AFGHANISTAN

Localised vulnerability analysis: Injil district and Herat city, Herat province

1. OVERVIEW

In 2025, Herat experienced an influx of returnees from Iran and Pakistan, climate and natural hazards, a deterioration of economic conditions, and Interim Taliban Authority (ITA) restrictions on public life and freedom of movement. All of these, combined with the 2025 cuts in humanitarian funding, contributed to an increase in unmet humanitarian needs (ACAPS 16/08/2024; Mercy Corps 08/10/2025). Increasing restrictions on women's and girls' freedom of movement in Afghanistan have also been well documented (ACAPS 21/04/2023, 01/12/2023, 25/07/2024, and 24/12/2024). Women and girls residing in Herat city are more likely than those in rural areas to be exposed to enforcers of the Law on Propagating Virtue and Preventing Vice (LPVPV), resulting in a climate of fear and decisions by individuals and households to change peoples' (especially women's and girls') behaviour or manner of dressing to meet LPVPV requirements and avoid confrontation (AAN 21/08/2025; Protection Cluster 07/02/2025; ACAPS 24/12/2024; KII 30/10/2025 b).

By 29 November 2025, more than 1.82 million Afghans returned from Iran to Afghanistan within the year, most involuntarily (IOM accessed 08/12/2025; Protection Cluster 31/10/2025). Most returnees have settled in border provinces, including Herat (Mercy Corps 08/10/2025; ACAPS 08/09/2025; FEWS NET 06/10/2025). The province has been slowly recovering from the devastating series of magnitude-6.3 earthquakes that struck in 2023, affecting between 275,000–500,000 people, killing more than 1,500, injuring over 2,000 others, and causing widespread damage (IOM 06/01/2025; STFA 05/2025; CARE 11/11/2024). Injil district experienced some of the most severe consequences, including damage to critical infrastructure and more than 15,000 homes (OCHA 02/11/2023; AAN 10/11/2023). Herat city also experienced substantial damage (UN 21/02/2024). Two years later, thousands of earthquake-affected families continue to reside in tents, struggling to rebuild their homes and livelihoods (Hasht-e-Subh 07/10/2025).

Map 1. Herat province located on a map of provinces in Afghanistan

Source: Mappr (accessed 14/12/2025)

2. ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report is the first in a series on localised vulnerability and capacity in Afghanistan, made possible with the support and coordination of the Afghanistan Protection Cluster and its members. It makes use of primary and secondary data collected in selected locations to identify programming priorities and potential entry points to improve programme designs and targeting by:

- providing insight into the drivers of multidimensional vulnerability
- revealing context-specific perceptions of what makes people more vulnerable to being unable to meet basic needs
- enhancing understanding of the different coping strategies and mechanisms people use to mitigate vulnerability.

Defining multidimensional vulnerability

Multidimensional vulnerability depends not on categories of people but on how different factors linked to an individual or household and their positioning within their community and society affect their vulnerability to unmet needs. People are not automatically considered vulnerable just because they belong to a certain population category (e.g. a person with a disability or a woman). Rather, vulnerability is derived from the interaction between categories (age, gender, disability, displacement status, etc.) and cultural and societal factors (location, family and community norms, socioeconomic conditions, the availability of income-generating activities, etc.). This means vulnerability is viewed as the intersection of different related factors instead of an inherent state of being.

The purpose of a localised approach is to identify location-specific causes and manifestations of vulnerability and better understand how people experience and mitigate them. The provinces in which assessments were carried out were selected through a prioritisation exercise conducted with Protection Cluster responders, during which they were asked to identify the districts and provinces with the highest protection needs and risks and those where responders had the highest data collection capabilities. After reviewing the identified provinces, ACAPS selected locations focusing on diversity in geography, the presence of returnees and IDPs, and exposure to climate shocks. The selection also considered where responders had access. Data for this study was collected in Herat city and surrounding periurban and rural areas of Injil district, in Herat province. All of these locations have experienced high influxes of returnees in recent years, and Protection Cluster partners specifically selected Injil villages with high numbers of returnees.

Aim

This analysis reflects on vulnerability drivers in Injil district and Herat city. It intends to support the prioritisation and design of humanitarian and basic human needs assistance in the targeted areas by enhancing humanitarian responders' understanding of the factors affecting people's overall vulnerability to basic needs issues, including their capacity to meet their own needs.

Methodology

The findings in this report are based on primary data collected by Protection Cluster partners and ACAPS, complemented by a review of more than 40 documents on crisis, vulnerability, and capacity in Herat province. In total, 85 people were consulted. Protection Cluster partners used random sampling strategies, and data collection comprised:

- 39 structured household interviews[1] with men and women[2]
- six focus group discussions (FGDs) with 40 participants, three with men in rural areas of Injil and three with women in Herat city
- six key information interviews (KIIs) with Afghan humanitarian responders (five men and one woman) working in national and international NGOs across Herat province.

Limitations

Data collection with women was challenging because of cultural norms and ITA restrictions. That said, women made up nearly half of all household interview respondents and three of six gender-segregated FGDs. Because household interviews were structured and FGDs were conducted in a group setting, many protection questions were not asked, and there was no explicit disclosure of gender-based violence risks. The data collected for this study should be considered indicative; the findings highlight perceptions useful for programmatic decision-making and, where possible, have been triangulated with secondary information.

1 Protection Cluster partners conducted 40 household interviews but excluded one because the respondent reported their age as 14 years old, and the study did not specifically seek to engage with child-headed households, making their inclusion an anomaly.
2 18 women and 21 men participated in the household interviews. Most (27) were returnee households, seven were IDP households, and five were from the host community. The average household included 6.44 people.

