

AFGHANISTAN

Spotlight on social impact: July-October 2022



Thematic report
13 December 2022

The spotlight on social impact in Afghanistan provides a pulse on intersectional vulnerabilities (e.g., financial, social, political, and cultural) experienced by Afghans during a given period. The reports focus on events that emerged as important based on what is being discussed by Afghans and humanitarian responders. These events are considered in terms of how they are affecting life for people in Afghanistan and the impact they may have over time. Where possible, considerations for specific groups and locations are made.

The events in each report are chosen based on their current or potential impact on people as observed over time. The updates seek to support the humanitarian community's understanding of the groups of people who face challenges in meeting their needs and those most exposed to protection concerns.

This Spotlight focuses on three policies introduced by the Taliban Government and their social impact between July–October 2022:

- restrictions on freedom of movement for women and girls
- policy to provide Kabul beggars with state assistance
- policy to centralise and manage street vendors in Kabul.

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METHODOLOGY

The spotlight on social impact in Afghanistan uses primary and secondary information and is based on:

- a secondary data review of published and unpublished information in and on Afghanistan
- the daily monitoring of relevant indicators logged in the ACAPS qualitative database
- discussions with context experts
- discussions with people directly affected by these policies

The secondary data review and preliminary conversations with Afghans are used to develop an initial list of potential issues, which are then clarified during joint analysis sessions with the team and context experts and combined to develop a shorter list of issues selected with consideration to their potential or actual impact on people. Additional discussions are carried out after the topics are selected to provide nuance on the impact on people's daily lives.

LIMITATIONS

This first spotlight on social impact in Afghanistan builds on relatively new internal databases and networks which limits the current ability to identify trends over time. While the emphasis on qualitative data makes it difficult to compare aggregate data, it allows for a more nuanced narrative where themes and trends can be uncovered to understand their social impact and put forward the perspectives of Afghan people.

CONTEXT

On 15 August 2021, the Taliban captured Kabul resulting in the fall of the republic and the establishment of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan by the Taliban, hereafter called the Taliban government. The Taliban have since announced and implemented policies and regulations that affect all aspects of life. These include major restrictions on women's freedom of movement, putting a mental and financial burden on families. In the third quarter of 2021, the number of employed women decreased by 16% (ILO 19/01/2022). Restrictions have also created barriers to providing and accessing equitable services, including healthcare.

While the Taliban continue to seek international diplomatic recognition, political and commercial engagement between most neighbouring countries and the Taliban has resumed. The Taliban government's relationship with the US, EU, and many western countries, however, remains contentious. The closure of secondary schools for girls, reduced public participation for women, the abolition of the Ministry of Women's Affairs and the establishment of the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, the lack of a broad-based political system, and ongoing human rights issues are likely to continue to be obstacles in fully re-establishing diplomatic relations with the west. The Taliban government has also continued to increase its influence over aid distribution and has directly affected aid delivery (OCHA 01/2022). However, overall humanitarian access has improved (ACAPS 07/2022).

The continued isolation of the central bank, freezing of overseas assets, sanctions, and suspension of all but humanitarian assistance has created a financial and economic crisis that has only been compounded by the war in Ukraine (ACAPS 26/09/2022). The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) projected acute food insecurity in Afghanistan between June–November 2022, with 18.9 million people (45% of the population) facing acute food insecurity and nearly six million (14.3% of the population) in emergency (IPC 09/05/2022; WFP 07/11/2022). Because of poverty and reduced purchasing power, people are spending 92% of their income on food, and 89% of the population has poor food consumption (WFP 19/10/2022). This is compounded by the lack of access to medical care, affecting all households but especially those that include family members with chronic medical needs. People's limited resources have been exhausted, and many have begun turning to potentially harmful and irreversible coping mechanisms to survive.

Poor families have been forced to find alternative ways to support themselves, including sending children to work, begging, or peddling as street vendors. There has also been an increase in families marrying off their underage daughters (AAN 20/10/2022). Restrictions on women's ability to play a fuller role in the society, the onset of winter, and the unintended negative consequences of new Taliban policies will result in some households exhausting their resources and capacities to cope.

