

### OVERVIEW

Households in Aybak district have faced steadily worsening challenges in meeting basic needs in recent years, especially in the last 12 months, driven in particular by rising unemployment, drought across Samangan, and the impact of the 2025 earthquake (EI 28/01/2026 a; EI 07/01/2026; EI 08/01/2026; EI 01/01/2026; EI 27/01/2026 b). The arrival of IDPs fleeing drought, flooding, and the earthquake's impacts from other parts of Samangan – along with returnees from Pakistan and Iran, who congregate in Aybak city – has strained the already fragile services and infrastructure of this small, relatively urbanised provincial centre. Reliance on daily wage labour, an often insecure and unreliable income source, is notably high compared with other districts and increasingly competitive following the arrival of climate IDPs and returnees from abroad. Access to humanitarian assistance, community support, and more reliable employment opportunities, for example in the civil service, is often determined by social connections, potentially excluding women and other marginalised groups.

In this increasingly pressured context, households in Aybak district face significant unmet needs, with the **unaffordability of food, health, rent, and education cited as major challenges**. The most common cause of concern for participants in this study was the cost of basic goods and services, rather than their availability. That said, clean water was highlighted as both unavailable and too costly, as were healthcare and education in more rural parts of the district. Different households and individuals experience varying degrees of vulnerability to these unmet needs, but nearly all rely on coping strategies with potentially harmful consequences, including a notable proportion of interviewed **households that regularly go entire days without eating, and/or send their children to work**. Under the strain of these needs, traditional structures of community-based support are eroding.

### ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report is part of a series on **localised vulnerability in Afghanistan**, made possible with the support and coordination of the Afghanistan Protection Cluster and its members. This localised approach aims to identify location-specific causes and manifestations of vulnerability to unmet needs and better understand how people experience and mitigate them.

Reports in the series include analyses of districts in Herat, Baghlan (forthcoming) and Nangarhar (forthcoming) provinces.

#### Aim

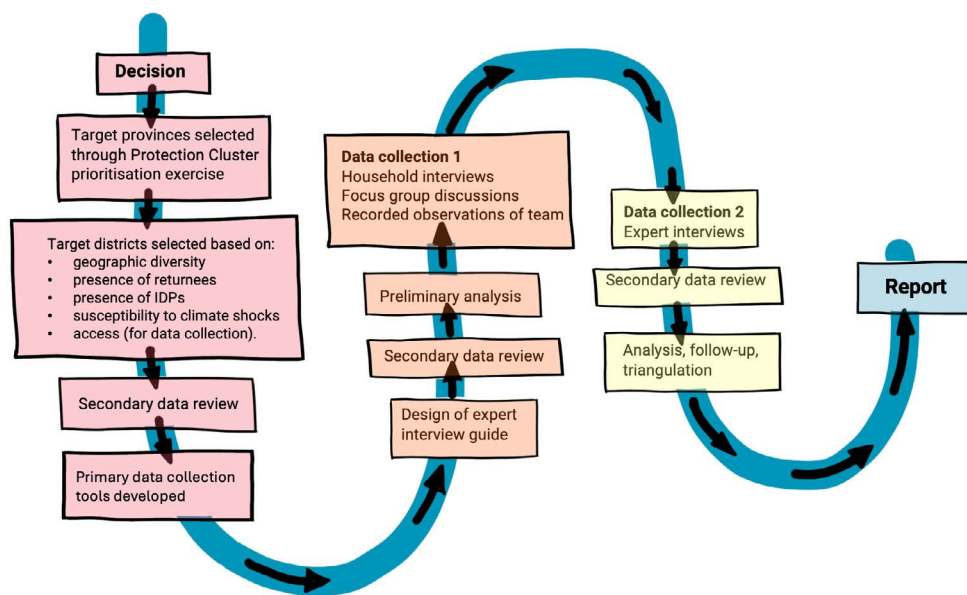
This report aims to support operational actors to identify programming priorities and potential entry points for improving the design and targeting of humanitarian activities by:

- providing insight into possible drivers of multidimensional vulnerability
- revealing context-specific perceptions of what makes certain people more vulnerable to unmet basic needs
- enhancing understanding of different coping strategies that communities and households use to mitigate vulnerability.

#### Methodology and limitations

Data for this study was collected in Aybak district, Samangan province, in the provincial centre and surrounding periurban/semirural and rural areas. The findings presented here are based on primary data collected by Protection Cluster partners and ACAPS. Secondary data was used to inform the selection of locations for the localised vulnerability analyses, design the data collection tools, and triangulate and substantiate findings from the interviews.