3. KEY FINDINGS

- Climate change, protracted impacts of the 2023 earthquake, increasing ITA restrictions on women's movement and access to livelihoods, and economic precarity as a result of drought and floods appear to be the key drivers of multidimensional vulnerability in Herat city and Injil district. Recurrent droughts and floods have severely reduced agricultural production, damaged shelters, strained water systems, and undermined the livelihoods of returnee and farming households. Nearly all FGD participants and most households interviewed reported climate-related shocks in recent years, and half reported the direct loss of crops, livestock, or income-generating assets.
- Assessed households in Herat city and Injil district rely heavily on daily wage labour, leaving them with inconsistent income and little protection from market fluctuations. Declining agricultural outputs, increasing unemployment, and restrictions on women's mobility and employment have sharply reduced household incomes. ACAPS' data consistently identified unemployment and poverty as households' most pressing challenges.
- Public health facilities in Herat city and Injil district are overstretched, and 37 out of 39 interviewed households reported an inability to afford regular medical expenses. Mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) was the most identified health need among interviewed households (30 out of 39). Households linked worsening mental health and the need for mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) to economic stress and deteriorating living conditions.
- High costs of clean water, long distances to fetch water, and rising groundwater salinity in Herat city and Injil district were understood to particularly affect water access for people without stable incomes, with IDPs, returnees, and women-headed households at heightened risk of being unable to afford access to clean water. Challenges are directly tied to climate change, earthquake damage, and population increases from high volumes of returnees and IDPs.
- The mean severity score provided by ACAPS household interviewees was highest – at 7.65 – for education. Supporting this, among household interviewees with school-age children, only around one-third of the children (39 of 120) attended school. The most commonly cited barriers impeding children's education access were government restrictions and/or the decline in overall economic conditions, resulting in the need for children to work. ACAPS' household interview data and FGD and KII data show that, while girls consistently leave school earlier than boys, boys also leave school early, primarily because of economic challenges and the need to support their families.
- Most households have exhausted their economic reserves or did not have any to begin with. Widespread poverty has likely weakened traditional community-based support structures, resulting in households increasingly depending on potentially harmful coping strategies to meet basic needs. The most frequently reported strategy was delaying or deferring healthcare access, along with borrowing money (including to pay for food or healthcare) and food, reducing food consumption, and child labour. Extreme strategies, such as 'selling' children or organs, were also reported.
- While many challenges reported across ACAPS data sources were shared across the rural, urban, and periurban areas covered in this assessment, focus groups and household interviewees in rural and periurban Injil were more likely to point to a lack of basic services, including healthcare, education, and electricity. Shelter challenges appeared more widely experienced in Herat city, particularly as a result of returnee influxes that increased rental prices, though some participants in rural and periurban Injil also reported shelter challenges.

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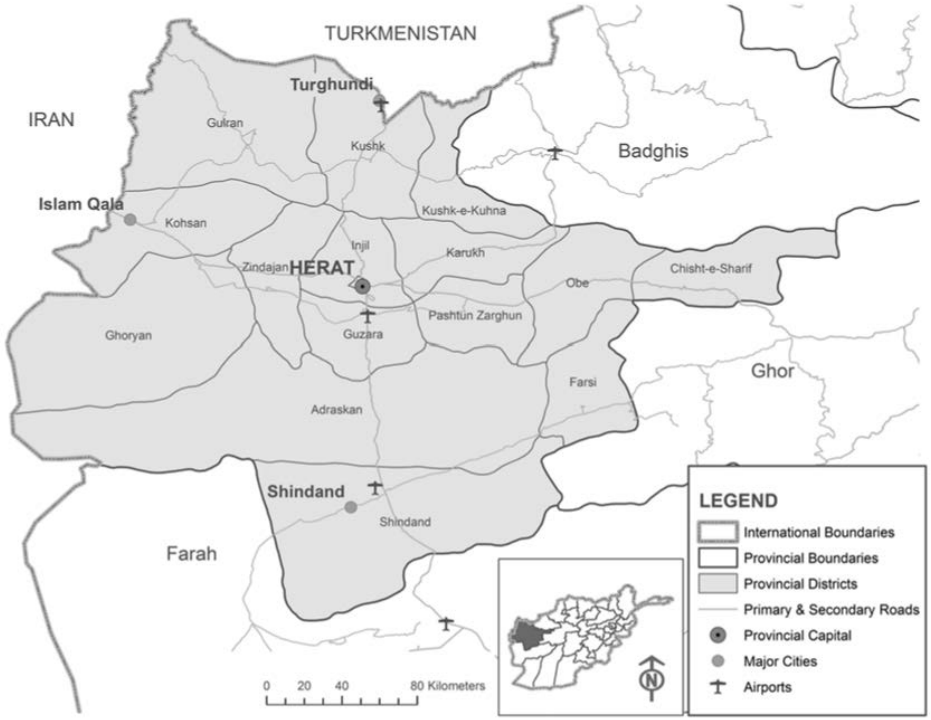
5. KEY FACTS: INJIL DISTRICT AND HERAT CITY

Herat province in western Afghanistan shares international borders with Iran and Turkmenistan and domestic borders with Badghis, Farah, and Ghor provinces (DRC 16/06/2021). Herat province is extremely diverse and is home to a range of ethnic groups, including Hazara, Pashtun, Tajik, Turkmen, and Uzbek people, including a range of tribes within these ethnic groups (DRC 16/06/2021; Minority Rights Group accessed 11/12/2025; NPS accessed 06/12/2025). Because Afghanistan's last comprehensive national census was conducted in 1979, population data remains estimated. In 2016, estimates put the provincial population at just below 2.5 million (WB accessed 06/12/2025).

Map 2. District map of Herat province



Source: USIP (03/2015)

Herat city, the regional capital of western Afghanistan, is surrounded by fertile agricultural land. It is the third-largest city in the country and among its most densely populated (Britannica accessed 06/12/2025; UNESCO accessed 06/12/2025). In 2020, its estimated population was 556,000 (DC accessed 06/12/2025).