RESTRICTIONS ON FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS

Since 15 August 2021, the Taliban's restrictions on women and girls have been well documented, including the curbing of freedom of movement. The current decree indicates that women cannot move a distance of more than 72km without the company of a Mahram (male guardian) (Al Jazeera 26/12/2021; The Independent 17/08/2021). Such decrees and guidelines, coupled with pre-existing strict patriarchal norms that dictate the behaviour of men and women, have created a constrained environment for women and girls and directly impact their ability to access goods and services.

There is a lack of information on how rigorously these restrictions are being implemented across the country, although anecdotal evidence suggests variations exist (ACAPS discussions with Afghan organisations 23/11/2022). There are reports of women able to travel without a Mahram, as well as reports of women being stopped within the 72km radius for travelling without a Mahram. This lack of clarity and uniformity creates a great deal of uncertainty and affects not only women's ability to plan their daily movements but also the ability of private businesses and aid organisations to effectively plan for the movement of their staff.

Women in Afghanistan have protested these restrictions on multiple occasions. Protests erupted immediately after the Taliban came to power in August 2021 and continued throughout 2022. From late August 2021 to March 2022, more than 80 protests have been recorded, compared to just three from the start of 2021 until the Taliban takeover (ACLEL 14/04/2022). 37% of all protests in the country in 2022 were led by women (SIGAR 30/07/2022). Fearing reprisals, women have used precautionary measures when attending demonstrations, including changing their clothes immediately afterwards to be less recognisable (France 24 09/02/2022). Some women – both those protesting and those afraid to protest publicly – have voiced their concerns on social media (RFE/RL 08/12/2021). Protests have often been suppressed and protestors detained. As a condition for their release, women arrested for protesting have been coerced into signing an attestation that they will not protest again, nor will they speak about their detention in public (Amnesty International 27/07/2022).

Impact of restrictions on freedom of movement on aid workers and health workers

As much of the Afghan society is gender-segregated, the presence of women aid workers and health workers is crucial in addressing the needs of women and girls. Since August 2021, humanitarians have been scrambling to adapt to the restrictions on women. Although the Taliban have declared that women are allowed to continue working (The Times 27/08/2021; Sky News 18/08/2021), the lack of written approval for women to work without restrictions at

the national level has resulted in the uneven application of regulations on women working for humanitarian organisations. In Badghis province, for example, women are completely banned from going to the office, while in Bamiyan and Daikundi provinces, they are allowed to attend assessments but cannot partake in the delivery of assistance phase. In some provinces, women are only allowed to go to work if accompanied by a Mahram, while in others, women aid workers have been restricted to sectors related to health and education (HRW 04/11/2021), where they can only serve and support other women and girls.

These restrictions have resulted in some women having to stop working and others working in different (and sometimes uncomfortable) conditions. Two Afghan organisations, one in Kabul and one in Ghazni, shared that restrictions on women's mobility have made it difficult and stressful for their women staff to travel because of the fear of being stopped and questioned (ACAPS discussion with Afghan NGOs in Kabul and Ghazni 23/11/2022).

Some women health workers have been unable to travel to work because they are not accompanied by a Mahram (HRW 18/01/2022), and some said the restrictions have forced them to leave their jobs. A lack of women doctors, nurses, and medical staff will severely limit the access of women and girls to healthcare, as it is unlikely that female patients will be willing to openly disclose their symptoms and medical history to male doctors. Mobility restrictions and the reduction in women health workers are key barriers that may result in female patients and pregnant women not receiving adequate care on time and potentially developing long-term complications or even losing their lives (UN Women 03/12/2021). The effect of these restrictions on women's ability to access lifesaving healthcare was illustrated in the aftermath of a severe earthquake in June 2022, where the lack of women doctors prevented female survivors from receiving medical attention (TOLOnews 24/06/2022).

Impact of restrictions on freedom of movement on access to aid and services

Mobility restrictions and the Mahram requirement have been applied differently across the country. For example, women in the districts of Karz and Arghandab in Kandahar, as well as Ghazni and some parts of Nangahar, are unable to access health services without the presence of a Mahram (The Wall Street Journal 25/03/2022), but women's access to health services in Mazar-e Sharif appears not to be rigorously restricted (SIGAR 30/07/2022). In some parts of the country, healthcare staff have been ordered not to provide care to female patients not accompanied by a Mahram. Some health workers who violated this policy have been detained and charged (FP 02/03/2022). One of the health facilities providing free medical care in Helmand province has reported that some patients are required to drive six or seven hours to receive care (MSF 10/05/2022); women are unlikely to be able or willing to travel such distance without a Mahram.