Figure 1. Research process



The themes and issues discussed are those that emerged from the primary data. The provinces were selected through a prioritisation exercise conducted with the Afghanistan Protection Cluster to identify which ones faced the highest protection needs and risks. ACAPS selected the districts within the provinces that presented selected features that may aggravate vulnerability, namely a presence of returnees and IDPs and heightened exposure to climate shocks; that were geographically diverse from one another; and where there was access for Protection Cluster partners to collect primary data.

Data collectors purposely selected households that met the general criteria likely to put them at risk of being unable to meet needs. The breakdown of households is shown below in Table 1.

Households were interviewed using a questionnaire containing a mix of open and closed questions. A preliminary analysis of their responses identified areas for follow-up with in-depth interviews with Afghan context experts, which added contextual details and explanations.

Table 1. Primary data summary

<b>NUMBER OF HOUSEHOLDS INTERVIEWED</b>	<b>40</b>
Number of women-headed households	18
Number of men-headed households	22
<b>NUMBER OF INTERVIEWS WITH AFGHAN CONTEXT EXPERTS</b>	<b>8</b>
Number of women experts	3
Number of men experts	5
<b>NUMBER OF FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS (FGDS)</b>	<b>5 (WITH 10–17 PARTICIPANTS EACH)</b>
FGD composition: 3 with women participants, 2 with men; including a mix of IDPs, returnees, older people, youth, people with disabilities, and ethnic minorities	

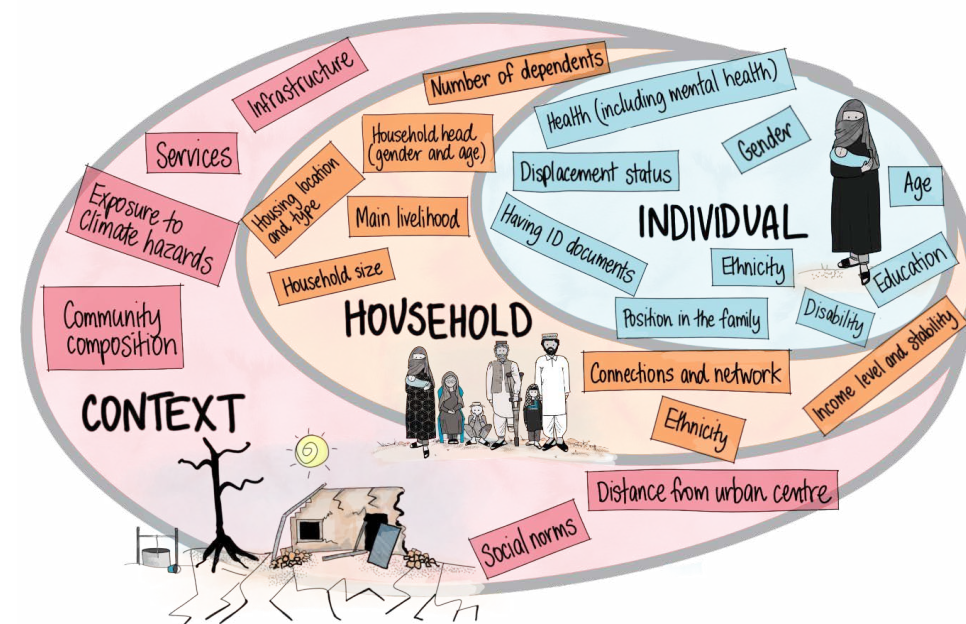
Interviews with context experts are referenced in the text as EI, household interviews as HH#, and site observations by the research team as DO.

This is a qualitative study, and while every effort has been made to select experts carefully and to acknowledge and consider potential biases and shortcomings in the analysis, the findings should be considered indicative of the lived experiences of the people in Aybak. They may be indicative for understanding other similar locations but are not generalisable.