Injil district, which borders Herat city to the north, has been experiencing increased urbanisation to varying degrees and with varied impacts on villages (Fazely and Ghoryar 23/11/2024). That said, the district remains predominantly rural, with a majority Pashtun population and smaller communities of Tajiks and other ethnic groups also present. The primary economic activity is agriculture. In 2024, the estimated population of Injil district was 426,000 (UNHCR 02/09/2024). Both Herat and Injil are among the ten districts hosting the most IDPs displaced between 2021 and the first quarter of 2025 across Afghanistan (IOM 18/06/2025).

6. BASIC NEEDS THAT HOUSEHOLDS AND INDIVIDUALS STRUGGLE TO MEET

Households and individuals in Injil district and Herat city are vulnerable to being unable to meet a range of basic needs, with vulnerability levels depending on specific circumstances. This section explores the different challenges that impede households' and individuals' abilities to meet their basic needs, considering which factors make certain households and individuals more vulnerable to each challenge than others.

6.1 Vulnerability to unmet livelihood needs

Across the expert interviews and FGDs, participants repeatedly reported unemployment and poverty as among the biggest challenges households face in their communities in Herat city and Injil district (FGD 1; FGD 2; FGD 3; FGD 4; FGD 5; FGD 6; KII 29/10/2025; KII 30/10/2025 a; KII 30/10/2025 b; KII 03/11/2025; KII 01/12/2025). Most (36 of the 39) interviewed households reported that their main income source had decreased in the six months prior to the interview, and no households reported an increase. This finding is supported by two, 2025 IOM assessments, one in Injil district and one across Herat province, wherein more than half of respondents reported a recent decrease in work (IOM 20/03/2025 and 15/09/2025). IOM's assessment in Dasht e Kahdestan (Injil district) also found an increase in both men's and women's unemployment, although women were significantly more likely to be employed or own a business than in the previous year (increasing from 4% to 21%). ITA restrictions on women working alongside men they are not related to in public, including in NGO sectors, have led more women to establish small- and medium-sized enterprises. Despite this increase in women working, households' overall incomes still declined, likely because women's increased employment does not always offset income lost by increased male unemployment (IOM 15/09/2025; ACAPS 12/02/2025).

Just over half of the households ACAPS interviewed relied on daily wage labour for their primary source of income, with nearly all others relying at least partially on income from daily wage labour. While the interviews are not representative of all households, IOM's study in Dasht e Kahdestan similarly found widespread reliance on precarious daily labour (IOM 15/09/2025). Where households rely on daily wage labour, they tend not to have regular income or access to the social security that typically accompanies employment, putting them at greater risk of labour market fluctuations. This reduces their resilience to economic shocks. Daily wage labour also carries a risk of labour exploitation because of the lack of formal contracts. Among 14 of the 39 households interviewed by ACAPS who cited exploitation (including in the workplace) as among the five main challenges they experienced, all relied fully or partially on daily wage labour for their primary income source.

Factors driving vulnerability to unmet livelihood needs

Across data sources, several factors were identified as increasing households' vulnerability to insufficient or unsustainable livelihoods. Some, such as climate or natural hazards, affected whole communities. **Most focus groups and KIIs cited the impact of drought and floods on agricultural production as a major challenge, particularly in rural Injil** (FGD 1; FGD 2; FGD 3; FGD 4; KII 30/10/2025 a; KII 30/10/2025 b; KII 03/11/2025). ACAPS' household interviews supported this claim, with most (32 out of 39) reporting flooding and heavy rainfall in the three years prior to data collection, while 28 reported drought and desertification. A little more than half (22), including all that relied on farming and livestock as their main income source, reported the loss of or damage to crops, livestock, or other income-generating assets as among the most damaging impacts of climate hazards. As one man in a focus group in Injil explained, *"People's lifestyles have changed; we used to practice livestock farming, but now, because of the drought, we are forced to abandon it."* Another man in rural Injil noted, *"Every year, our area is damaged by floods due to heavy rainfall"* (FGD 1) This is supported by other studies on Injil district and Herat province as a whole, which found significant asset and livestock loss from climate hazards (UNHCR 28/08/2025; IOM 20/03/2025).

Several experts noted that the saffron sector in Herat, which has been affected by drought, is another industry that traditionally employed unskilled labourers and women but has come to offer fewer opportunities (KII 29/10/2025; KII 30/10/2025 a; KII 03/11/2025). Interviewees noted that drought and challenges in accessing water have driven displacement from other areas of Herat province to Injil district and Herat city, where population growth adds stress to already strained resources, aggravating unemployment (KII 29/10/2025; KII 30/10/2025 a; KII 03/11/2025; KII 01/12/2025).

In May 2025, OCHA observed that drought conditions in Herat province had resulted in critically low soil moisture levels, and vegetation health indicators showed stress in parts of the province, with conditions comparable to the 2018 drought (OCHA 31/05/2025). This was reinforced by an expert consulted by ACAPS, who explained that "agricultural land is turning into desert" (KII 29/10/2025).

The 2023 earthquakes, which damaged water reservoirs and raised the water table in some areas, aggravated climate-induced challenges to water access in rural parts of Injil district in particular (KII 30/10/2025 b; AAN 10/11/2023; Mercy Corps 08/10/2025). One expert noted that the resulting increase in groundwater salinity has affected many agricultural and pastoralist residents' livelihoods, damaging soil quality and agricultural output (KII 30/10/2025 b). Depleted agricultural production has undermined the livelihoods of many agricultural households in Injil district, including returnee households primarily engaged in farming and agriculture both prior to and during their exile and who traditionally have fewer resources than households who have never been displaced (UNHCR 28/08/2025).

