

OVERVIEW

Conflict and insecurity, political instability, socioeconomic challenges, natural hazards, and environmental degradation have been exposing Afghans to stressors and shocks for decades. The Taliban's return to power in August 2021, its increasingly authoritarian rule, and the shift from international development to primarily humanitarian aid have further challenged state capacity, economic stability, and the ability to address environmental degradation.

Afghans have shown remarkable resilience, adapting to environmental changes and continuing to survive and even thrive. Resilience is a multifaceted concept and exists at the individual, household, and community levels. This report focuses on socioeconomic resilience at these levels, defining resilience as the strategies and tools **Afghans possess and employ** to withstand hardship and bounce back from adversity without relying on potentially harmful coping mechanisms.

Domestic and international events since 2021 have compounded historic and current fragilities, eroding resilience strategies and underscoring the need for sustained international support and inclusive governance structures. To effectively address these key issues, humanitarians first need to understand what resilience in Afghanistan looks like and how decades of multivariate crises have affected it.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

About this report	3
Setting the stage: Current context and key stressors.....	4
Resilience strategies available to Afghans	7
Factors undermining the sustainability of resilience strategies	11
Groups at risk of being left behind or with less access to resilience strategies	12
Impact of humanitarian aid on drivers of resilience	12

KEY FINDINGS

- The main stressors that test Afghan resilience include climatically and geologically induced hazards, economic decline, forced return (of both IDPs and Afghans in Iran and Pakistan), unemployment and underemployment, lack of accessibility to economic and legal resources, reduced ability to migrate for work, increasingly authoritarian rule, and increased restrictions on women and girls.
- Forced return is a stressor for both returnees and host communities. In some areas, returnees are among those least likely to have access to community support given already depleted resources and the sense that they no longer belong.
- Living in a state of gradual and continuing stress has a severe impact on mental health and wellbeing, especially for women and girls, who have few avenues for social engagement and support because of increasingly stringent restrictions. People with disabilities and the youth also struggle with a lack of mental health and psychosocial support.
- Afghan individuals and communities rely on migration, remittances, income diversification, cultural and social cohesion, and local government support to increase their resilience.
- Groups least able to access resilience strategies include IDPs and returnees, women and girls, people with disabilities, and economically vulnerable people living in communities with fewer resources. Communities can only rally to help one another if their members have the means to do so.
- The same conditions that threaten general wellbeing also threaten resilience strategies in Afghanistan. These conditions include climate change impacts and the economic and political environment. Increasing restrictions on women and girls also directly affect the economy and resilience.
- While humanitarian aid plays an important role in supporting national resilience, it has created physical and psychological dependencies that have long-term impacts on the resilience of Afghans.

Potential areas of further study

- There is insufficient information on the role of community networks in different provinces. Interviewees noted their strength and presence in Paktika, but they appear to be less effective in Nimroz and Badghis provinces. Further research into the role that community-level networks, such as youth groups and professional associations, play in resilience and community support would be helpful, as would further research into why some resilience strategies are successful in certain regions but not in others.
- There is a lack of nuanced and detailed information on the roles that community governance systems play, with most data noting the presence of tribal leadership and community development councils (CDCs) but with less focus on their efficiency. This highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of the role they play in supporting community resilience in different areas.
- Based on analysis of REACH data, some areas show a relatively high percentage of the population using potentially harmful coping strategies with irreversible consequences, even though the needs identified in these areas are not very high. It is worth exploring what causes people in such areas to resort to more extreme coping strategies despite having comparatively lower needs.
- There is a lack of information on how people in areas that do not border other countries, lack official border crossings, or lack informal border crossings overcome the challenges of geographic separation to migrate for work. Given the high value placed on migration and remittances for family survival, further research may be warranted to understand what resilience strategies populations in such areas use.
- There is insufficient analysis of the potential impact of the efforts of the Interim Taliban Authorities (ITA) to formalise and centralise the collection of zakat, an Islamically mandated charitable contribution of 2.5% of one's earnings for all but the poorest, making contributions mandatory. Early evidence suggests that the ITA have required households already relying on humanitarian assistance for survival to pay zakat (AAN 28/09/2022; Amu TV 31/01/2023; Hasht-e Subh 06/04/2024). Its impact on resilience at the individual, household, and community levels should be explored.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

Aim

This report aims to improve knowledge of and enable programming that strengthens resilience in Afghanistan through an exploration of shocks, resilience strategies, and related barriers.

