic State – Khorasan or ISK (mainly in Helmand, Kandahar, Jalalabad, and Nangahar) and other extremist groups remain. The number of ISK attacks in 2021 increased compared with 2020 (UN 17/11/2021; ACLED accessed 16/01/2022).

Political

Since 15 August, the Taliban have generally been amenable to data collection and needs assessments, and humanitarian organisations have been able to physically access areas that were inaccessible before (KII 13/01/2022). That said, the Taliban are not a monolithic entity and do not have a unified approach towards needs assessments and data collection. KIs have reported that access for data collection in some more remote provinces has to be negotiated individually. As a result, humanitarians expend significant resources in ensuring safe and ethical data collection is possible across the country. In other areas that have always been under Taliban control, humanitarians already operating there have been able to continue their work with little to no interruption (KII 08/11/2021; KII 09/11/2021; KII 19/11/2021).

Taliban interference in humanitarian activities is becoming an increasing problem in 2022 as they seek to influence where data collection occurs, who collects it, and how data is validated (KI 25/01/2022; KII 02/02/2022).

Gender

Issues around permissions to use female enumerators for data collection persist. In 25 of 34 provinces, female staff have been allowed to participate in the full spectrum of response activities, although there are still reports of impediments, threats, and other restrictions (Mahram). The lack of women in data collection in some areas severely limits the ability to collect data from women or on gender-sensitive topics and hinders access to female-headed households, leading to the inability to collect disaggregated experiences based on gender and the intersection between gender and society (KII 09/11/2021; KII 19/11/2021; KII 26/11/2021).

Cultural norms

The experiences, perceptions, and needs of women and members of the LGBTQI+ or other minority communities are often underrepresented, while male voices are overrepresented. Social and cultural norms often constrain these underrepresented groups. That their voices are partly or entirely missing from collected data means there is an entire information gap on specific issues that men cannot answer. Although rapid gender analyses have been conducted, they are often not statistically representative (KII 09/11/2021), especially with female-headed households being challenging to reach (KII 09/11/2021; KII 19/11/2021; KII 26/11/2021). When members from underrepresented groups are reached, there is always the concern that they are consulted within the presence of other people, possibly affecting the validity of their answers (KII 16/11/2021; KII 26/11/2021).

Geography and weather

Much of rural Afghanistan is hard to physically access because of poorly maintained roads and difficult terrains. People living in urban centres are relatively easier to access and tend to be overrepresented in data collection and analysis, resulting in a lack of nuance in collected data. The weather is also a huge access barrier during the winter. Between December–March, snow blocks the roads in physically hard-to-reach areas across the country. There is a lack of information at the district level, and data remains scarce around a significant part of the country as a result of minimal access until 2022. Efforts are underway to improve this. For example, in 2022, REACH Initiative started undertaking the monitoring of the humanitarian situation through KIs across 265 districts (KII 08/11/2021; KII 19/11/2021; KII 16/11/2021; KII 08/02/2022).

Cash

Fears that the economic crisis, liquidity issues, and the disruption to the banking system since August 2021 would cause organisations to be unable to pay data collectors (as in salaries and daily subsistence allowances) do not seem to have materialised. The lack of cash is not seen as a significant obstacle to data collection. That said, rising fuel costs have likewise increased the cost of primary face-to-face data collection (KII 09/11/2021; KII 16/11/2021).

3.3. Data quality

While data collection continues, data reliability remains a major issue, and triangulation is necessary but not always done. It is also important to be aware of the limitations and challenges around the data collected. Many challenges contribute to significant selection bias and many other biases exist. Information gaps – both baseline and current – also reduce the overall quality of available data.

Selection bias

During the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, most organisations shifted to remote working methods and from household-level consultations to KIIs. This shift has made data collection difficult and limited access to people who have phones, who are primarily men in urban areas. Collecting data by phone also raises issues around privacy. Humanitarians cannot ensure that they are speaking to women and girls in a quiet, private, and secure environment, and Afghans are concerned about overall security (e.g. phone calls may be tapped or information may be leaked). Quality assurance and accountability are also more difficult to ensure when using remote data collection methodologies. Given physical and security constraints, remote data collection is likely to continue in some areas, particularly in regions where they are not granted access (KII 09/11/2021; KII 16/11/2021; KII 19/11/2021; KII 26/11/2021).

Response bias

As in many humanitarian contexts, assessments are often directly linked with aid provision. Some responses are suspected to be influenced by the type of assistance the interviewing organisation is known to provide (KII 09/11/2021; KII 16/11/2021; KII 19/11/2021; KII 26/11/2021).