Women and girls in need of humanitarian assistance are left behind because of the lack of women aid workers. A national NGO operating in Helmand shared that despite receiving calls from women requesting support and inclusion in assessments, they are unable to send women staff because of the Mahram requirement. The same NGO noted that women cannot visit their offices for the same reason (ACAPS discussion with an Afghan NGO in Helmand 23/11/2022).

Impact of restrictions on freedom of movement on the cost of aid delivery

Restrictions on the freedom of movement of women directly affect the cost of aid delivery. The requirement for a Mahram to accompany women humanitarian workers means that the Mahram must be compensated at the very least with food and travel, a cost directly borne by the organisation. Other requirements, such as gender-segregated workspaces and shuttle services, also have a substantial financial impact. Smaller INGOs and Afghan NGOs face more difficulty adapting to these new requirements logistically, operationally, and financially, affecting their overall operational ability (ICVA 01/02/2022). One INGO in Wardak shared they have hired more women staff and have budgeted AFN 10,000 (approximately USD 100) per month for each Mahram to ensure the staff can continue to reach women in need (ACAPS discussion with an INGO in Wardak 23/11/2022).

Impact of restrictions on freedom of movement on women's professional growth

The many restrictions on women's freedom of movement and access to the public space have created a constraining environment for them, especially in the workplace and in universities. The Mahram requirement has a direct implication on women's professional growth and further entrenches inequality. Only families with a significant amount of disposable income can afford the additional cost of visa fees and plane tickets for a Mahram to accompany a female student to her destination country, hindering the ability of families with fewer economic means to benefit from the upward economic movement that further education provides. The implementation of the Mahram policy at airports is inconsistent. During the reporting period, some women scholars who had been accepted to universities abroad were prevented from boarding their flights because they were not accompanied by a Mahram. These scholars noted that there was disagreement among Taliban airport officials about whether to let women travel abroad without a Mahram (AW 27/09/2022; ACAPS discussions with women scholars 16/07/2022 and 20/09/2022). Female travellers with approval to travel without a Mahram still faced undue stress and uncertainty at the airport prior to their travel (ACAPS discussion with a woman scholar 08/11/2022).

Potential knock-on effects of restrictions on freedom of movement for women and girls

Restrictions on freedom of movement for women and girls are just one of many policies in place that limit their participation in the public sphere and substantially shrink their civic space (UN News 25/11/2022). Women and girls are subject to harassment and violence as they manoeuvre the public space (Amnesty International 27/07/2022; Al Jazeera 28/11/2022) such harassment is used by the Taliban to justify their restrictions as a protective measure ensuring the safety and dignity of women.

It is important to note that not all women and not all families are affected by these restrictions in the same way. The Mahram requirement places a higher burden on households where there is no male family member, or the male family member has a disability. Not only are such households generally more vulnerable economically, but households with family members with a disability often have greater health needs that add to their financial burden. Without a Mahram, they are less able to access healthcare (ACAPS discussions with women-headed households with members with special needs 02/10/2022 and 28/10/2022).

Even in families with a working-age male member, job scarcity and a drastic decline in household income means the Mahram requirement causes a further financial burden on these families. Male family members have to take time off education, work, or other forms of income generation to accompany female family members. There is also the additional burden of childcare for large families who may not have support at home to look after their children while the women or girls in the family are out.

The reduction in women's access to public space means less knowledge about services and humanitarian assistance, which disproportionately affects women in households without a male family member who can act as a Mahram. Systematic and prolonged lack of access to humanitarian aid and services will negatively impact the ability of women and their families to meet their needs, resulting in the adoption of negative coping mechanisms and further exposing women, girls, and their family members to serious protection risks.

POLICY TO PROVIDE KABUL BEGGARS WITH STATE ASSISTANCE

The humanitarian situation in Afghanistan has worsened since the Taliban seized power and the international community froze access to financial reserves and cut all assistance other than humanitarian. Increased unemployment, inflation, displacement, and restrictions on women have resulted in more people resorting to negative coping mechanisms, including begging.