Table 2. Key concepts

TERM	DEFINITION
Basic needs	The essential goods, utilities, services, or resources required to ensure survival and minimum living standards without resorting to potentially harmful coping strategies or compromising health, dignity, and safety (Okular Analytics/STC 03/09/2018).
Coping strategies	The different ways individuals, households, and communities meet their basic needs, especially in the face of shocks or times of crisis. Examples of coping strategies, including those with potentially harmful consequences, identified in previous ACAPS research in Afghanistan include internal mobility, sending children to work, and relying on humanitarian assistance (ACAPS 03/06/2024 and 16/06/2023).
Multidimensional vulnerability	The set of conditions determined by intersecting context-level, household, and individual factors that increase susceptibility to unmet basic needs, including protection needs.
Factors influencing vulnerability	<p><b>Context-level factors</b> include social cohesion or fragmentation; discriminatory norms and practices; the strength or erosion of informal safety nets, social networks, and solidarity mechanisms; the presence of services and infrastructure; the displacement composition of the community; and exposure to climate and natural hazards.</p> <p><b>Household-level factors</b> include the characteristics that influence the household's vulnerability to unmet needs, harm, or having its interests overlooked. These could include the gender and age of the household head, legal and displacement status, income sources within the household, and other characteristics, such as the number of dependents or health needs of members.</p> <p><b>Individual-level factors</b> include the characteristics of an individual, such as gender, age, and disability, that influence the vulnerability of that individual (or others dependent on them) to unmet needs, harm, or having their interests overlooked.</p>

Figure 2. Factors influencing vulnerability



Source: ACAPS

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

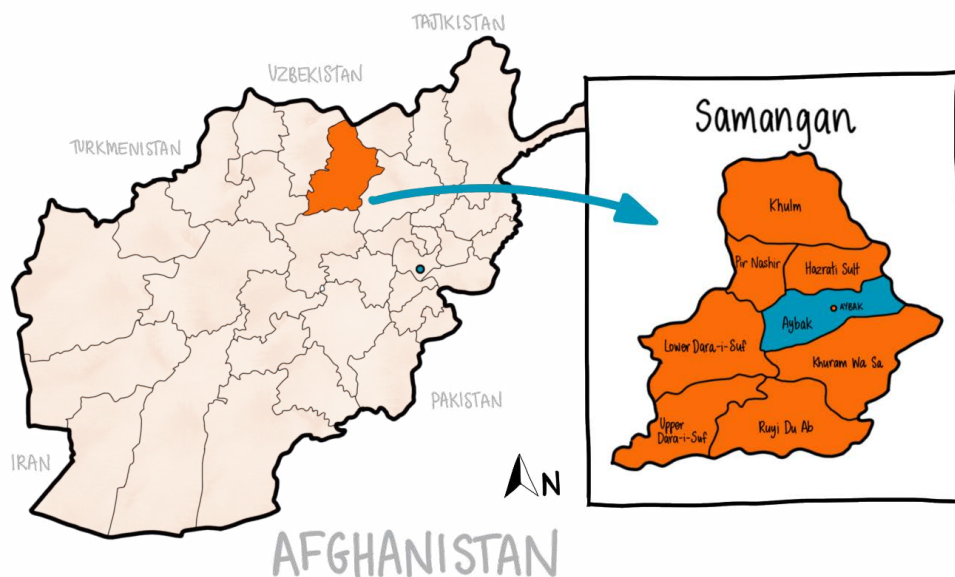
Table of contents .....	3
Background: Aybak district, Samangan province .....	4
Context-level shocks and stresses in Aybak district .....	5
Vulnerability to unmet needs in Aybak district .....	8
Coping strategies .....	11

## BACKGROUND: AYBAK DISTRICT, SAMANGAN PROVINCE

### Geography and demography

Samangan province, in northern Afghanistan, borders Baghlan, Balkh, Bamyan, Kunduz, and Saripul provinces. It is primarily mountainous and semi-mountainous, with farmland throughout the north and east (IOM 14/02/2022). The province is divided into eight districts (with Khulm district transferred from Balkh in 2022) (ATN 09/08/2022). Its population of 678,400 is ethnically diverse, comprising Uzbeks, Tajiks, Pashtuns, Hazaras, Tartars, Turkmens, and Arabs. Dari and Uzbeki are the most widely spoken languages, followed by Pashto (IOM 20/03/2025; GWOT 20/09/2023; NPS accessed 29/01/2026).

Map 1. Location of Samangan province in Afghanistan; location of Aybak in Samangan



Source: ACAPS

Aybak is the most urbanised district of Samangan province, although 71.4% of its 118,550 inhabitants live in rural areas (according to 2020 population projections), in settlements interspersed with agricultural land (IOM 14/02/2022; City Population accessed 11/02/2026 a). The district's urban centre itself is not large compared to other provincial capitals in the north, with a population of 33,900 in Aybak city compared to 484,500 in Mazar-e-Sharif in Balkh province or 123,700 in Pul-e-Khumri in Baghlan (City Population accessed 11/02/2026 b).