Gender norms and restrictions were another recurring driver of households' vulnerability to insufficient income-generation opportunities. FGD participants in both rural Injil and Herat city, along with expert interviews, cited the ITA's ban on women from working alongside men they were not related to, including in the public and NGO sectors, as a challenge to households' economic prosperity (FGD 2; FGD 5; KII 29/10/2025). In May 2025, enforcers of the LPVPV banned dozens of women from entering markets or using public transportation for not wearing a Chadar Namaz (UNAMA 10/08/2025). FGD participants in both rural Injil district and Herat city flagged restrictions on women's freedom of movement as a challenge, including their ability to go to the market freely (FGD 2; FGD 3; FGD 4). Male expert interviewees explained that restrictions on women's access to markets in Herat city have effectively barred them from working as street vendors (KII 29/10/2025; KII 30/10/2025 a). Women FGD participants in Herat city confirmed this, emphasising that the ban on women from working prevented them from solving their challenges through employment (FGD 5). Although not discussed in the ACAPS datasets, the 2024 decision by the ITA to reduce the monthly salaries of female public employees by AFN 5,000 per month is also likely to have particularly affected women in urban centres such as Herat city, households where women were the primary breadwinners, and women-headed households (Amu TV 11/06/2024).

Several other exclusionary social norms were also implied as community-level drivers of vulnerability to insufficient income-generating opportunities. FGD participants in both rural Injil and Herat city suggested that people with disabilities were at a heightened risk of unmet needs as they faced difficulties with working, while some female FGD participants in Herat city highlighted the challenges for returnees trying to find work (FGD 2; FGD 4; FGD 5).

6.2 Vulnerability to food insecurity

Both primary and secondary data suggests that the impacts of climate change and natural hazards (discussed above) and general economic decline resulting in limited livelihood coping and income diversification strategies have affected people's ability to afford food (FGD 2; IOM 15/09/2025). For the households interviewed by ACAPS, the mean score for the severity of food issues was 6.9 (on a scale of 1–10, with 1 being of no concern and 10 being a persistent, major concern), highlighting that limited food access was a challenge for many. Experts interviewed by ACAPS supported these findings, unanimously emphasising food as a key challenge that households in both Injil district and Herat city faced (KII 29/10/2025; KII 30/10/2025 a; KII 30/10/2025 b; KII 03/11/2025; KII 11/11/2025; KII 01/12/2025). Although a small sample, these findings mirror those of another 2025 assessment that found poor food consumption scores among IDPs and returnees alongside an increase in child malnutrition across Herat province (UNDP 12/11/2025; KII 30/10/2025 b). Declines in agricultural output (discussed in section 6.1.1. above) have likely affected people's ability to access food or grow their own.

Factors driving vulnerability to unmet food security needs

Among the households interviewed by ACAPS, vulnerability to food insecurity was overwhelmingly attributed to poverty; 30 of the 39 households reported being unable to afford cooking essentials. One expert explained, *"The population in Herat city is grappling with a poor economic situation because the large number of IDPs and returnees in the city has led to a scarcity of employment opportunities and challenges in accessing food and shelter."* (KII 30/10/2025 a) Male FGD participants in rural Injil echoed this sentiment, noting that access to coping strategies, such as income diversification, is lower among returnees and IDPs than the host community (FGD 2). Challenges in affording food are likely a result of many households' precarious livelihood access (discussed in section 6.1 above) but could also be a result of increased food prices. For instance, although parts of Herat experienced a month-on-month decrease in the cost of high-quality rice, cooking oil, and pulses in August 2025, the year-on-year costs of rice, cooking oil, and wheat flour actually increased. It is also important to note that the cost of a WFP food basket in some remote areas of Herat was 13% higher compared to the cost of the same basket in provincial centres (WFP 15/09/2025). Expert and household interviewees highlighted that returnee, IDP, and women-headed households are most likely to struggle to meet their food needs, along with people with disabilities (KII 29/10/2025; KII 30/10/2025 a; KII 03/11/2025; KII 11/11/2025; KII 01/12/2025). This is primarily because of their more limited access to income-generating activities and livelihood opportunities.

6.3 Vulnerability to being unable to meet health needs

The interviewed households voiced concerns about their vulnerability to not meeting health needs, with a mean score of 7.03 for the severity of issues related to access to healthcare and medication. In fact, 30 of the 39 households cited challenges in accessing healthcare as a priority need. **The most commonly reported health need, also cited by 30 of the 39 households, was MHPSS, f**ollowed by healthcare services (25) and medicines and medical supplies (21). FGD participants in both rural Injil and Herat city echoed this sentiment, with some noting that the 2023 earthquakes and stress from economic challenges have aggravated mental health issues (FGD 1; FGD 3; FGD 4; FGD 5). One ACAPS household interviewee in rural Injil disclosed that as a result of the challenges faced, they *"tried to commit suicide"* – highlighting how economic challenges are tied to mental health and how the inability to meet both livelihood and mental health needs can have extreme results.

Factors driving vulnerability to unmet health needs

Across ACAPS data, low economic statuses worsened households' vulnerability to unmet health needs; nearly all (38 out of 39) said they could only afford primary care, while 37 households could not afford regular or recurrent medical expenses, including treatment and medications. While public health facilities are free, they are heavily overstretched, with thousands of patients daily. Some services, such as diagnostic tests and medicines, must be paid for even in public hospitals, while access to private health facilities depends on one's financial capacity (KII 29/10/2025; KII 30/10/2025 a; KII 03/11/2025; KII 11/11/2025; MSF 04/07/2025).

Localised healthcare availability also affected households' vulnerability to unmet health needs. FGD participants in rural Injil varied in their assessments of the availability of health services, with some stating health services in their community were not available at all or were provided by volunteers, while others said mobile health services and MHPSS were available. Availability differs across communities, in turn affecting residents' vulnerability to unmet health needs (FGD 1; FGD 2; FGD 3). Concerns about healthcare availability reflect findings from an IOM assessment in Herat province; just over half of respondents did not have meaningful access to health services, with most noting a lack of health infrastructure in their communities (IOM 20/03/2025). A lack of local health facilities requires individuals and households with health needs to travel for care, which may involve long-distance foot travel or additional costs.