Methodology

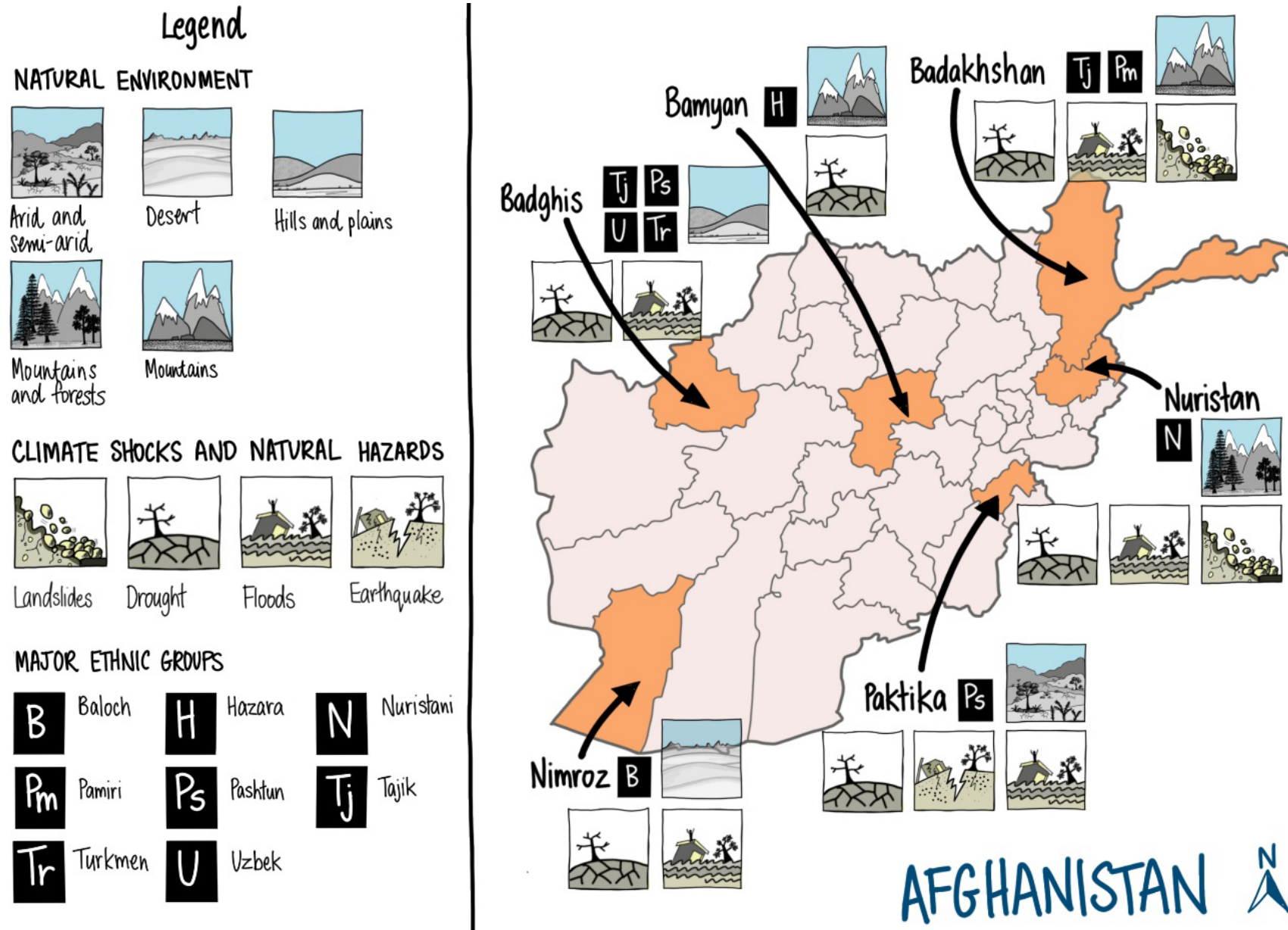
This report is based on a review of over 100 publications pertaining to resilience (in Afghanistan and globally) and 12 expert interviews with Afghan humanitarian responders at the national and subnational levels. An analysis of REACH's Shock Monitoring Index (collected between April 2023 and January 2024) and December 2023 Humanitarian Situation Monitoring (HSM) dataset complements the review and interviews.

ACAPS held the interviews with humanitarian responders working at the national level and in Badakhshan, Badghis, Bamyán, Nimroz, Nuristan, and Paktika provinces. The selection of provinces was based on their unique natural and ethnic characteristics to provide insight into how geographic, demographic, and ethnic factors intersect to shape coping and adaptive strategies in the face of adversity (Figure 1).

Limitations

This report primarily relies on secondary data and is limited by what is publicly available and research that has already been conducted. Applying an intersectional lens (gender, sex, age, disability) is also challenging given the social, cultural, and political barriers that limit refined and reliable recent information. ACAPS is confident, however, that the findings will add nuance and provide insight into discussions of resilience in Afghanistan.

FIGURE 1. SELECTED PROVINCES AND THEIR NATURAL AND ETHNIC CHARACTERISTICS



Source: ACAPS

SETTING THE STAGE: CURRENT CONTEXT AND KEY STRESSORS

Current context

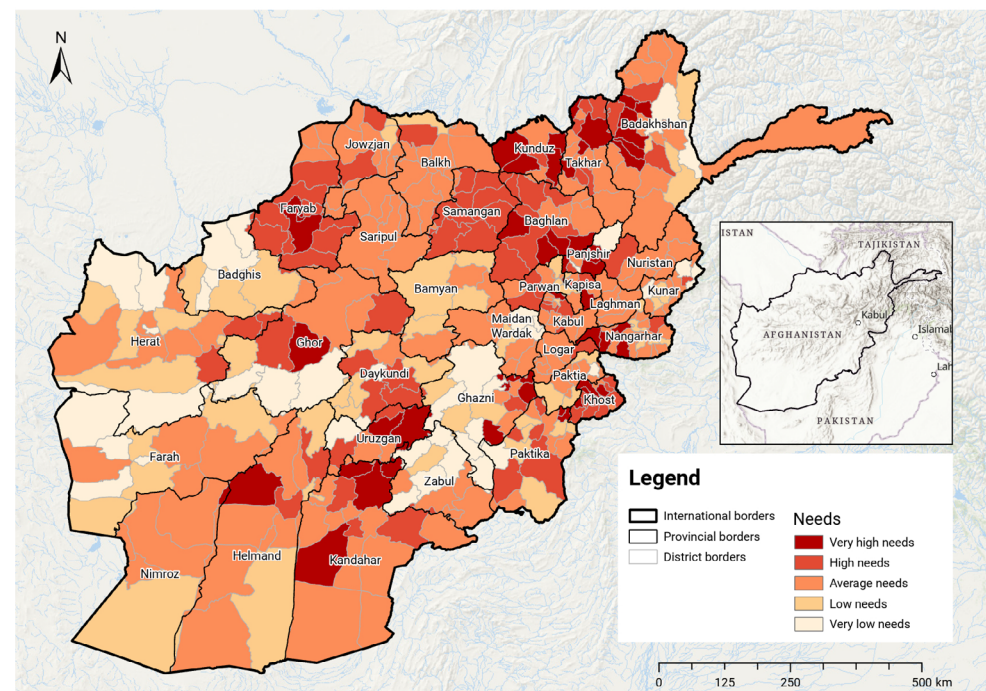
The Taliban's return to power in August 2021 resulted in a significant decline in armed conflict, but Afghans remain economically vulnerable, food-insecure, and vulnerable to climatic shocks. About 20 million people (half the population) are poor, and "the welfare situation... remains one of high deprivation and extreme vulnerability" (WB 03/10/2023). In 2024, an estimated 23.7 million Afghans are expected to need humanitarian assistance (OCHA 23/12/2023). In the most recent food insecurity analysis on acute food insecurity, Afghanistan was classified as a hotspot of very high concern; 12.25 million people were projected to be living in Crisis (IPC Phase 3) levels and 3.5 million in Emergency (IPC Phase 4) levels by March 2024 – an increase from 10.6 million and 2.4 million, respectively, in October 2023 (FAO, WFP 2023; IPC 14/12/2023). Economic instability, reduced incomes, high unemployment levels, displacement, high food prices, and climate and weather variability drive such food insecurity (IPC 14/12/2023). In Herat, the 7–15 October 2023 earthquakes, which affected more than 275,000 people and caused significant damage shortly before the onset of winter, likely worsened food insecurity. As a result, the province is projected to experience IPC 4 levels for the first time (IPC 27/05/2024; WHO 22/01/2024; WB 04/01/2024). Herat also hosts the country's second-highest number of IDPs, who were already struggling to access livelihood opportunities even before the earthquake (GFDRR/WB 04/01/2024). At the same time, Afghanistan is expected to experience continued reductions in humanitarian assistance as a result of decreased donor funding, including support for food, livelihoods, and agriculture (FAO/WFP 31/10/2023; IPC 27/05/2024).