### Economy and livelihoods

Samangan's economy is largely rural and reliant on natural resources. Manual and unskilled labour account for a significant proportion of income-generating activity in Aybak district specifically.

Table 3. Comparison of main income-generating activities for households in northern Afghanistan, Samangan province, and Aybak district in 2021

MAIN INCOME SECTOR	NORTHERN AFGHANISTAN	SAMANGAN PROVINCE	AYBAK DISTRICT
Manual/unskilled labour	38.6%	34.9%	55%
Agriculture	27.6%	25.5%	16%
Livestock	13%	20.1%	13%

Source: IOM (14/02/2022)

More recent IOM data from March 2025 indicates that only 18.7% of Samangan's population engages in different forms of farming or livestock rearing, which may indicate a decrease in agricultural livelihoods in the province (IOM 20/03/2025). This may be partly attributable to the growing impact of climate and natural hazards on agricultural livelihoods. In the primary data collected in Aybak for this study, 29 households indicated changing their main source of income in the six months before data collection, and several experts discussed the detrimental impact of drought, floods, and other climate and natural hazards on the area, particularly on rainfed agriculture, which accounts for around 85% of agriculture in the province (EI 18/01/2026; EI 17/01/2026; EI 28/01/2026 b).



*“In Samangan, livelihoods are deteriorating. The majority of people live in poverty, and unemployment is increasing. The agricultural sector has been significantly affected by droughts and increased flooding.”* (EI 18/01/2026)

Coal is the single biggest export earner from Afghanistan, with over 500 mines, primarily in Dara-e-Suf-e-Bala district, as well as Dara-e-Suf-e-Payin and Ruy-e-Duab districts of Samangan. Labour in the coal mines provides an important source of employment outside agriculture (GEM accessed 11/02/2026; XCEPT 01/04/2024).

### Climate and natural hazards

Decades of deforestation owing to conflict, poverty, and a lack of sustainable alternatives to firewood have increased Samangan communities’ vulnerability to both drought and flooding (Afghanaid 17/04/2025). Samangan is currently among the northern provinces most affected by Afghanistan’s six years of hydrological and meteorological drought (OCHA 30/12/2025). By mid-2025, it was one of the provinces in Afghanistan with the most widespread precipitation deficits and significant deterioration in vegetation conditions, triggering severe drought conditions and agricultural losses (OCHA 31/05/2025 and 27/07/2025). Aybak is among the Samangan districts classified to be at high very high risk of drought (IWMI 08/12/2023).

In recent years, periods of heavy flooding in the province have also caused significant infrastructure loss, damage, and displacement (IOM 20/03/2025).

Samangan experiences winter from around November–March, when average minimum temperatures drop below 0° C. Precipitation increases starting in November and peaks from March–April. During summer, from around June–August, there is minimal to no precipitation, and average maximum temperatures approach 30° C (WB accessed 06/11/2025).

## CONTEXT-LEVEL SHOCKS AND STRESSES IN AYBAK DISTRICT

*“People in Aybak have faced many challenges, the most significant of which are severe droughts, a lack of shelter, and an increased number of returnees. People struggle to access food and clean water.”* (EI 01/01/2026)

**The perception of all context experts and 36 of the 40 households interviewed for this study was that living conditions in Aybak have deteriorated in the past year.**

This deterioration is driven by varied shocks and chronic stresses across Aybak district described below, compounded by the impact of changes and restrictions introduced by the ITA across Afghanistan.

### Climate hazards drive internal displacement and challenges in meeting needs

**The impact of climate hazards has driven internal displacement across rural areas of Samangan, including Aybak district, to the urban centre of Aybak city.**

A 2025 UNHCR REACH assessment identified Samangan as a hotspot for climate displacement, as poverty linked with climate impacts drives families to relocate within the province (UNHCR 28/08/2025). Many climate IDPs congregate in Aybak; between 2021 and March 2025, the district received nearly 11,600 IDPs, the highest number across Samangan, accounting for nearly 10% of Aybak’s 2020 population of 118,550 people (IOM 15/07/2025; City Population accessed 11/02/2026 a). The humanitarian responders interviewed for this study reported that many of the IDPs arriving in Aybak have had to relocate because of climate hazards in other parts of Samangan province, such as the drought and flooding in Dara-e-Suf-e-Bala and Ruy-e-Duab districts (EI 17/01/2026; EI 01/01/2026; EI 08/01/2026).