When asked who in their community was likely to struggle most to access healthcare, including MHPSS, FGD participants in both rural Injil and Herat city pointed to women, children, older people, and people with disabilities (FGD 1; FGD 2; FGD 3; FGD 4; FGD 5). Although not stated specifically, it is likely that these groups were understood to face additional logistical barriers, such as suitable transport and the physical inaccessibility of some

healthcare services. Although not covered by ACAPS primary data, a recently published report by Médecins Sans Frontières suggests gender norms and restrictions may also be increasingly limiting women's access to healthcare in Herat, with new location-specific restrictions requiring all female patients, staff, and caretakers to wear a burqa when entering public health facilities. After the implementation of the new requirements, there was a 28% observed drop in admissions between 5–7 November 2025 (MSF 10/11/2025).

6.4 Vulnerability to unmet clean water needs

Access to water was also a priority need reported by participants in the FGDs in rural Injil and Herat city, as well as in the KIIs (FGD 1; FGD 2; FGD 3; FGD 6; KII 29/10/2025; KII 30/10/2025 a; KII 11/11/2025). Women in Herat city also cited challenges in accessing water (FGD 4). This is supported by data from IOM assessments across Herat province, including Dasht e Kahdestan, where respondents said they lacked access to clean water for drinking and household purposes and identified clean water access as a priority need (IOM 15/09/2025 and 20/03/2025). 26 of the 39 interviewed households reported that water had to be fetched from outside the home, in most cases (14) by the head of the households, with 6 reporting that girls fetched water and 3 reporting that boys fetched water.

Factors driving vulnerability to unmet clean water needs

FGD participants in both rural Injil and Herat city identified water insecurity as one of their biggest challenges (FGD 1; FGD 2; FGD 4). Across ACAPS' data, two community-level factors served as the main contributors to households' vulnerability to water insecurity: drought and insufficient economic capital for clean water. **Drought directly affects water access** (both in terms of quality and quantity), which in turn affects communities' opportunities for sustainable livelihoods (see section 6.1 above). One participant explained, *"We do not have water for agriculture. The saffron we have has less water due to climate change, and the saffron we have needs water."* (FGD 2) One expert explained that climate change and desertification in Herat province have driven displacement and made distance a challenge for accessing water, saying, *"Agricultural land is turning into a desert. In some villages, entire populations have been displaced due to drought, leaving them without access to drinking water. In some villages, I have seen people walk for four hours to collect drinking water for their households."* (KII 29/10/2025). Precipitation deficit and unsustainable water extraction are rapidly reducing groundwater levels in parts of Herat province, threatening water access for both agriculture and domestic consumption (Hasht-e-Subh 23/10/2024). This was confirmed by IOM's 2025 assessment on climate vulnerability, which found that most respondents in Herat province cited water insecurity as their biggest challenge related to climate change. Because of insufficient makeshift irrigation systems in their communities, respondents said they relied primarily on rainwater, surface water, or, to a lesser extent, groundwater for irrigation purposes (IOM 20/03/2025). According to Mercy Corps, households in Herat and Kandahar also attributed difficulties in accessing water to high returnee numbers, placing additional burden on already strained water resources (Mercy Corps 08/10/2025).

Water affordability also directly affects access; 24 of the 39 households interviewed by ACAPS reported that water was not affordable in their area. According to one expert, the cost of clean drinking water is a barrier to access for people with limited or no income-generating activities, including IDPs, returnees, and women-headed households (KII 30/10/2025 a).

Lack of access to clean water for drinking and household use can have severe health implications. In one study conducted by Mercy Corps in Herat and Kandahar, 45% of households reported recurring illnesses, including chronic kidney disease, linked to poor water quality and high salinity (Mercy Corps 08/10/2025). **The link between challenges in accessing clean water and challenges in accessing healthcare, including affordability** (discussed in section 6.3 above)**, cannot be overstated.**

6.5 Vulnerability to lack of education access

Another recurring theme among the interviewed households was children's risk of being denied access to education, reported as a challenge by 25 households. **The mean severity score provided by ACAPS household interviewees was also highest – at 7.65 – indicating high levels of concern about educational barriers.** Supporting this, among household interviewees with school-age children, only around one-third of the children (39 of 120) attended school, although it should be noted that the sample is not representative. Both male and female FGD participants in rural Injil and Herat city considered the ITA's ban on girls' education after the sixth grade to be a threat to their community (FGD 1; FGD 4).

Factors driving vulnerability to lack of education access

The most commonly cited barriers impeding children's education access were government restrictions and/or the decline in overall economic conditions, resulting in the need for children to work, as mentioned by 18 of the 39 interviewed households. This, along with factors such as early marriage, child exploitation, and discrimination, was echoed by FGD participants in rural Injil and Herat city (FGD 1; FGD 2; FGD 3; FGD 6). A smaller number (9) of household interviewees cited community or family restrictions. The impact of gender norms and ITA restrictions on girls' reduced education access was evident across the data, with nearly all (37 out of 39) interviewed households saying it was harder for girls to attend school than boys. ACAPS' household interview data and FGD and KII data show that girls consistently leave school earlier than boys, although boys also leave school early, primarily because of economic challenges and the need to support their families (FGD 2; FGD 4; FGD 5;

FGD 6; KII 30/10/2025 a; KII 30/10/2025 b; KII 03/11/2025; KII 01/12/2025). Male participants in one FGD in rural Injil also flagged the harassment of children on the way to school as a challenge that primarily affected girls (FGD 1). Some participants in rural Injil and Herat city said online education was available for girls, but they also cited regular internet access as a challenge (FGD 1; FGD 4; FGD 5; FGD 6). Challenges in accessing electricity, which have become increasingly persistent (discussed in section 6.6 below), have made accessing education online more difficult for both urban and rural residents of Herat province (Hasht-e-Subh 06/12/2025).