Afghan society is patriarchal, and the extended family is the core socioeconomic unit (Jordans et al. 03/2013). The emphasis on traditional family-based structures means women and girls frequently rely on male relatives to act in their best interests (Majidi and Hennion 31/01/2014). The combination of patriarchal norms and increasingly restrictive ITA regulations has increased the vulnerability of women and girls in general and especially during crises. For example, deteriorating economic conditions and food insecurity have increased the incidence of early marriage, including forced marriage (ODI 06/12/2023). The report discusses the gendered impact of key stressors and gendered access to resilience strategies in greater detail below.

ACAPS' district-level analysis of recent REACH HSM data shows that areas across the country (in provinces such as Badakhshan, Baghlan, Faryab, Ghor, Helmand, Kandahar, Khost, Kunduz, Nangarhar, Panjshir, Takhar, and Uruzgan) were experiencing very high or high needs for essential food and hunger relief, humanitarian assistance, and movement for better conditions between November–December 2023 (see Map 1).

A similar analysis of REACH's Shock Monitoring Index data on the number of shocks¹ experienced between April 2023 and January 2024 found that most of the country continued to experience shocks or was experiencing an increase or severe increase in the number of shocks.

Map 1. Severity of needs across Afghanistan

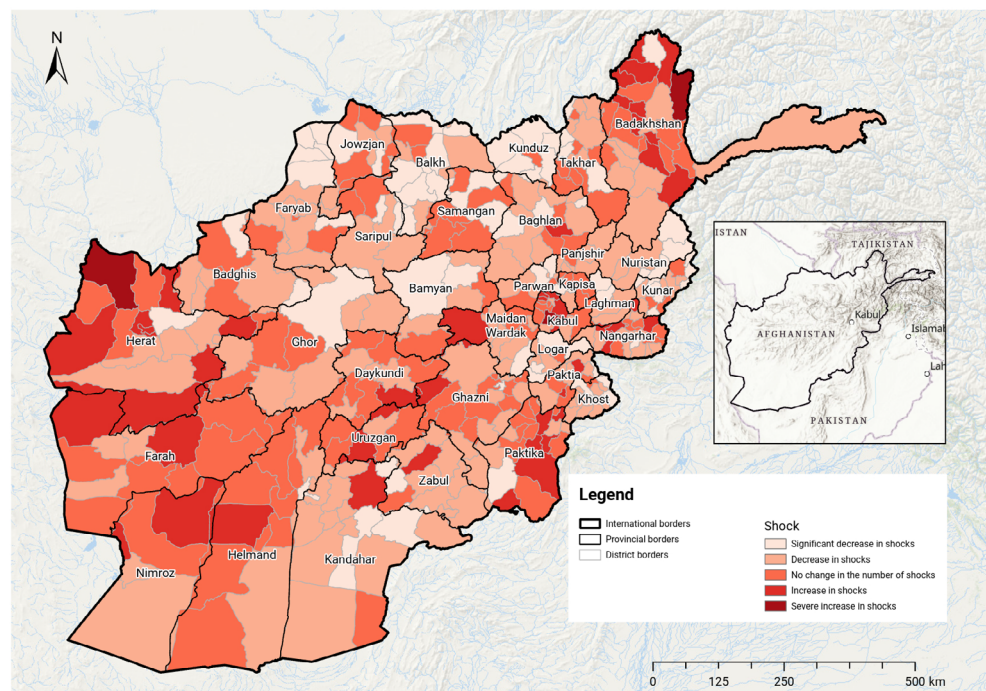


Source: REACH (03/01/2024)

Shocks were recorded at the district level. The provinces that experienced a higher number of shocks compared to others over the ten months assessed were Badakhshan (478 incidents), Nangarhar (342), Balkh (301), Takhar (287), Herat (273), Baghlan (224), Faryab and Ghazni (219 each), and Kabul (216).

¹ Shocks included in the analysis were conflict, natural hazards (drought, flooding, earthquake, heavy snow), displacement, disease outbreaks, and market and economic shocks. Policy and access were excluded from the analysis.

Map 2. Average change in total number of shocks (month-on-month) per district in Afghanistan between April 2023 and January 2024



Source: REACH (16/05/2024)

Key stressors

Data collected from interviews, additional literature, and the REACH dataset demonstrates the following key stressors challenging Afghan resilience:

- climate-induced and geological hazards
- economic deterioration and increased unemployment and underemployment
- increased authoritarian rule disproportionately affecting women and girls
- continued lack of healthcare access, including for mental health
- continued internal displacement and high return levels
- reduced migration opportunities.
- Although these stressors are explored individually, they are interconnected and sometimes compound one another.

Climate-induced and geological hazards

Climate-induced hazards are major drivers of current needs. Decades of conflict have led to significant environmental degradation, affecting livelihoods and diminishing people's ability to cope and adapt. Soil erosion, desertification, overgrazing, deforestation, and inadequate natural resource management have also aggravated the country's vulnerability to climate-related stressors (NUPI/SIPRI 03/02/2023). Global warming has increased Afghanistan's mean annual temperature by 1.2 °C since 2008, leading to a rise in extreme weather (AAN 06/06/2022). Agriculture, which supports the livelihoods of about 80% of the Afghan population, is particularly susceptible to temperature and precipitation variability and extremes (FAO 16/10/2022). Afghanistan experienced a third consecutive year of drought in 2023, affecting more than 50% of its population (OCHA 01/08/2023).

As a result, Afghanistan ranks among the ten countries most vulnerable to climate change and scores 5/5 (high risk) on the Ecological Threat Register (ND-GAIN accessed 09/04/2024; Vision of Humanity accessed 09/04/2024). Increasing temperatures and changing precipitation patterns, compounded by the effects of La Niña and El Niño, are triggering more frequent extreme weather events (WB accessed 09/04/2024; OCHA 23/12/2023). Changing weather patterns and rising temperatures are also accelerating the melting of snowpack and glaciers, posing a threat to the country's water security (AAN 05/01/2021). Despite being one of the most climate change-affected countries globally, Afghanistan remains isolated internationally; in 2023, it was one of the three countries without delegates at COP28, the UN Climate Change Conference, and it cannot access key climate funds (Reuters 11/12/2023).