*“Climate change has had a significant impact on all communities in rural Aybak, particularly those reliant on agriculture and livestock for income. Prolonged drought has resulted in families losing their livestock, which was a critical source of income in rural areas, where each household typically owned more than 30 sheep or goats that provided a stable revenue stream. Climate change-induced droughts have also affected agriculture by drying up pastures, forcing households to sell their livestock and leading to income loss.”* (EI 17/01/2026)

*“1,800 residents of Dara-e-Suf-e-Bala and Ruy-e-Duab were forced to relocate to Aybak city as a result of drought and the drying up of rainwater sources (known as Kanda).”* (EI 08/01/2026)

*“Droughts and earthquakes have had a great impact, disrupting livelihoods, shelter, and access to food, education, and health. Thousands of people have been displaced, homes have been destroyed, and people have lost agricultural land and access to clean water.” (EI 28/01/2026 b)*

Households in Aybak reliant on agriculture and livestock have faced significant drought-related impacts, as their previously stable income source no longer provides for their needs. Displacement from rural areas of Aybak and other parts of Samagan into urban Aybak in some cases provides more opportunities for employment, especially unskilled daily wage labour. It also enables improved access to services, which are not available or are less accessible in rural areas (EI 17/01/2026). That said, movement into the urban centre does not address all the challenges posed by climate hazards. For example, the city faces drought-induced water access issues, and many households must pay for water. At the same time, climate-displaced people who primarily worked in the agriculture sector frequently lack the skills and training necessary to find employment in Aybak city (EI 08/01/2026).

### **Returnees from Pakistan and Iran also contribute to increased pressure on resources and infrastructure**

Samangan is not a main destination province for returnees from Pakistan and Iran in terms of overall numbers, but because Aybak is a small provincial capital, the impact of the returnees on the host community is notable. Between January 2021–March 2025, returnees arriving in Aybak district made up over 10% of its population (11,945 of 118,550 people) (IOM 15/07/2025; City Population accessed 11/02/2026 a). Like elsewhere in Afghanistan, returnees arrive in Aybak with minimal belongings, assets, and social and community connections, with some returnees having spent decades in Iran or Pakistan (EI 01/01/2026).

The combined arrival of returnees from abroad and people displaced from within Samangan increases competition for employment and shelter, driving up prices, including rent (EI 17/01/2026; EI 27/01/2026 b). Public services, including healthcare and education, are increasingly overstretched (EI 01/01/2026; EI 28/01/2026 a). All the experts consulted for this study suggested that the **increase in the population vying for resources and jobs in Aybak is a key contributing factor to challenges in meeting needs.**

*“The overcrowding in Aybak city has led to increased competition over resources, higher house rents, and overall poverty in Samangan province.” (EI 28/01/2026 b)*

Several of the experts acknowledged a heightened sense of tension in parts of Aybak, with community members expressing concerns over increased violence in communities triggered by overcrowding and unemployment. They observe that conflicts and violence sometimes occur for no obvious reason, making people reluctant to travel far from home and to allow their children outside without supervision (EI 28/01/2026 a; EI 28/01/2026 b).

### **Economic shocks, including loss of longstanding livelihoods, make meeting needs challenging**

**Experts recurrently noted that the main economic shock facing people in Aybak is the loss of household income**, with multiple experts observing that unemployment has risen recently (EI 01/01/2026; EI 28/01/2026 b; EI 17/01/2026; EI 08/01/2026). Unemployment is high across Afghanistan, with 44% of households reporting loss of employment in the six months preceding the 2025 Food Security Assessment (IPC 16/12/2025). There are indications that Samangan may be particularly affected; an early 2024 FAO nationwide sample survey found that it reported the highest loss of employment among Afghanistan’s provinces in the preceding three months, affecting nearly 60% of the households surveyed in the province (FAO 03/06/2024).

Multiple factors drive unemployment in Aybak, including changes to staffing in the public service sector, ITA restrictions on women’s employment, the impact of droughts on agriculture, and the increased number of people in the provincial centre competing for work (Hmoon et al. 12/02/2025).