Returnee children were perceived to be at increased risk of barriers to education – regardless of gender – because of difficulties related to accessing documentation (discussed in section 6.8 below), including past education certificates (KII 29/10/2025; KII 30/10/2025 b; KII 03/11/2025). The availability of schools was also a factor, with 10 out of 39 ACAPS household interviewees (all in rural or periurban Injil) reporting that there was no functional school in their community, vastly reducing children's access to education. Where children have to travel to access schools, it is worth noting that ACAPS household interviewees cited the Mahram requirement, poor road conditions, insecurity or fear of harassment, the cost of fuel, and the lack of public transport or a vehicle as barriers to movement. Access to education provides protection for children, offering important socialisation and child development opportunities and reducing the risk of exposure to child labour or early marriage. One expert explained, "The main issue is girls' exclusion from education. Even when communities don't believe in early marriage, there is no other option for girls." (KII 30/10/2025 a)

6.6 Vulnerability to being unable to access electricity

Access to electricity was cited as a priority need by participants in all FGDs in both rural Injil and in Herat city (FGD 1; FGD 2; FGD 3; FGD 4). 23 of the 39 households interviewed by ACAPS (all in rural or periurban Injil) reported no available electricity in their area. The 16 households with available electricity accessed an average of 7.5 hours of electricity daily. These figures are consistent with a recent IOM assessment, wherein most respondents in Herat province said they did not have meaningful electricity access (IOM 20/03/2025). Residents of Herat province are increasingly experiencing rolling blackouts and power cuts, worsening since autumn 2025, with households sometimes receiving only four or five hours of electricity daily, along with increased electricity bills (Hasht-e-Subh 06/12/2025).

Factors driving people's vulnerability to being unable to access electricity

Cuts to electricity have cascading effects, increasing households' vulnerability to other unmet needs, such as access to online education, because electricity cuts affect Wi-Fi networks and people's ability to charge their cellphones. Drinking water is also affected; one resident of Injil district explained that most areas received drinking water through a system that requires electricity to pump the water. Pumps use solar-generated electricity during the day – which cuts out when the weather is cloudy, especially during winter – and the electrical grid at night. As a result, people can go days without access to clean drinking water (Hasht-e-Subh 06/12/2025). Rising electricity bills mean households with limited access to income-generating activities and/or reduced economic means are likely to be the most affected. Rolling blackouts are also likely to affect children engaged in online education.

6.7 Vulnerability to lack of adequate shelter

Challenges linked to accessing shelter were raised as a key challenge during one FGD in rural Injil and among all KIIs discussing both Injil and Herat city, especially for IDPs and returnees (FGD 3; KII 29/10/2025; KII 30/10/2025 a; KII 30/10/2025 b; KII 03/11/2025; KII 11/11/2025; KII 01/12/2025). One expert explained, *"People who returned to Herat [live in] tents that are not suitable for living in. They are impacted by harsh weather."* (KII 03/11/2025) A July 2025 UNDP assessment found that most returnee households in Injil district lived in tents or degraded structures, and 70–80% of returnees residing in Herat city lived in homes in poor condition (UNDP 12/11/2025). Shelter challenges are also a persistent issue in Herat province. In 2024, returnees in Herat provinces told ACAPS they were concerned for their personal safety because of a lack of access to shelter (ACAPS 16/08/2024). Lack of access to shelter and shelter overcrowding are widely understood to increase vulnerability to exploitation or abuse, primarily affecting women and girls (UNHCR 11/09/2025). People experiencing difficulties in accessing adequate shelter are also more likely to experience challenges in accessing electricity and water than people living in apartments or houses.

Factors driving vulnerability to lack of adequate shelter

Across ACAPS' different data sources, several factors were understood to increase households' vulnerability to inadequate shelter. These included climate and natural hazards, increased competition for limited housing options because of high returnee rates, declining economic circumstances, and tenure insecurity. Participants in all FGDs mentioned earthquakes in general (after their experience with the 2023 earthquake) as a major concern (FGD 1; FGD 2; FGD 3; FGD 4). This is unsurprising considering the impacts of the 2023 earthquake and the fact that many communities are still rebuilding following the earthquakes (KII 30/10/2025 b; AtlasPress 07/10/2025; BBC 01/09/2025). The influx of returnees into Herat city and urban parts of Injil district – stemming from drought, the 2023 earthquake, and returns from Iran – has also driven up rental costs, resulting in greater challenges in accessing affordable and adequate shelter (KII 03/11/2025; KII 01/12/2025; Rukshana 08/08/2025; ADSP 01/09/2025).

Women in Herat city said those who have to pay rent are most at risk of eviction or barriers to adequate shelter, including those displaced by hazards (FGD 4; FGD 6). All of the 11 households interviewed by ACAPS that cited the risk of eviction as a major challenge also reported renting their shelters. **IDPs and returnees were also cited by experts as people with heightened vulnerability to inadequate and/or informal shelter,** both because of limited access to livelihoods and reliance on daily wage labour (discussed in section 6.1 above), limited social networks, challenges in accessing documentation (discussed in section 6.8 below), and limited access to justice and legal protection in cases of eviction (KII 29/10/2025; KII 03/11/2025; KII 11/11/2025). This is likely because IDPs across Herat province are less likely to have formal leases and more likely to rely on informal agreements (ADSP 01/09/2025; UNDP 12/11/2025). Without official documentation, such as birth or marriage certificates, returnee households in Injil reported challenges in accessing housing (UNDP 12/11/2025). The lack of formal lease agreements also makes people more susceptible to forced eviction, with male FGD participants in one community in rural Injil reporting the risk of eviction as a major challenge faced in their community. During household interviews with ACAPS, returnee respondents were more likely to report the risk of eviction than IDP or host community respondents. This aligns with a study by the Asia Displacement Solutions Platform, which found that returnees and IDPs living in periurban informal settlements are more likely to experience threats of forced eviction from the ITA (ADSP 01/09/2025). That said, one planned forced eviction for Andisha town, on the outskirts of Herat city, will particularly affect Hazaras, who make up the majority of the town's population (Hasht-e-Subh 13/09/2025; Amu TV 15/09/2025).