Geological hazards continue to be a stressor. Situated in a seismically active zone, Afghanistan faces frequent high-magnitude earthquakes (WorldData accessed 20/04/2024). Construction styles and settlement patterns increase Afghans' susceptibility to their severe impacts (Shnizai et al. 10/08/2022). Urban centres with high population density are especially vulnerable because many buildings are not seismically sound (KP 08/02/2023). The October 2023 Herat earthquakes and June 2022 Paktika and Khost earthquake killed thousands of people and left hundreds of thousands more in need of humanitarian assistance (OCHA 20/02/2023 and 16/10/2023; ICRC 07/11/2023).

Economic deterioration, increased unemployment and underemployment

Most Afghans are economically vulnerable. 20 million people (half the population) have consumption levels below the national poverty line, and one in three young men is unemployed (WB 03/10/2023). According to data collected by Afghan Witness (a Centre for Information Resilience project that collects, preserves, and verifies information on human rights and current events in Afghanistan), even provinces considered to be in the Taliban's 'heartland', such as Helmand, have experienced protests about economic concerns (AW 19/04/2024). Natural and geological hazards, reduced and suspended international financial aid, and high global inflation compound persistent unemployment and underemployment (ICRC 07/12/2023).

The ITA's ban on women working has cost the Afghan economy an estimated USD 1 billion by mid-2022 (up to 5% of the country's GDP) (UNSDG 14/12/2022). A 2023 survey of Afghan women found a direct link between restrictions on women working in NGOs and increased poverty (UN Women et al. 06/2023; ODI 06/12/2023). Restrictive gender policies affect not only women but also their families; another 2022 survey found that one-third of families had lost their entire household income, and nearly one-fifth had sent their children to work. More than one million children were expected to be working across the country in 2022, and children in rural areas are more likely to work than their urban counterparts (STC 14/02/2022; ILO 19/01/2022).

All interviewees pointed out poverty as a key stressor for Afghans. Households that were already economically vulnerable to begin with experience the stress of unemployment most acutely because they lack the resources to survive during such periods (KII 03/04/2024; KII 28/04/2024). One interviewee noted the unique impact of poverty on girls, saying some families have been forced to marry off their daughters because of the dire economic situation (KII 03/04/2024). Others said that people were reducing the quality and quantity of food (including reducing children's food intake), resorting to consuming animal feed, and selling their land to the village leader (KII 24/03/2024 b; KII 25/03/2024; KII 28/04/2024).

Increased authoritarian rule disproportionately affecting women and girls

Since the ITA's return to power, they have passed increasingly authoritarian restrictions on both men and women (ACAPS 21/04/2023 and 01/12/2023). These restrictions prohibit girls and women in particular from accessing education, employment, and freedom of movement, besides tasking men with the responsibility of ensuring that their female relatives follow ITA directives (ACAPS 21/04/2023). The ITA's restrictions have incrementally created a system of coercive state control of women, with severe impacts on their mental health and wellbeing (discussed in section 6.2.4). Interviewees noted that such restrictions and fear of more to come are an especially strong source of stress for women and girls (ACAPS 31/07/2023 and 25/01/2024; KII 13/03/2024; KII 14/03/2024; KII 25/03/2024). Increasing restrictions on women and girls have also affected their relationships in the home, including increasing the likelihood of domestic violence and reducing decision-making influence (UN Women et al. 06/2023; ODI 06/12/2023).

Continued lack of healthcare access, including for mental health

According to the 2024 Humanitarian Response Plan, 17.9 million Afghans need healthcare, a priority need expressed by 46% of people in rural areas and 60% in urban areas. The healthcare system is fragile, underfunded, understaffed, and reliant on international humanitarian aid (OCHA 23/12/2023). The main obstacle to accessing healthcare in the past year has been cost. Movement restrictions and a shortage of female health workers specifically restrict women's and girls' healthcare access (MSF 06/02/2023).

All of Afghanistan except 4 provinces are projected to face IPC 3 food insecurity between May and October 2024 (IPC 27/05/2024). Food insecurity especially affects children and pregnant and lactating women, with moderate and severe acute malnutrition rates steadily increasing since 2022 (ACAPS 09/01/2024; OCHA 23/12/2023). The combination of food insecurity and poor access to clean water and adequate sanitation, limited healthcare access, poor maternal nutrition, low immunisation rates, and high disease burden contributes to the continued deterioration in the nutritional status of children under age five (AAH et al. 08/06/2023).

Inconsistent physical healthcare access also contributes to mental health deterioration (ODI 06/12/2023). Already declining before the ITA's return to power, mental health has continued to deteriorate, especially for women and girls, because of both gendered restrictions and how they prevent them from gathering or seeking support from other women (KII 13/03/2024; KII 14/03/2024; KII 24/03/2024 a; KII 24/03/2024 b; KII 24/03/2024 c; KII 28/03/2024). Recent surveys among Afghan women found a high percentage of urban women suffering from depression (over 80%) or reporting poor mental health (over 90%) (Neyazi et al. 03/08/2023; UN Women et al. 06/2023). Relationships between Afghan women, which would normally constitute a source of emotional and mental support, have worsened, with 15% of women in one of the studies

noting that they had not met with a woman outside their immediate family in the last three months (UN Women et al. 06/2023). People with disabilities and youth also struggle with mental health problems and the lack of mental health support (KII 18/03/2024; KII 28/03/2024). One interviewee noted that men also struggled with poor mental health, but there were very few resources targeting them (KII 28/04/2024).

Continued internal displacement and high return levels

Poverty, debt, and disrupted livelihoods drive displacement. According to a December 2023 rapid assessment, 90% of returnee households had no income source (IOM 28/12/2023). Returnees from Pakistan were unable to take more than approximately USD 173 with them when leaving the country and had to leave businesses and assets behind (UNHCR 17/11/2023; Reuters 14/11/2023). The number of people displaced because of climatic factors is also increasing (Samuel Hall/UNICEF 22/09/2023). IDP returns to areas of origin remain the ITA's preferred solution, including through forced eviction and requests for humanitarian organisations to support the returns (IIED 08/02/2024). From October to the end of 2023, 467,919 Afghan nationals were forcibly returned from Pakistan (IOM 16/01/2024). This has strained already limited resources in host communities (ACAPS 07/12/2023; HRW 28/11/2023; UN Women 15/12/2023). The return of up to 1.46 million people from Pakistan and Iran is expected to continue through 2024, to areas where people are already experiencing protracted crises (OCHA 23/12/2023).