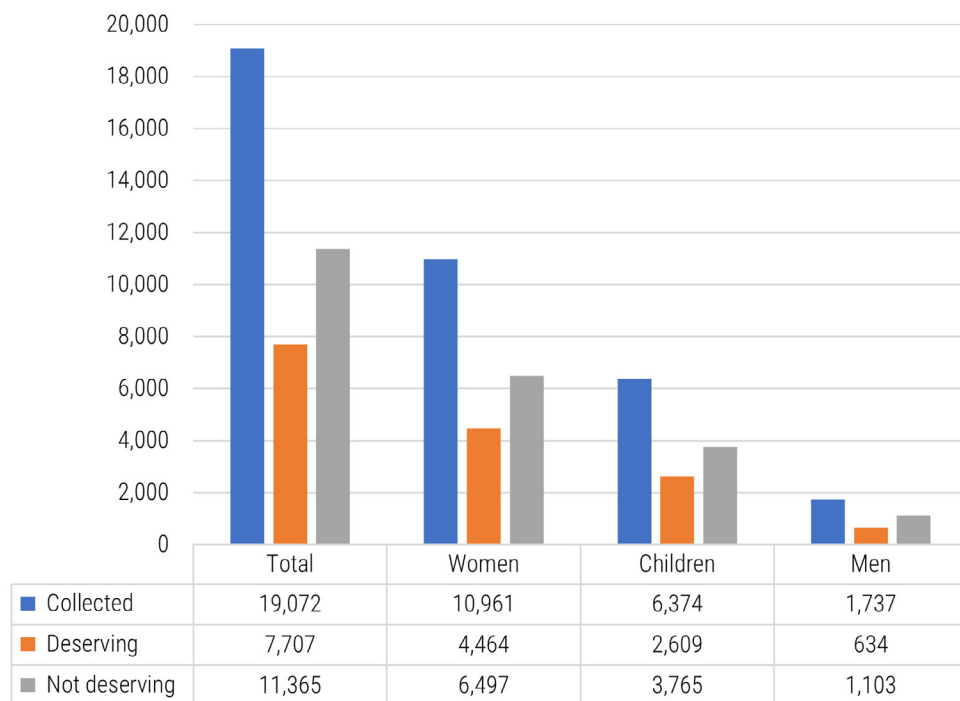
It was estimated that 97% of Afghans could fall below the poverty line by mid-2022 (UNDP 09/09/2021), and 18.9 million individuals (almost half of the population) are projected to experience severe food insecurity (WFP 15/08/2022). In round two of REACH's Humanitarian Situation Monitoring (HSM), conducted across 34 provinces between July – September 2022, 87% of respondents reported that households in their settlement had directly experienced an economic shock in the six months prior to data collection. In the same assessment, 19% of respondents stated that households in their settlement relied on begging or charity in the 30 days before data collection when faced with a lack of food (REACH 09/2022). This is in addition to pre-existing urban poverty and migration from conflict-affected areas to Kabul under the previous government. Many of those families who have lost their breadwinners have resorted to sending their children out to beg to earn a living (UNHCR accessed 10/11/2022).

In an attempt to resolve the begging issue, provide assistance to the poorest, and bring order to the city, the Taliban issued a decree in mid-August 2022 and established a Beggar Collecting Committee to identify beggars in Kabul and assist them based on what they consider 'deservingness'. 'Deserving' beggars will receive monthly cash assistance, beggars with the ability to work will receive employment opportunities, and children will be enrolled in education facilities (Afintl 18/09/2022).

This will result in the protection of those found to be 'deserving' from abuse and exploitation – especially children, who in the past have been exploited for drug dealing, theft, and to beg, sometimes rented out to begging gangs by their parents for a daily rate (IWPR 27/02/2017). As a result of the policy, children will be enrolled in schools and their parents will receive monthly payments to not send them out to beg again.

The criteria for identifying 'deserving' and 'not deserving' are unclear, with some publicly available information suggesting that in addition to the community helping in identifying and referring the 'deserving' beggars to the Beggars Collecting Committee, inability to work caused by disability and lack of skills are the main criteria (Etilaat Roz 11/09/2022; Pajhwok 22/09/2022). While the policy might be well-intended, the lack of clarity on eligibility criteria and implementation may unintentionally lead to further exclusions.