6.8 Vulnerability to lack of legal and civil documentation

Although all population groups in Afghanistan face challenges in accessing civil and legal documentation, experts consistently cited women and returnees as those with the greatest difficulty in accessing documentation, especially returnees whose place of origin in Afghanistan is outside Herat province. Female FGD participants in Herat city also cited challenges in accessing documentation and, by extension, services, citing cost and movement restrictions for women as significant barriers (FGD 5; FGD 6). Without access to documentation, people struggle to find employment, shelter, or education and cannot register businesses (KII 29/10/2025; KII 30/10/2025 a; UNDP 12/11/2025). ACAPS' household interview respondents also reported that missing one type of documentation can bar them from accessing another type of documentation. Lack of legal and/or civil documentation can affect people's ability to access shelter (see section 6.7 above) and education (see section 6.5 above).

Factors driving vulnerability to lack of documentation

The process to acquire documentation can be long and expensive, requiring taxi fares to get people to and from government offices (KII 29/10/2025; KII 30/10/2025 a; KII 03/11/2025; KII 11/11/2025; UNDP 12/11/2025). The increased enforcement of the LPVPV is likely making it harder for women to access government offices, affecting their ability to access documentation (FGD 4). In fact, participants in all FGDs with men in rural Injil said women specifically struggle to access legal documents because of government restrictions (FGD 1; FGD 2; FGD 3). Similarly, the most commonly cited barrier to accessing documentation for ACAPS' household interviewees was the inability to reach government offices, mentioned by 25 households. Without access to documentation, people struggle to access employment opportunities, shelter, or education and cannot register businesses (KII 29/10/2025; KII 30/10/2025 a; UNDP 12/11/2025).

7. COPING STRATEGIES USED TO MITIGATE VULNERABILITY

Most (21 out of 39) ACAPS household interview respondents said they were unable to take any actions to cope with the various challenges they identified, either because they had exhausted all their resources or because of general economic hardship. In one case, a respondent linked her inability to take action to her gender, saying, *"Because I am a woman, I cannot take any action."* Some FGD participants in rural Injil and some experts suggested youth can overcome livelihood challenges by migrating to other countries to work, although other FGD participants noted that migrating to Iran was no longer viable in the face of forced returns (FGD 1; FGD 2; KII 11/11/2025; KII 01/12/2025). Other participants explained that efforts to find extra work were not always successful, with one noting that women are being required to work as a coping strategy. That said, given the findings above about a lack of available work in Injil district, this coping strategy would not be available or sustainable for many households.

Supporting these findings, in 2024, ACAPS found that **poverty threatens traditional social and community-based mechanisms for coping and resilience in particular,** as these depended on the economic wellbeing of a community or an individual's social networks. When everyone's economic resources have been depleted, community support is rarely an available coping strategy (ACAPS 03/06/2024). One female FGD participant in Herat city explained, *"In the past, people could take loans in difficult times. But now, no one has extra money beyond their own expenses."* (FGD 6) The different factors aggravating vulnerability to specific needs discussed in section 6 have likely played a role in the sustained erosion of individual and community-level coping strategies, potentially culminating in extreme actions. This was echoed by one expert, who, speaking about Herat city, explained, *"The large number of IDPs and returnees within the city has led to a scarcity of employment opportunities, and access to food and shelter has become a great challenge. In previous crises, such as the Herat*

earthquakes or previous returns from Iran, the host community provided support to those in need. But this kind of support is not always available." (KII 30/10/2025 a) Another expert said that Herat city's size and diversity lead to less community support *"because people are from all over. There's less common culture and language"* (KII 30/10/2025 b).

7.1 Reducing food quality or quantity

When asked about the coping strategies they used to access food, **32 of the 39 ACAPS household interviewees reported relying on at least one potentially harmful coping strategy.** These included relying on less expensive foods, reducing the number of meals eaten in a day, passing entire days without eating, limiting portion sizes at mealtimes, and/or adults restricting their consumption to give way to small children. In fact, most of the households that reported reducing the number of meals they ate in a day or passing an entire day without eating were women-headed households (6 out of 8). Female FGD participants in Herat city also reported people reducing the number of meals they eat in a day (FGD 4; FGD 6).

In general, both male and female ACAPS household interviewees suggested that **people with disabilities and women were most likely to struggle to meet their food needs,** including women-headed households, single women, and pregnant and lactating women. Respondents also said that returnees and IDPs (20 out of 39 and 15 out of 39, respectively) would struggle to meet their food needs. Although these are perceptions, the depiction of women and older people as more at risk of reducing or skipping meals mirrors findings from WFP, UNHCR, and the Gender in Humanitarian Action working group (UNHCR 27/08/2025; WFP 05/01/2023; GiHA 23/11/2022). Women in Afghanistan are more likely than men to skip meals, both because of societal pressure for women to put their children's needs ahead of their own and because women tend to personally choose to put their children's needs first (CARE 01/11/2022). When resources are limited, girls may also receive less or lower-quality food than boys (HBS 07/08/2017).

7.2 Borrowing money, selling assets, and begging

Most (27 out of 39) ACAPS household interview respondents said they borrowed money to access healthcare, highlighting that at least some households are using debt to meet their needs. A smaller number reported borrowing food (21 out of 39), acquiring food on credit (13 out of 39), or sending household members to beg (8 out of 39). Respondents' heavy reliance on debt mirrors results from studies by the Asia Displacement Solutions Platform and IOM, which found that households across Herat province and in Dasht e Kahdestan relied heavily on debt to meet their basic needs, with borrowing reaching up to 100% among recently displaced people. Among ACAPS' study participants, the drivers of debt included unmet food or healthcare needs and the costs of mitigating the impacts of climate and natural hazards (ADSP 01/09/2025; IOM 15/09/2025 and 20/03/2025). While IDPs and returnees were consistently identified in the literature as among those with the highest rates of debt, women are least likely to have access to credit and be denied access to this coping mechanism (ADSP 01/09/2025).