Institutional and stereotyping bias

A significant consequence of having a difficult primary data collection environment is that organisations might focus on collecting data that enables programming, having often assumed the need and appropriateness of their proposed intervention. The objective analysis of needs and possible intervention is also inhibited by the lack of joint analysis between actors with differing perspectives and skills.

Most data used by humanitarians is collected by humanitarians (KII 09/11/2021; KII 16/11/2021; KII 19/11/2021). There is very little use of sources outside the humanitarian sector. While there is a greater representation of national staff (including at the senior level) in international humanitarian organisations than in many other contexts, the humanitarian system uses very little data from community-based organisations or non-humanitarian national sources. Multiple KIs consistently referred to only one Afghan source, the Afghan Analysts Network, which is an international organisation.

Government data

Official sources have published very little recent data. Reaching national Taliban authorities was challenging in late 2021, and this issue affected findings, data sense-checking, and credibility establishment. That said, engagement by the authorities is increasing in 2022 as they seek to influence humanitarian activities and direct actors towards remote and underserved areas (KII 16/11/2021; KII 18/02/2022).

Most baseline data is out of date or non-existent

Only a few clusters can rely on up-to-date baseline information (KII 09/11/2021). Given the lack of an updated census, population figures are estimated using Flowminder population data (see page 13 of the IPC report and the WorldPop website for a short explanation).

3.4. Data-sharing

Humanitarian organisations in Afghanistan show an appetite for collaboration, but data-sharing depends on data type and sensitivity (KII 09/11/2021; KII 16/11/2021; KII 19/11/2021). There is no well-coordinated system for data-sharing, and data-sharing agreements tend to be ad hoc, although the newly established Assessment and Analysis Working Group is expected to address this (KII 09/11/2021; KII 18/02/2022). Data protection concerns restrict the sharing of beneficiary data in some instances, and humanitarian organisations do not systematically share more general information on access, security, needs, and other issues (KII 25/01/2022). The assessment registry contains 717 entries for 2019–2021, but this information was not systematically updated promptly. There were 18 assessments undertaken in 2021 that were not entered until February 2022, and many more remain unentered (KII 18/02/2022).

3.5. Data analysis

Despite the challenges mentioned above, data continues to be collected, and the volume of data and information available is overwhelming. Making sense of it all is challenging. Organisations lack the time and resources to process all the data they collect; they analyse only the fraction that is most relevant to their information or decision-making needs.

Depth

Prioritising the identification of immediate sectoral needs – which are many and are increasing in scale and concern – impedes more complex analysis to identify more sustainable solutions that require greater contextual analysis, take longer, and would benefit from more collaboration than most analysts can afford. Analysis is often limited to particular issues or clusters and rarely goes beyond the descriptive and explanatory phases of the analysis spectrum (see Annex A). Specifically, there appears to be a lack of understanding of the ways humanitarian assistance affects different Afghan population groups, interacts with the local economy, and contributes to reifications, reinforcements, or changes in socioeconomic dynamics. KIs also highlighted the need for more interpretive and anticipatory analyses to provide a more in-depth and nuanced understanding of different issues and how the situation may evolve (KII 09/11/2021; KII 18/11/2021). Response requirements often drive analysis, and humanitarians typically draw from their own programming data and needs assessments and on the same few larger datasets (which is the case for REACH Initiative's Whole of Afghanistan Assessment and the IPC Acute Food Insecurity Analysis).

Objectivity

The objective analysis of the situation and needs of Afghans is extremely challenging. A strong narrative pits the Taliban against all Afghans and does not consider the nuances of the country's sociopolitical, cultural, religious, and geographical realities. Such a narrative means that much of the data collected and analysed is presented within the simplistic framework that automatically puts a negative light on anything related to the Taliban. This perception supports the idea that the Taliban have an almost naturally negative impact on the living conditions and wellbeing of all Afghan people, which can deter a nuanced understanding of Afghanistan and the different experiences of Afghans across time; space; gender identity; ethnic, religious, or political affiliation; class; and other factors. The prevalence of fake news, much of which is propagated via social media and driven by political motives, and which is often extremely hard to triangulate or verify, reinforces this narrative – although fake news also propagates the counternarrative.

Breadth

Despite the wealth of existing research and non-humanitarian studies on Afghanistan, much humanitarian analysis takes little account of the broader context. Neither does it make full use of the wealth of information and data that exists in the development, policy, and academic sectors, and it is typically limited to immediate basic needs. There is a need for strong contextual analysis that recognises the role humanitarian assistance plays in Afghanistan and links humanitarian assistance with the country's history, economy, politics, conflict, and sociocultural dynamics. The typical "fly in and fly out" disposition to humanitarian work can no longer continue without long-term ramifications, and there is a need to start contextualising humanitarian assistance to ensure adherence to the principle of do-no-harm. Contextual analysis also helps humanitarians identify biased or inaccurate analyses. Overall, there is a need for more nuanced and independent analysis that draws from multiple sources, triangulates information, and challenges assumptions about Afghanistan (KII 9/11/2021).