Both IDPs and returnees experience difficult conditions, including disrupted social networks. This is especially true for women; both the ITA's restrictive gender policies and restrictive gender norms limit their access to social networks (IIED 08/02/2024). IDPs and returnees also struggle to access documentation, especially women, children in women-headed households, and unaccompanied children (IOM et al. 14/08/2023). Lack of documentation has a direct impact on access to inheritance and marital property, livelihoods, humanitarian aid, education, other documentation, credit, and justice, as well as implications on freedom of movement and reintegration (NRC/Samuel Hall 08/11/2016; Samuel Hall 16/08/2023).

Forced return is a stressor for both returnees and host communities. Returnees find themselves in communities that lack the capacity to receive them, while their return further stretches the already diminishing resources of host communities experiencing multivariate crises (UNICEF 08/2023; UN 27/10/2023; UNHCR 21/11/2023). For example, returnees to Nimroz are arriving in heavily drought-affected places lacking sufficient potable water, further straining already limited resources (KII 24/03/2024 d).

Reduced migration opportunities

On 26 September 2023, Pakistan announced its decision to enact the Illegal Foreigners' Repatriation Plan. This plan returned more than half a million people to Afghanistan between 15 September 2023 and 15 April 2024 (IOM 19/04/2024). As the environment in both Pakistan and Iran becomes increasingly hostile, the outflow of Afghans has dropped dramatically, and the number of forced and voluntary returnees has increased significantly (IOM 17/04/2024; ACAPS 07/12/2023; VOA 11/12/2023). Interviewees noted that the lack of migration opportunities was a stressor given the historic and current use of migration as a strategy to mitigate economic stress (KII 24/03/2024 a; KII 24/03/2024 b).

RESILIENCE STRATEGIES AVAILABLE TO AFGHANS

Understanding resilience

There are multiple definitions of resilience, including ecological, social, developmental, community, psychological, and socioecological resilience (Quinlan et al. 11/11/2015). This report focuses on socioeconomic resilience, noting that resilience is a "process, not a trait or an end product" (Sousa et al. 20/06/2013). Resilience includes the ability to anticipate, prepare for, respond to, and recover from shocks (HPG/ODI 30/11/2012). For this report, ACAPS defines resilience as the strategies and tools Afghans possess and employ to withstand hardship and bounce back from adversity without relying on potentially harmful coping mechanisms (Althathini 01/2020; Béné 11/07/2020). This is in line with the UN Sustainable Development Group definition, which emphasises positive recovery and an "acceptable level of functioning" that does not compromise long-term development, peace and security, human rights, and wellbeing (UNSDG 30/09/2021).

According to OCHA: "Communities and households are resilient when they are able to meet their basic needs in a sustainable way and without reliance on external assistance." (OCHA 11/05/2013) Because of this, ACAPS does not consider humanitarian assistance to be a form of resilience because, although aid is often an essential safety net and can facilitate recovery from a shock, it is external to the community and is not in their power to control, meaning aid dependency can undermine resilience.

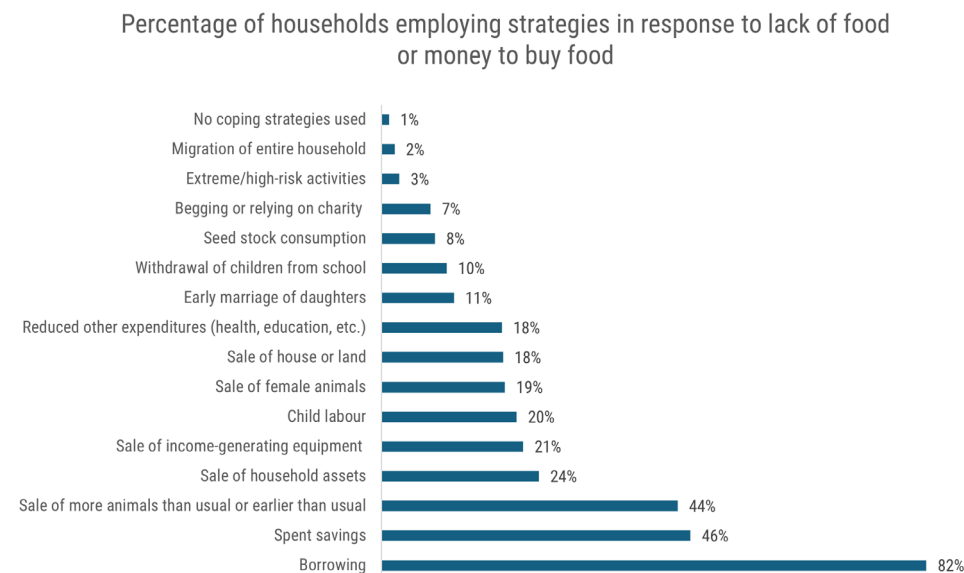
COPING STRATEGIES

Coping strategies tend to be short-term, unplanned, and reactive. If these strategies become permanent, people will need to find new ways to cope in the face of adversity (HPG et al. 03/2014). Adaptive strategies are longer-term responses and behavioural adjustments linked to strategic needs. People often plan and carry out these strategies in anticipation of a threat (Atiqul Haq et al. 16/06/2021).

For decades, Afghan households have used a range of coping strategies to mitigate the effects of various crises, including food insecurity. As a result, people have exhausted many strategies, which are no longer available or have become insufficient. More than 80% of Afghan households rely on at least one coping strategy known to have potentially harmful consequences on an individual or community, and many households have mobilised family members to seek income-generating opportunities. That said, the pressures of population growth and reduced economic opportunities have increased the labour supply and reduced the number of jobs available, meaning unemployment has doubled and a quarter of the workforce is underemployed (WB 06/10/2023). Contractions in the national economy, combined with reduced international funding, increased restrictions on women's freedom and ability to work, and a ban on opium cultivation, have depleted the resources of Afghan households (WB 06/10/2023; AAN 07/11/2023; FMF 16/06/2023; USIP 10/08/2023).

Many households have made gains in short-term welfare at the cost of long-term welfare, resulting in the loss of resilience to future economic shocks (AAN 07/11/2023). This is because some coping strategies – eating less or lower-quality foods, foregoing education for work, and forced and child marriage – have irreversible impacts. Such coping strategies erode long-term resilience through their long-term negative implications on physical and economic health (ACAPS 16/06/2023; UNICEF 08/2023; IIED 08/02/2024). Households have also depleted savings, incurred debt, and sold assets (both productive and non-productive), all of which can reduce resilience to future shocks (AAN 07/11/2023; ACAPS 16/06/2023).