Collected beggars from September to December 2022



Source: ACAPS using data from FDPM Twitter 04/12/2022

As of 3 December 2022, 19,072 beggars were collected in Kabul.¹ 7,707 of them (40.4%) were considered 'deserving', while 11,365 (59.6%) were deemed professional beggars. 6,374 (33.4%) were children, of whom 2,609 (40.9%) were considered 'deserving' and 3,765 (50.1%), including 62 unaccompanied children, 'not deserving'. The unaccompanied children have since been referred to care and training centres (orphanages) for livelihood training and education (FDPM Twitter 04/12/2022). 1,737 (9.1%) of the collected beggars were men, 634 (36.5%) 'deserving' and 1,103 (63.5%) 'not deserving'. Men with ability and skills to work were promised jobs (DW 08/08/2022). Most of the beggars collected (10,961 or 57.5%) were women and girls – 4,464 'deserving' (40.7%) and 6,497 'not deserving' (59.3%) of assistance (FDPM Twitter 04/12/2022). Many female beggars are war widows and heads of households, including households with members with chronic diseases, disabilities, or addictions (NPR 17/07/2022). It is unclear what was offered to women who were found to be 'not deserving' of assistance (57.8% of all female beggars collected).

'Deserving' beggars were referred to the Afghan Red Crescent Society (ARCS) for a monthly stipend. As of 1 October 2022, ARCS confirmed that they had provided 103 beggar families (a total of 640 people) with AFN 2,000 (approximately USD 20) per individual per month and that the programme would continue with the support of the Azizi Bank (ARCS Twitter 01/10/2022). Some beggars said the money is enough to cover all their monthly expenses, while others have reported that despite being considered eligible, they have not received the money on time (La Prensa Latina 08/09/2022).

In the absence of a social safety net, this policy could offer a systematic approach to supporting the most economically and socially disadvantaged groups. However, it is unclear how cash assistance for beggars is being funded, what the long-term plan for the programme is, or how long the programme will run. A similar decree on begging was implemented in 2009 by the previous government but only continued for two years before it was suspended for budgetary reasons (DW 11/06/2014).

Potential knock-on effects of the new policy on beggars

While the new policy will provide support for families deemed deserving of assistance for as long as the programme has funding, there are unintended negative consequences for those considered professional beggars or not deserving of assistance. Women are disproportionately affected by the decree, and because of the limitations placed on them, including on women working and the Mahram requirement, they are less likely to be able to find alternative sources of income. Informal discussions with Kabul residents found that some female beggars want to work as domestic staff in people's homes, but the social stigma associated with begging follows them, and few households are willing to hire a former beggar. As a result, female beggars have resorted to knocking on the doors of houses during the evening to ask for money, food, clothing, or other items that help them meet their basic needs (ACAPS discussions with Kabul residents 12/11/2022 and 20/11/2022).

The most severe potential unintended implication of the begging ban on women and girls is the increased risk of being forced into illegal and desperate acts for survival associated with exploitation and abuse. Those forced into such acts are among the most victimised and abused portion of the population. During the late 1990s, bans on the movement of female beggars in shops and malls was correlated with an increase in illegal and desperate acts; widows with children were particularly affected (RAWA 08/1999). It is likely that some female beggars will once again be forced into such acts to support their families – especially female heads of households without a working-age male, with young children, or with family members requiring special care.

¹ All collected beggars have their biometric data registered. Those caught begging again will face consequences: face-to-face advice from police district officials after the first attempt and their case filed in court if they are caught again (La Prensa Latina 08/09/2022).

The gendered impact of the new policy on beggars will also affect children. Where children can work it is likely that they will stop attending school to support their families. A survey of 1,400 households in seven provinces found that sending children to work was the only form of income generation for 18% of families (Save the Children 14/02/2022). In another survey, 42% of respondents reported that children having to earn money to support their families was among the top five barriers for children to attend school in their settlement (REACH 09/2022).

Children from families deemed undeserving of assistance will likely be more exposed to exploitation; if picked up by the authorities after their biometric data has been taken, they are also at higher risk of legal consequences. Some parents experiencing poverty will more likely fall victim to deception and agree to turn over their children into labour with physical violence or intentionally sell their children (especially boys) into more desperate and illegal activities (U.S. Embassy 19/07/2022). Some parents sell their children or force their young daughters into early marriage in exchange for doweries and in the hope that this will ensure their daughters' wellbeing (WFP 15/06/2022 and 03/12/2021; AAN 20/10/2022; New York Post 26/01/2022; Newshub 24/10/2022). This trend is likely to worsen as families make difficult choices to keep their children alive. Child labour, including sending children to collect plastic to re-sell or to collect food waste or washing cars with polluted channel water, is also closely linked to negative health outcomes for children and their mental and physical development. In some cases, children who fail to collect enough money to support their families may face violence at home (RF/ERL 11/03/2008).