Collaboration

Even though the current environment is conducive to information-sharing and there is a collaborative platform for reporting, such as for the 3Ws, there is a lack of collaborative and coordinated analysis (KII 16/11/2021). Joint analysis is reported to be mostly informal and bilateral, and most collaboration happens during the production of the HNO and HRP and makes use of a few large-scale data collection exercises (KII 09/11/2021). One KI noted that clusters appeared to work in siloes, focusing specifically on their own data collection mechanisms and analysis. There is minimal consideration of how a joint analysis could enable common understanding; a shared perspective of the key issues, locations, groups, and sectors; and the identification of more holistic response options (KII 09/11/2021; KII 16/11/2021). The lack of a coordinated space for analysts to come together and use a shared analysis framework for the response also contributes to a lack of clarity on new information needs and gaps. While some sectoral or organisational analysis is done using an analysis framework, there is an absence of regular, structured, and joint analysis to consider how sectoral issues interact and facilitate more interpretive and anticipatory analysis. A priority need is agreement on key figures. For example, IOM and UNHCR use different methods to estimate the number of displaced people, meaning that their estimates substantially differ. Since early 2021, the Population Movement Task Team have been working to address this by endeavouring to harmonise the counting of historical data and improve displacement data collection (KII 08/02/2022; KII 18/02/2022).

Capacity

Some KIs also highlighted a lack of analytical capacity to bring together separate pieces of data and information in a coordinated manner. This lack of analytical capacity also contributes to delays in publishing findings and reports, reducing their usefulness. Even when good quality data is collected, the time taken in data collection and analysis, sometimes coupled with delays in publication, results in outdated data and conclusions (KII 08/11/2021; KII 09/11/2021; KII 09/11/2021; KII 16/11/2021; KII 19/11/2021).

4. METHODOLOGY

Between October 2021 and January 2022, the ACAPS Afghanistan Task Force conducted a stakeholder mapping exercise and interviewed 13 IM representatives, analysis organisations, and individuals working on face-to-face and remote data collection and analysis in Afghanistan.

The framework used to analyse the information and analysis ecosystem in Afghanistan was based on an adapted version of the ''ideal analysis ecosystem'' model that ACAPS developed (see annex A). The framework considers five key elements for a functional analysis ecosystem where decisions makers have the information needed to define response strategy. Considering the key elements, ACAPS conducted a secondary data review of products collected in the meta-database and analysed the information collected through KIIs with actors working in and on Afghanistan.

In October–November 2021, ACAPS analysed the data and analysis landscape for the humanitarian response in Afghanistan through a secondary review of the main humanitarian IM products published between 2019–2021. ACAPS developed a meta-database of over 1,200 primary datasets, needs assessments, and analysis products publicly available from 2019–2021 (all in English). The 1,200 products were analysed for the year data was collected, source, and level of data collection.

The review included in this report combines data from three different ACAPS internal databases:

• The **monitoring dataset** includes products collected through ACAPS' global weekly monitoring exercise. The dataset is made up of information collected during the everyday analytical monitoring of a specific crisis. This monitoring includes situational, assessment, and analysis reports; press releases; databases; media articles; and journal articles.

• The **INFORM Severity Index** includes information from a range of publicly available sources that brings together 31 indicators that quantitively measure the severity of the humanitarian crisis. The index is updated monthly, and the indicators are scored on a scale of one to five then aggregated into an overall severity score.

• The **Humanitarian Access dataset** includes a range of qualitative information sources that enable quantitive measurement of the level of humanitarian access. It brings together different indicators organised in three dimensions that are aggregated into an overall score on a scale of zero to five. It is updated biannually.

To complement the information landscape, additional data for the same time frame (October–November 2021) was included from the OCHA Assessment Registry on HumanitarianResponse. info – although at that time, the assessment registry was missing entries from March 2021. It has since been updated.