*“The number of unemployed people has increased because of the ban on women’s employment, the challenges of working in the government sector, the devastation of the agricultural and livestock sectors, droughts, and overcrowding because of the high number of returnees.” (EI 28/01/2026 b)*

24 of the 40 households interviewed depended on daily wage labour as their main source of income, and 33 had gone into debt. The households’ answers to open-ended questions, along with some of the expert interviews, indicate that this dependence is increasing, particularly for those who have recently lost more stable employment. Daily wage labour is generally unstable and irregular, and as more people move into urban areas, there is likely to be even greater competition for it.

## Many people face inequitable access to essential resources, employment, and assistance

Several interviewed experts mentioned that networks and connections, including with ITA officials, influence individual and household access to aid in Aybak (EI 28/01/2026 b; EI 28/01/2026 a). Discrimination on the basis of social capital and connections with the ITA may also play a role in access to employment in civil and security services in the district (EI 01/01/2026; XCEPT 01/04/2024). With increasing strain on limited resources, employment opportunities, and infrastructure, the mobilisation of social capital may be a growing source of community tensions and a potential threat to social cohesion.

*“People who have a good network or some kind of connection to humanitarian organisations or community leaders are more likely to receive support.”* (EI 28/01/2026 b)

While this analysis did not directly gather data on discrimination against ethnic minorities, ethnicity may influence the social connections that enable access to aid, services, and employment in the district, given that Samangan was among the provinces with the highest rates of discrimination against ethnic minorities and other marginalised groups reported nationally in 2025, according to the Protection Analysis Update. This discrimination manifested in systemic policy-based exclusion, localised stigmatisation, and the denial of services (Protection Cluster 31/10/2025).

One context expert noted that social network-related barriers to accessing aid also interact with gendered barriers, as ITA restrictions on women’s movement and participation in public life impede some women’s knowledge of what support is available and how to access it (EI 28/01/2026 a). A 2023 Ground Truth Solutions survey of 1,925 people, including people in Samangan, found that women in rural areas have a better understanding of the assistance available than those in urban areas (such as Aybak city), possibly because women in rural areas have stronger social networks than women in urban areas (GTS 30/06/2023).

One context expert also noted that many of the people they speak to no longer feel they can safely complain about conditions, including discriminatory aid distribution, and that there are fewer organisations to represent and support them (EI 01/01/2026). This diminishes accountability for aid providers and, without a formal outlet for feedback and complaints, risks increasing dissatisfaction within the community, possibly leading to tensions.

### Challenges in accessing civil and legal documentation

Challenges linked to lack of access to civil and legal documentation, which is a significant driver of inequitable access to services and assistance across Afghanistan, were widely discussed across the household interviews. 36 of the 40 interviewed households reported challenges related to lack of documentation (16 faced these regularly, 20 occasionally), consistent with Protection Cluster monitoring in 2024, which found that 55% of households across Afghanistan had at least one member (disproportionately, women and girls) lacking documentation (Protection Cluster 11/06/2024). Some reports suggest that access to civil and legal documentation has become even more important under the ITA for a range of processes and services, including movement within the country; access to healthcare, education, government benefits, and humanitarian assistance; accommodation rentals; and SIM card registration (AAN 07/07/2025; Protection Cluster 11/06/2024). This means that potentially, significant numbers of households may experience impeded access.

### The November 2026 earthquake worsened pre-existing challenges related to displacement, climate hazards, economic shocks, and discrimination

Aybak was one of the districts most affected by the magnitude-6.3 earthquake on 3 November 2025 (WHO 03/11/2025). The earthquake killed 13 people and injured 421 in Samangan province, besides damaging health facilities, WASH infrastructure, and hundreds of houses, including 595 in Aybak district (ECHO 04/11/2025; WHO 07/11/2025). Agricultural land and infrastructure were particularly affected, including the winter wheat planting, which may affect the summer 2026 harvest and potentially increase the number of people displaced to Aybak city after losing their agricultural livelihoods. By February, most affected families continued to live in damaged homes, which sometimes shelter multiple families, or were staying with host families, with minimal access to basic services and humanitarian assistance (Protection Cluster forthcoming).

## VULNERABILITY TO UNMET NEEDS IN AYBAK DISTRICT

Factors at the context, household, and individual levels intersect and aggravate each other to influence vulnerability to unmet needs in Aybak district.

### Vulnerability to unmet food needs

**The unaffordability of food was the most cited challenge by households in Aybak**, along with inadequate work and income opportunities. When given the opportunity to rate their level of concern about food security on a severity scale of 0 (no severity) to 10 (persistent and major concern), 27 households rated food-related issues as 10 and a further nine households as 9. This produced an average severity score of 9.5/10 for food-related issues in Aybak, among the highest score across different needs assessed in this study.