POLICY TO CENTRALISE AND MANAGE STREET VENDORS IN KABUL

Unemployment has resulted in many Kabul residents working as street vendors to cover their families' expenses. After the Taliban came to power in August 2021, more than 500,000 people lost their jobs (ILO 19/01/2022) by mid-2022, this number increased to nearly 700,000 (UNDP 05/10/2022). Many people without access to other forms of employment turned to peddling on sidewalks to make ends meet.

In January 2018, the previous government introduced a policy with a one-year deadline to remove all vendors from the streets and assign them to designated spaces (Jomhor News 29/01/2018) to bring order in the city. The government failed to meet the deadline, and street vendors slowly returned to their previous locations. This resulted in corruption, as different groups collected money illegally from vendors who wanted to retain their spots. According to some reports, the municipality and police were receiving an average of AFN 40 (approximately USD 0.40) per day from each street vendor, depending on the size of their booth (Pajhwok 15/08/2021). The previous government started to re-implement the policy in 2021, by surveying vendors, issuing licenses, providing booths, and setting fixed sums and annual payments. They also established that only one person per household could be a

vendor – a policy aimed at expanding opportunities for other poor households and preventing a monopoly on street vending (Information TV YouTube 11/07/2021). Before the takeover of Kabul, the policy had begun to be implemented in the Cinema Pamir area, in police district 1.

The Taliban have since sought to implement a similar programme with a few differences. Under the new policy, vendors are not being surveyed, and there is no requirement of only one vendor per household. Street vendors have to buy new booths from the municipality for a one-time cost of AFN 16,000 (approximately USD 160) and must pay rent for their location (Anis Newspaper 29/05/2022). Kabul municipality officials said monthly rents range between AFN 500–2,500 per square meter based on booth size, activities, and location. Street vendors who cannot afford higher rents can move to a location with lower rent. Vendors have been complaining about the high rent costs and low level of income. One street vendor said his daily income used to average AFN 3,000, of which he paid AFN 800 per month to traffic police and AFN 200 per month to the municipality. With the new policy, his daily income averages AFN 500, of which he needs to pay AFN 800 per month for a security guard to watch the booth at night and AFN 1,500 per month for the municipality rent. He also had to buy the booth for AFN 16,000 (ACAPS discussion with street vendor 29/11/2022).

Impact of the policy on vendor livelihoods

Although the new policy seeks to eliminate corruption and streamline peddling, vendors have complained about the high rent of booths and low sales, which impact their livelihood. Many vendors noted their sales have been affected by the decline in consumer purchasing power as household incomes have decreased. Despite a 14% reduction in average monthly household income from the first quarter of 2022, during the third quarter of 2022, the average family's basic monthly needs have increased by more than 12% (IFRC 11/11/2022). One street vendor from Paktika who recently started selling fruits on the streets of Kabul because of a lack of job opportunities shared:

"I came here from Paktika because there were no opportunities where I am from. I sell fruits on the streets here, and I make AFN 300 per day, but my expenses are high. I have to pay AFN 600 per month for my home, AFN 1,500 per month in rent to the municipality for my booth, and AFN 800 per month to a guard to watch my booth at night. I am worried my business is going at a loss, and I will not be able to support myself and my family, but I have no other options." (ACAPS discussion with street vendor 29/11/2022)

Kabul's street vendors have been hit by an increase in costs for their booths and a decrease in overall income. The requirement to buy expensive new booths has placed an additional burden on them and their families. One of their main complaints is that while the monthly rent is calculated based on size, activity, and location, the one-time cost (AFN 16,000) of purchasing a booth is the same, irrespective of those criteria. Vendors have had to borrow money from relatives to purchase booths (ACAPS discussion with street vendor 29/11/2022).

While the implementation of the policy to centralise and manage street vendors seeks to create order and generate revenue for the State, it risks making an already financially disadvantaged and poor demographic even poorer. The high start-up cost for purchasing a booth and the need for some vendors to borrow money to make the payment puts them at a disadvantage, as debt can render families more vulnerable to exploitation or more likely to marry off their children to pay their debt.