Figure 4. Breakdown by type of data sources analysed (2019-2021)

■ Assessment Registry ■ Monitoring ■ Severity Index ■ Access
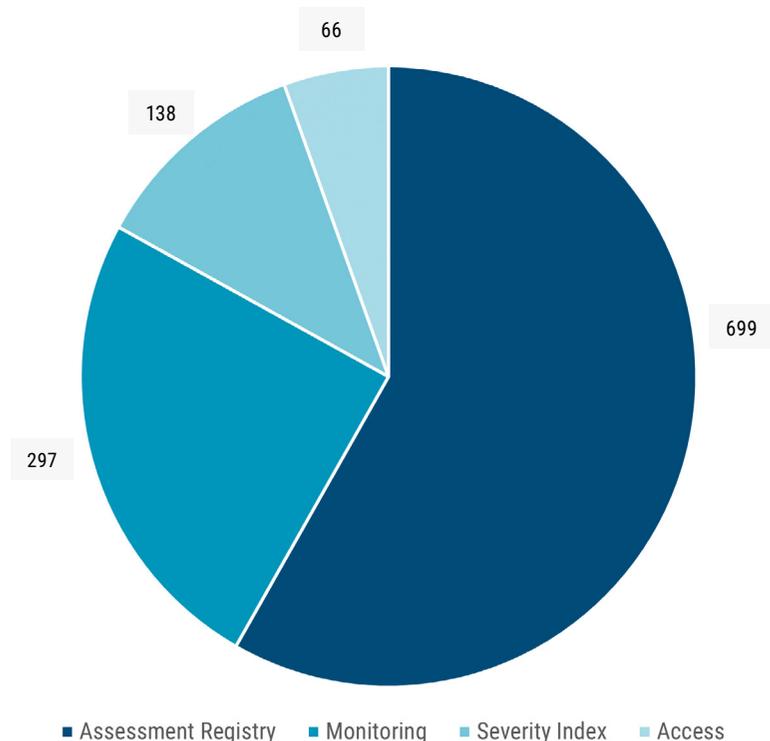
Source: ACAPS

LIMITATIONS

Selectivity

The review of data and information products does not represent all the sources of data and information available within the Afghanistan response. The analysis focused on the most common products used within the response given the vast quantity of information available. The charts and figures in this report are snapshots based on a sample selected by ACAPS and are not part of an exhaustive categorisation.

Period of assessment

The secondary data review timeline is between January 2019 to December 2021.

ACAPS does not have a direct presence inside Afghanistan.

These findings were developed through remote desk research and KIIs. ACAPS attempted to address this weakness by seeking input and advice from operational actors or analysts who work, or have recently worked, inside Afghanistan (eight of the 12 stakeholders interviewed were based in or regularly travelled to Afghanistan). While the lead researcher for this product has also previously worked within the humanitarian response in Afghanistan, the possibility for errors and misunderstandings remain. ACAPS has no institutional presence in Afghanistan but has been monitoring the country as part of the Crisis Insight project for about eleven years.