In one interview, an expert noted that IDPs and returnees from agricultural backgrounds, those lacking the skills to find salaried work, and women-headed households are most likely to sell household assets or turn to begging to cope (KII 29/10/2025; KII 30/10/2025 a). It is also unclear whether households who sold productive assets after the 2023 earthquakes have been able to recover them or if this has reduced their overall economic resilience (UN 21/02/2024). According to the Afghanistan 2025 Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan, across Afghanistan, women-headed households and households headed by a person with a disability were nearly twice as likely to rely on begging or charity as a coping strategy compared with the national average (OCHA 08/01/2025). Resorting to borrowing, begging, or selling assets decreases people's capacity to cope with future shocks.

7.3 Delaying or deferring healthcare

Most ACAPS household interviewees (31 out of 39) reported delaying or deferring medical care for some or all members of their household as a coping strategy. This is in line with nationwide reports on delayed healthcare access as a result of economic barriers or because a Mahram is unavailable to accompany women and girls, a consideration also influenced by economic factors – including double the transport costs for the patient and the Mahram – and the time men must take out of their day to serve as Mahram, possibly taking time away from work (Hasht-e-Subh 28/10/2025; PBS 09/08/2022). The recent requirement for women and girls to wear a burqa to enter health facilities may also delay their access to care (MSF 10/11/2025). Other challenges in accessing healthcare, including distance and lack of transportation (discussed in section 6.3 above), likely also contribute to delayed or deferred access. Delayed access to care can result in the increased severity of illness and disease, sometimes leading to death, along with more women giving birth at home.

7.4 Child labour, child marriage, and other forms of child exploitation and trafficking

Several experts noted the prevalence of children (especially IDP and returnee children or the children of women-headed households) engaging in labour, including washing cars, collecting plastic, polishing shoes, cleaning shops, street vending, and begging (KII 29/10/2025; KII 30/10/2025 a; KII 30/10/2025 b; KII 03/11/2025; KII 11/11/2025; KII 01/12/2025). Some experts noted an increase in boys working in the streets and even cases of girls begging or collecting scraps (KII 30/10/2025 b; KII 03/11/2025; KII 11/11/2025). ACAPS household interviewees also mentioned child labour as a coping strategy, including one household that tried to send their 13-year-old son to Iran for work but said it was "unsuccessful". One FGD participant explained, *"Children have turned to hazardous work, and child exploitation and abuse have increased… Children are trafficked for labour."* (FGD 1) Two experts observed that women and girls working outside the home are at increased risk of sexual harassment or sexual exploitation (KII 03/11/2025; KII 11/11/2025).

Child marriage, especially for girls, was also a commonly cited coping strategy, especially among IDP, returnee, and women-headed households (FGD 1; FGD 2; KII 30/10/2025 a; KII 30/10/2025 b; KII 03/11/2025; KII 11/11/2025). One expert suggested that the burden of the Mahram requirement has contributed to an increase in child marriage. Another expert associated challenges in accessing shelter and food with a higher likelihood of early marriage for girls to alleviate economic pressure on their families. Yet another explained, *"Families think that sacrificing one child will save others. They receive money for forced marriage. These cases have increased a lot recently. We have even seen the case of a seven-year-old girl getting engaged."* (KII 30/10/2025 b) ACAPS household interviewees also mentioned child marriage as a coping strategy. One reported betrothing their 12-year-old daughter because of unemployment, and two reported trying to arrange their daughters' marriages but being prevented by NGOs and doctors. A fourth respondent said, *"There are times that I've thought about selling my child."*

Both child marriage and the 'selling' of children as a coping strategy were also mentioned by women FGD participants in Herat city and male FGD participants in rural Injil (FGD 3; FGD 4). One expert interviewee noted that earthquake-affected households still living in tents are more likely to 'sell' their children into marriage (KII 30/10/2025 b). Although the dynamics of these reported exchanges are unclear, reports of selling children have emerged in other studies, both in Herat and across Afghanistan. In just one IDP settlement in Injil district, the Afghanistan Peace Campaign reported 118 girls sold into marriage and 116 families waiting for 'buyers', accounting for 40% of the households they surveyed (Afghanistan Peace Campaign 15/01/2024). Similarly, in Balkh, at least one IDP mentioned 'selling' children when speaking to ACAPS data collection responders (ACAPS 14/08/2025). Other humanitarian responders and media outlets have documented the 'selling' of children – both boys and girls – in Afghanistan to cope with rising poverty and unemployment. These 'sales' can be for marriage, adoption, or possibly labour, and their rise has been attributed to the combination of economic hardship and restrictions on girls, preventing them from accessing schools or working, leaving women-headed households more vulnerable to poverty (Hasht-e-Subh 28/01/2024; Protection Cluster 28/02/2023; Afghanistan Peace Campaign 15/01/2024; The Amargi 20/09/2025).

7.5 Organ trafficking

A final coping strategy to emerge in the data was selling organs. One male FGD participant in Injil shared, *"When people faced these [economic challenges], they turned to selling body parts… Several people from this same village sold body parts, namely their kidneys, because they suffer from economic poverty"* (FGD 3) Poverty has fuelled an illegal organ trade in Afghanistan, with one settlement in Herat province even dubbed 'one-kidney village' in 2022 because the practice was so widespread there (TBP 03/06/2023; France 24 28/02/2022). In some cases, parents told a media outlet that they felt they were stuck between selling their kidney or their child (AJ 28/02/2022). At the same time, individuals selling kidneys find they often end up with additional health issues, limiting their ability to work and support their families (TBP 03/06/2023; AJ 28/02/2022). The ITA has since banned organ transplants, though it is unclear if this was because of the increase in organ trafficking. The ban, however, also deprives Afghans in need of transplants from accessing life-saving healthcare (RFE/RL 20/12/2024).