The most discussed coping strategies were decreasing food diversity, with all 40 households reducing red meat consumption and most reducing fish (39/40), fruit (39/40), and at least one form of dairy (35/40), and relying on less-expensive foods (38/40). Households also reported limiting portions at mealtimes (34/40) and borrowing food from friends and relatives (31/40), **suggesting that relying on social networks is still an important coping strategy for some households**. Highlighting just how challenging the food security situation is for many households, 21 reported reducing the number of meals consumed in a day, and 14 reported going entire days without eating.

Households gave a variety of answers to an open-ended question about skipping meals and household prioritisation given inadequate food. The household head was most likely to reduce or go without food, often joined by their spouse and other adults (5/40 responses indicated just the household head; 19/40 responses indicated the household head together with other adults). Nine out of 40 households indicated that older family members (grandparents) may be most likely to reduce food in favour of other family members. None of the households reported that women and girls skipped meals in favour of male family members. **It appears that children are prioritised because of their nutritional needs.**

The serious concern households expressed over food security is in line with IPC projections of a **significant deterioration of food security in the wider Samangan province for the November 2025 to March 2026 period**, with increasing numbers of people facing Emergency (IPC Phase 4) food insecurity in the province; over 330,000 people are projected to experience Crisis (IPC Phase 3) or worse food insecurity levels, including 132,000 facing IPC 4 levels (IPC 16/12/2025).

*“The issue lies not in the lack of food and goods in the market but rather in people’s inability to afford these essentials.” (EI 17/01/2026)*

Among the households and experts consulted for this study, loss of livelihoods and household income was framed as the major factor in people’s vulnerability to unmet food needs in Aybak. They stressed that it is often unaffordability, not unavailability, that affects households’ food consumption in the district. With an apparently increasing number of households relying on daily wage labour, which is irregular and unstable, as their main income source, vulnerability to food insecurity may increase. Among the households interviewed for this study, those reliant on daily wage labour (24 of 40) more frequently reported being unable to afford items required for cooking when compared with households that relied on small businesses, farming, and other income sources. No returnee households reported being able to afford these items, which may be because returnees from abroad are often more likely to face unemployment and heavy reliance on casual daily wage labour, and also because they are rebuilding their lives, having brought limited possessions with them (UNDP 12/11/2025).

*“These people, along with their families, went to Iran and have now returned to Samangan. They sold everything they had, including household items, land, and houses. Now they have returned with nothing, which makes them more vulnerable to risk.” (EI 27/01/2026 a)*

## Vulnerability to unmet shelter needs

Lack of access to shelter was the third most frequently cited challenge by households interviewed in Aybak. 33 of the 40 households classified **shelter and housing needs as the most severe**, with an average severity score of 9.7/10.

Lack of access to shelter was the most frequently cited challenge faced by **IDP and returnee households** during interviews. Seven out of nine returnee households reported access to shelter and food as their main challenge, and 11 of the 19 IDP households reported access to shelter as their main challenge. Based on household data, IDP households and returnees were more likely to live in shared dwellings and rental properties. Interviews with context experts added that they were also often seen in unfinished, damaged, temporary, or makeshift homes (including tents) with inadequate shelter conditions. Meanwhile, some host community families are experiencing significant overcrowding (EI 28/01/2026 a).

About half of the households interviewed for this study rented their homes, heightening their risk of experiencing rental price hikes. One context expert noted that the influx of both IDPs from rural areas and returnees to Aybak has aggravated shelter needs by contributing to increased rental costs in the centre, which many (including host community households) are unable to afford, leading to insecure tenure (EI 28/01/2026 b). Many returnees households across Afghanistan face insecure tenure, linked with both limited income and the barriers (including cost) to obtaining the civil and legal documentation necessary to assert their housing, land, and property rights (Afghanistan Protection Cluster 26/12/2024).

*“The arrival of returnees has created challenges for both themselves and host communities. Access to shelter has become more competitive, leading to increased rents in Aybak city.”* (EI 17/01/2026)

**Those affected by climate and natural hazards, including the November earthquake**, also appear to be more vulnerable to unmet shelter needs. One of the context experts explained that, while it is common for extended families to live in overcrowded shared dwellings, the earthquake has aggravated overcrowding, with seven to ten people sharing a room, frequently in a damaged house (EI 28/01/2026 b). Overcrowding can increase vulnerability to health risks, such as the spread of infectious diseases, especially if WASH facilities are not sufficient for the number of people.