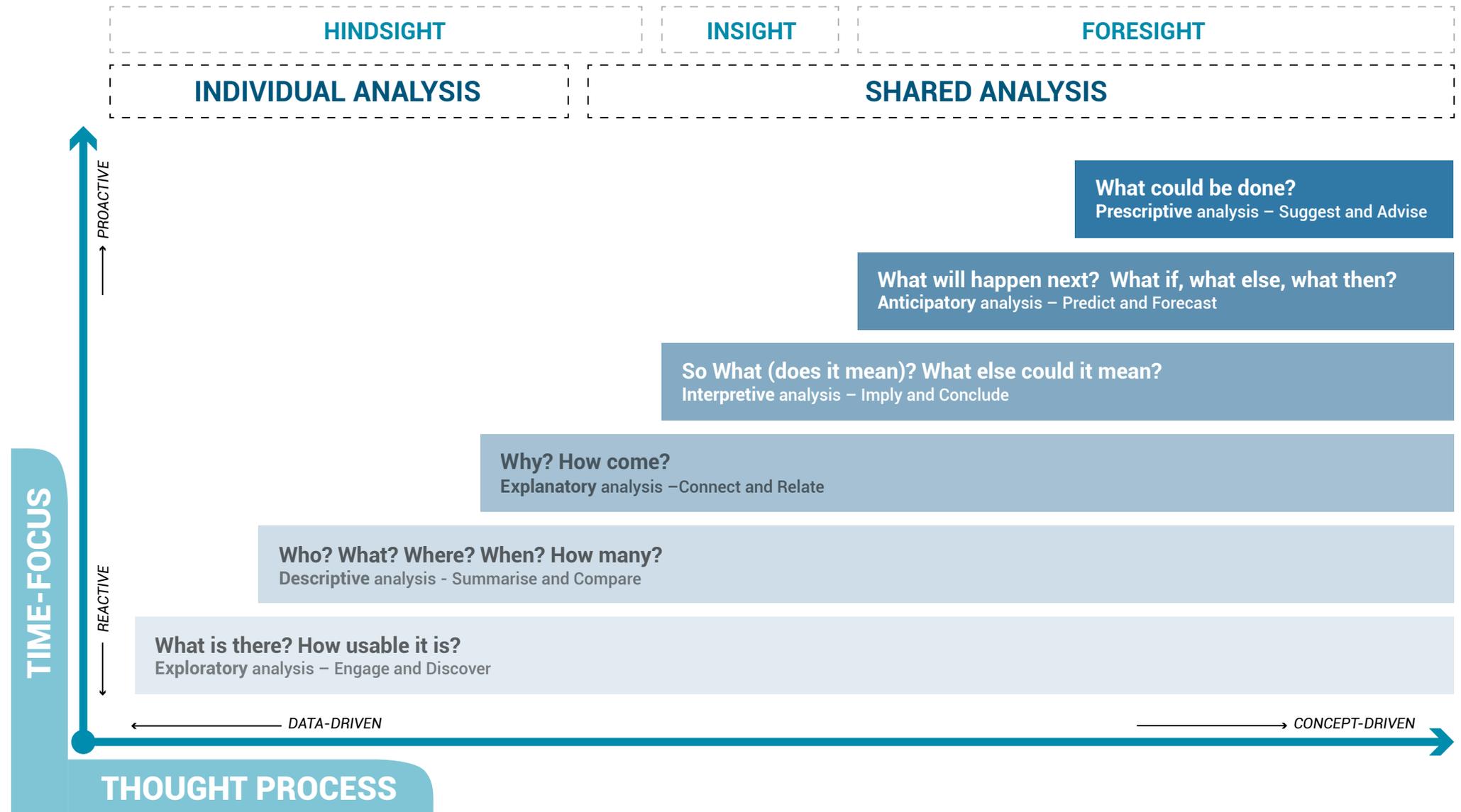## ANNEX A: ACAPS IDEAL ECOSYSTEM AND ANALYSIS FRAMEWORK

Over time, ACAPS has identified five key elements of an 'ideal' analysis ecosystem (involving both data collection and analysis processes). The diagram on the right shows the information flow cycle in an ideal analysis ecosystem. ACAPS has also developed an analysis spectrum describing the different kinds of analyses.

Figure 5. What happens in an ideal analysis ecosystem.
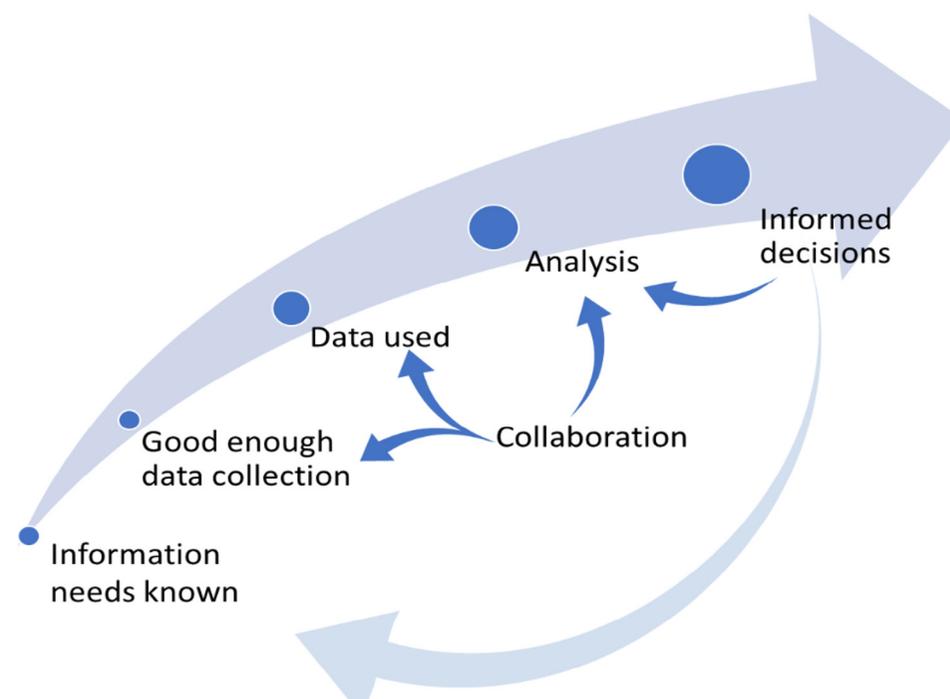
Source: ACAPS

Figure 6. The analysis spectrum (adapted from Pherson 2010).

Source: ACAPS