Figure 2. Coping strategies to address food insecurity in Afghanistan



Source: REACH (03/01/2024)

REACH data collected between November–December 2023 in 401 districts across the country found that borrowing food directly or borrowing money to buy food was the most used coping strategy for families lacking food, as echoed by interviewees (KII 24/03/2024 a; KII 24/03/2024 b). One interviewee, however, highlighted the limitations of this coping strategy, noting that “borrowing or depending on neighbours is no longer a viable option” because of the economic stress everyone is facing (KII 24/03/2024 d).

According to the REACH data, smaller but still significant proportions of the surveyed population resorted to coping strategies with potentially harmful and irreversible effects, such as child labour (20%), decreased healthcare or education expenditure (18%), the early marriage of daughters (11%), and withdrawing their children from school (10%). These national averages hide significant variations across the country. In Paktika, for example, far more households reported engaging in extreme or high-risk activities and relying on begging or charity. Fewer households borrowed or reduced expenditure – likely because they could not – but more had spent savings or sold animals or land, and 43% (twice the national average) relied on child labour. The picture is also different in Nuristan, suggesting a lack of assets and savings to liquidise but the ability to borrow. As in Paktika, higher-than-average numbers of households engaged in high-risk or potentially harmful coping strategies.

Resilience strategies

The data collected from interviews and additional literature, combined with REACH data on resilient strategies in response to lack of food, showed that Afghans used the following key strategies:

- migration (internally and abroad to work) and remittances
- income source diversification
- cultural resilience: religion and faith, family, social solidarity
- local governance structures.

Migration (internally and abroad to work) and remittances

Afghans have used mobility as a survival strategy, or as “social, economic, and political insurance”, for improving livelihoods or to escape conflict and natural hazards for a long time (Schmeidl 23/01/2019; UNICEF 08/2023). Interviewees echoed this, noting that migration is a commonly used tactic across the country (KII 13/03/2024; KII 14/03/2024; KII 24/03/2024 c; KII 24/03/2024 d; KII 24/03/2024 e; KII 25/03/2024; KII 28/03/2024). One interviewee noted that poorer individuals tended to migrate for work, but they must be able to cover their migration costs to neighbouring or Gulf countries (KII 24/03/2024 b; USIP 10/08/2023). Wealthier families also employed migration for education as a tactic, especially sending their daughters to Iran or Pakistan for schooling because of the increasing constraints on girls’ education in Afghanistan (KII 13/03/2024).

Even prior to the current crisis, remittances² have long been an important income source for Afghan families, who use them to build family resilience (IOM 14/09/2021; AAN 25/01/2024). The Hawala system, an informal money transfer channel that operates outside traditional banking systems, has allowed remittances to continue, even when 2021 sanctions affected banks and money transfer companies (AAN 25/01/2024). In the REACH HSM dataset, 35% of respondents in Badghis received remittances, as did 9% of respondents in Nimroz, 8% in Badakhshan, and 6% in Paktika (none in Bamyán and Nuristan). One interviewee also noted that remittances were a primary income source for people in Nimroz, saying:

“Approximately two out of every three families have someone working in Iran... [but] households headed by women or lacking an older male are unable to benefit from this strategy”

(KII 24/03/2024 d).

Remittances tend to be an individual or family-level resilience strategy. For the most part, remittances are significant for the immediate family members of people who have travelled abroad (KII 24/03/2024 a). It is also worth noting that recipients of remittances are not always the most economically vulnerable (HPG/ODI 26/03/2019).

The Herat earthquake is a good example of the diaspora’s important role in fundraising for recovery. By December 2023, only two months after the earthquake, the Afghan diaspora had raised more than USD 3.4 million (DRC 20/02/2024; KII 25/03/2024).

Income source diversification

Income source diversification has long been a strategy for Afghan families in maintaining economic wellbeing (AREU 30/06/2004). All interviewees noted that Afghans had sought to further diversify their income sources in the face of increasing economic precarity. Households diversify their income not only through migration but also increasingly by opening small businesses or becoming street vendors (KII 24/03/2024 c; KII 24/03/2024 d; AAN 14/04/2024). There has also been an increase in the number of women establishing home-based businesses, such as sewing, handicrafts, and carpet-making (though the total number of women in the workforce has dropped significantly, from 11% in 2022 to 6% in 2023) (UNDP 16/04/2024; KII 24/03/2024 a; KII 24/03/2024 c).

Poor economic conditions have also driven more people to engage in illegal activities. By the end of 2023, the ban on poppy cultivation has resulted in a 95% drop in production, affecting populations reliant on poppy cultivation for their livelihoods. Afghan farmers had lost an estimated USD 1 billion as a result of the ban (AJ 05/11/2023; AP 05/11/2023). The ITA have also sought to crack down on illegal mining across the country (Xinhua 04/11/2024; TOLONews 18/01/2024). Even so, one interviewee told ACAPS that some people have turned to poppy cultivation and illegal mining to diversify their income (KII 24/03/2024 a). Media reports about illegal mining in Badakhshan and Nuristan confirm this, including news of children working in illegal mines and former Afghan soldiers turning to illegal mining because of a lack of jobs (SCMP 12/09/2022; AJ 18/08/2023). Another interviewee noted the continued presence of illegal activities in Nimroz:

“Illegal trade, human trafficking, and employment opportunities in Iran constituted significant sources of income for numerous families... [but] heightened border security measures have adversely affected the population.”

(KII 24/03/2024 d; TOLONews 18/05/2022)

² For more on remittances, see ACAPS’ report on the scale and role of private financial transfers.

Social cohesion: Religion and faith, family, social solidarity

Social cohesion is an important source of resilience, and culture plays a particularly important role in fostering close communities. Many Afghans rely on religion and faith, family, and social solidarity as sources of resilience; culture is an important resource that Afghans share to promote resilience (Sousa et al. 20/06/2013; Eggerman and Panter-Brick 07/2010).

A 2023 study on resilience among Afghan migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers in Iran also found **religion and faith** to be important sources of resilience, with people commonly referring to the Quranic Surah Ash-Sharh 5–6:

“So, surely, with hardship comes ease. Surely with that hardship comes more ease.”
(Farahani et al. 18/04/2023)

Interviewees cited religion as a source of emotional resilience and as the source of some strategies such as zakat (KII 13/03/2024; KII 24/03/2024 e; KII 25/03/2024). Some organisations have centralised zakat, allowing them to centralise funds intended to support communities in need. For example, UNHCR’s Zakat Fund received more than USD 21.3 million in 2022, which they used to support refugees and IDPs (UNHCR 24/03/2023).

“The primary impetus for [sharing resources with those in need] stems from religious directives that urge individuals to aid those in need [as well as] cultural customs... as evidenced by individuals who may not adhere to religious values but still contribute.”
(KII 24/03/2024 c)

Family is a central pillar of Afghan life. One interviewee noted:

“In Afghanistan, we are very family- and community-oriented... We try to resolve challenges collectively”
(KII 25/03/2024).

Another interviewee echoed this by emphasising the role that family networks play:

“Family networks... remind people that they are not alone, often recounting historical or religious stories of resilience ingrained in our culture. These narratives bolster our strength and inspire affected communities to navigate through such crises.”
(KII 24/03/2024 c)

Some interviewees shared that elders often told stories about disasters, survival, and resilience during weddings and cultural gatherings, passing down narratives through generations (KII 24/03/2024 a; KII 28/04/2024).

During crises, Afghans show great **social solidarity**. This is reflected in different ways, ranging from making donations and sharing resources to travelling to affected areas to provide immediate support (KII 14/03/2024; KII 24/03/2024 e; KII 25/03/2024). One interviewee shared that during a crisis,

“Everyone will try to support or donate to people surviving a disaster... People will also voluntarily travel to those communities to provide help... There is a strong sense of empathy or sympathy for people experiencing disaster.”
(KII 14/03/2024)

Other interviewees echoed this, emphasising the immense amount of community-level support within and across provinces, with people pooling resources (material, financial, and physical) to support others during crises (KII 24/03/2024 e; KII 25/03/2024).

Afghanistan also has a history of **coordinated voluntary collective work** known as hashar. This can be tapped into for anything, ranging from revitalising historic irrigation systems to building schools and hospitals (AAN 06/06/2022; Hotak 31/10/2013). Community leaders and elders generally direct hashar by gathering and deciding how best to support the community. The practice exists across the country; as shared by one interviewee:

“All communities have a culture to support each other in times of need.”
(KII 25/03/2024)

Another noted that hashar in Paktika operated on tribal affiliation, with members of specific tribes coming together to address community needs and undertake initiatives (KII 24/03/2024 e). Afghans can undertake hashar in response to a disaster or to support the development and maintenance of a community.

Informal credit and solidarity lending systems are also common forms of social protection (SPARC 31/01/2024). Complex systems of informal borrowing and lending create layers of economic interdependency, increasing social cohesion, risk-sharing, and resilience.

One interviewee speaking about Paktika noted the important role that youth unions in particular played, maintaining reserve funds for crisis response in each district, mainly sourced from wealthy individuals and private donors abroad (KII 24/03/2024 e). Another interviewee speaking about Afghanistan more broadly echoed similar youth efforts in fundraising for families or people in need (KII 25/03/2024). Money exchanger unions and transport unions also provide support after a disaster (KII 24/03/2024 e). Such community solidarity extends to the diaspora, who rally to support crisis-affected people in Afghanistan (KII 24/03/2024 e; KII 25/03/2024).

Local governance structures

In many parts of Afghanistan, local governance structures play an important role in supporting community resilience, especially in the absence of state support and services. This includes traditional mechanisms, such as elders and religious leaders, and more recently formed structures, such as CDCs, set up post-2002 under the previous Government's National Solidary Programme/Citizen Charter (ISE 02/2019). According to REACH's HSM data, CDCs appear to be most present in Badakhshan (92%) and least in Nimroz (14%), showing a weakening of the once-thriving community bodies. In contrast, the strongest presence of community leadership was noted in Nimroz (96%) and Badghis (89%). In the other provinces, both CDCs and traditional structures seem to be equally present, or absent, such as in Bamyán, where only a 52% presence of CDCs and 42% community leadership were reported.

Table 1. Percentage of respondents indicating the presence of local administrative structures at the district level

PROVINCE	CDC SHURAS	COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP	WOMEN'S SHURAS	YOUTH SHURAS
Overall	52%	61%	2%	10%
Badakhshan	92%	44%	1%	13%
Badghis	32%	89%	0%	0%
Bamyán	52%	43%	0%	0%
Nimroz	14%	96%	0%	0%
Nuristan	58%	63%	1%	16%
Paktika	36%	43%	1%	9%

Source: REACH (03/01/2024)

Respondents in almost all six provinces noted that shuras (either traditional or CDCs) played a role in community resilience, though the consensus was that many CDCs lacked the resources (in terms of budget and capacity) to function effectively (KII 24/03/2024 a; KII 24/03/2024 b; KII 24/03/2024 d). One interviewee noted that in Nuristan, for example, individual tribal elders and not shuras primarily resolved disputes (KII 03/04/2024).

The extent to which people engage with shuras differs across the county, likely depending on the level of trust between community members and these traditional mechanisms. Our quotes also indicate that the ITA has started to control shura composition.

"In Afghanistan, we respect the decisions of shuras and jirgas more than courts. Mediators are highly respected, and the decision can never be reversed. Court decisions can be challenged and reversed."

(KII 14/03/2024)

"Shuras exist, but their members are not elected; rather, the Taliban dictates the selection and leadership of these councils, with most members being mullahs or religious scholars. They operate without a budget, rendering them largely symbolic structures. Their role is primarily limited to compiling lists of eligible individuals for humanitarian aid distribution."

(KII 24/03/2024 a)

REACH data suggests that almost no women's shuras seem to have survived the ITA's return to power, and only three provinces reported some presence of youth shuras: Nuristan (16%), Badakhshan (13%), and Paktika (9%). Our interviews, however, suggest that REACH data may not fully capture the activity of youth across Afghanistan. As discussed earlier, Paktika province reported the presence of active youth unions that helped people in need (KII 24/03/2024 e).

FACTORS UNDERMINING THE SUSTAINABILITY OF RESILIENCE STRATEGIES

The resilience strategies discussed are highly context-specific and threatened by the same conditions that threaten Afghan wellbeing. People have exhausted many coping and resilience strategies and are increasingly turning to coping strategies with potentially harmful and irreversible consequences.

Migration (internally and abroad to work) faces the threat of increasingly strict border policies, forced returns from Iran and Pakistan, and complex and expensive passport and visa processes. Other countries, such as the UAE, stopped issuing visas to Afghans in November 2020, and Afghans continue to find it nearly impossible to travel to the Gulf legally for work (AJ 25/11/2020; AAN 25/01/2024). An incredibly slow passport process also hinders legal travel, and in January 2024, the General Directorate of Passports stopped receiving paper applications for passports because of complaints (TOLNews 05/09/2023 and 22/01/2024). For those who have passports, visas are still a requirement for legal travel, and in 2024, Afghanistan ranked as the country with the least powerful passport in the world, with visa-free access to only 28 countries (H&P accessed 01/05/2024). Those able to secure a visa to travel may still require visas to travel via (AAN 04/02/2024).

Remittances face the impact of the economic downturn and policies of forced return in other countries (KII 24/03/2024 c; KII 28/03/2024). As one interviewee noted: “Iran’s currency has been inflated due to sanctions. Before, people used to earn money to buy a house and marry in their province, and 1,000,000 tomans would be AFN 10,000 (about 138 USD). Now, 1,000,000 tomans is only AFN 1,300 (about 18 USD).” (KII 28/03/2024) Policies of forced return from Pakistan and Iran mean that returning Afghans are unable to continue sending money to their families and need to find income in an already oversaturated market (USIP 17/11/2023).

Income source diversification is becoming increasingly difficult as a result of high unemployment and underemployment rates, poppy cultivation and mining restrictions, and increased border control. Afghan farmers have experienced an estimated USD 1 billion drop in earnings after the poppy cultivation ban (AJ 05/11/2023). Limitations on women’s work and the systemic discrimination that businesswomen experience also prevent income diversification and disproportionately affect women-headed households. The ban on women from working also erodes women’s psychosocial resilience, as they have lost the social component of work.

Traditional social and **community-based mechanisms of resilience face the threat of poverty.** Many of these strategies (community fundraising, zakat, solidarity, and informal lending systems) depend on the economic wellbeing of the community or an individual’s social networks. Where everyone’s economic resources have been depleted, community support as a resilience driver also becomes exhausted (SPARC 31/01/2024; KII 25/03/2024; KII 24/03/2024 a).

GROUPS AT RISK OF BEING LEFT BEHIND OR WITH LESS ACCESS TO RESILIENCE STRATEGIES

The deterioration of the Afghan economy, high unemployment rates, and greater restrictions on migrant workers have a greater impact on already economically vulnerable people and households, namely IDPs, returnees, women-headed households, people who worked for the previous Government, women and girls, people with disabilities, and the youth. Interviewees also emphasised that, in general, shocks affected people residing in rural areas more than urban residents (KII 24/03/2024 a; KII 24/03/2024 b; KII 24/03/2024 d; KII 28/04/2024).

Ethnicity can play a role in access to resilience strategies. For example, interviewees noted that minority-majority dynamics, as well as ethnic ties, influence resource distribution (KII 24/03/2024 b; KII 28/03/2024). One interviewee also noted that Tajik and Hazara women faced fewer culturally mandated restrictions on movement and the ability to work than their Pashtun counterparts (KII 24/03/2024 b). Another expert noted that tribal and other disputes can also affect who receives assistance (KII 25/03/2024).

IDPs and returnees are especially vulnerable because they have less access to community support. Local integration in host communities is especially difficult for displaced women and girls because of restrictions on freedom of movement, employment, and education access – the result of both ITA regulations and restrictive gender norms. This makes it more difficult for women and girls to re-establish social networks, access documentation, rent accommodation, and generate capital (Majidi and Hennion 31/01/2014; ACAPS 25/04/2024). Women IDPs are also more prone to experiencing social isolation, further eroding their resilience. The lack of larger social networks also affects IDP men, who struggle to find work in a society where many people rely on social networks to hire staff (Majidi and Hennion 31/01/2014).

Intersectionality also influences access to resilience. An interviewee noted that while women and people with disabilities had previously received less support, this was slowly changing. Women continued to experience systemic marginalisation, however, as

“women typically did not inherit property”
(KII 24/03/2024 e).

Legally, women do have the right to inherit property, and the ITA have safeguarded some of these rights, but in practice, their rights are often restricted (NRC et al. 02/09/2021; ICG 23/02/2023).

Women, youth, and other vulnerable groups also generally have minimal or less engagement with shuras (KII 24/03/2024 a; KII 24/03/2024 e). One interviewee noted that people with connections to the Taliban tended to enjoy greater access to shuras and other community leadership (KII 24/03/2024 a). Women, youth, and other vulnerable groups also have less access to mosques, where people (generally men without a disability) gather to discuss key issues (KII 24/03/2024 c; KII 28/03/2024). This is relevant given the role that mosques and mullahs play in disseminating information (KII 24/03/2024 a; KII 24/03/2024 c). One interviewee noted that in some places, however, women could also attend mosque on Fridays and during Ramadan for Taraweh (KII 03/04/2024).

IMPACT OF HUMANITARIAN AID ON DRIVERS OF RESILIENCE

Stakeholders in Afghanistan agree on the need to strengthen resilience and build climate change adaptation mechanisms (AAN 06/06/2022). Aid dependency is a commonly recognised problem, cited frequently during interviews (USIP 25/01/2023; CSIS 23/02/2022). While some interviewees extolled the benefits of aid, the overall sentiment was that current humanitarian aid has potentially harmful long-term consequences. As one interviewee noted, aid

“has weakened people’s resilience in coping with adversity... [It] has had a negative impact on traditional cultural practices, as some people now rely on the humanitarian community for assistance rather than on community-based support systems”

(KII 24/03/2024 a).

Another noted that decades of foreign funding have diminished people’s ability to cope with difficult situations without assistance (KII 24/03/2024 b). This implies that humanitarian aid’s current approach lacks efforts to develop communities’ capacity to achieve sustainable and self-reliant impacts for resilience.

Despite the impact of aid dependency, it is important to recognise the role of humanitarian aid in supporting resilience-building. For example, Afghanistan Resilience Trust Fund projects are designed to strengthen national capacity to address emergency food, health, and education needs, enhance water and irrigation systems for climate resilience and entrepreneurship (particularly for women), and build capacity for national NGOs (WB 23/04/2024).

As a whole, interviewees had mixed views on the impact of humanitarian aid on Afghans. One said that it caused psychological dependence, another that aid bolstered community practices (especially CDCs), and a third that aid played a role in maintaining social cohesion (and that the halt in aid led to conflict) (KII 24/03/2024 b; KII 24/03/2024 c; KII 24/03/2024 e).

“The sight of outsiders providing assistance serves as a catalyst for motivating the local community to contribute what they can.”

(KII 24/03/2024 c)

It was noted, however, that the amount of humanitarian assistance available was insufficient given the high levels of need (KII 24/03/2024 a; KII 24/03/2024 d).

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