## Vulnerability to unmet health needs

**Lack of healthcare access was the second most frequently cited challenge by the households in Aybak.** Issues related to access to healthcare and medication were also classified as one of the most severe, at 9.55/10.

Looking at specific health needs, most households (34/40) identified access to medicines and medications as their main need, followed by general access to healthcare services, such as clinics and hospitals (31/40) and mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) (28/40).

**Again, affordability, rather than availability, appears to be the major barrier to accessing health in Aybak, particularly in urbanised areas.** Reflecting this, 38 of the 40 interviewed households reported being unable to afford regular medical expenses. 39 households reported going into debt to pay for healthcare, and 38 delayed or deferred healthcare because they could not afford it. Government-provided healthcare was free in the past, but the ITA is increasingly imposing fees at public health facilities. This is alongside other costs associated with buying medication, laboratory tests, and transportation to reach services (EI 17/01/2026; EI 08/01/2026; EI 28/01/2026 b). Women also need to travel with a male relative because of the Mahram requirement, further increasing travel costs.

**Travel costs are particularly prohibitive for households in more rural parts of Aybak district, where healthcare availability is more of a problem** than in urban Aybak. IOM data from early 2025 indicates that across Samangan, only 11% of assessed communities reported access to even a basic healthcare centre, with only 1% reporting access to a comprehensive healthcare centre (IOM 15/07/2025). Several experts reported people in rural Aybak travelling four to five hours to reach a healthcare facility (EI 08/01/2026; EI 28/01/2026 b). In 2023, the number of beds in the provincial hospital in Aybak city increased from 80 to 240 (Pajhwok Afghan News 30/08/2023).

**The impacts of the 2025 earthquake and other climate hazards on people’s mental health and psychosocial wellbeing may be driving the relatively frequent reports of MHPSS needs**, particularly among interviewed IDPs in Aybak. The earthquake and associated displacement, loss of loved ones, and damage to livelihoods and homes have caused significant fear, anxiety, and depression among affected communities

in Samangan, including Aybak (Protection Cluster forthcoming). Previous ACAPS research identified that climate hazards and associated displacement in northern Afghanistan have contributed to significant fear and anxiety among affected households (ACAPS 14/08/2025). Gender is also a factor in MHPSS needs; one FGD with female IDPs reported increasing rates of women and girls experiencing depression in recent years, which is consistent with wider reports on the mental health and psychosocial impacts of ITA restrictions on the demographic (FGD 08/12/2025; Protection Cluster 31/10/2025).

### Trachoma in Aybak, a potential indicator of worsening conditions

Several experts reported an outbreak of trachoma in Samangan (EI 01/01/2026; EI 28/01/2026 a). Trachoma is a bacterial eye infection that can have serious consequences. Infection often reoccurs, becoming very painful and frequently leading to the scarring of the eyelids and irreversible blindness. Trachoma is related to poverty and deprivation, often occurring where living conditions are crowded, water is scarce, and hygiene is inadequate. It is also a disease that disproportionately affects women because of their increased exposure to the infection in their role caring for young children (Fred Hollows Foundation accessed 12/02/2026; WHO 28/11/2025).

While no secondary sources could be found about the outbreak, trachoma is known to be endemic in Afghanistan, and a research study that collected data from 2018–2019 found 52 cases in 965 children examined in three districts of Samangan, including Aybak (Salam et al. 10/03/2022). Some research suggests that there may be a link between chronic malnutrition and children's susceptibility to trachoma (Smith et al. 14/08/2007). Malnutrition in Samangan is projected to remain at IPC 3 levels, with 10–14.9% of children acutely malnourished until May 2026. The IPC report notes, however, that worsening malnutrition may be compounded in provinces that face severe drought and in those affected by the November earthquake. It also indicates that the influx of returnees, associated overcrowding, and potentially insufficient WASH facilities will have an impact. As all of these adverse conditions apply to Aybek, conditions conducive to the spread of trachoma are likely to persist (IPC 16/12/2025).

### Vulnerability to unmet WASH needs

All 40 interviewed households reported that both water quantity and quality are problematic for households in Aybak. For these households, water for drinking, cooking, and hygiene was more of a problem than water for sanitation, but this is not necessarily indicative of all areas of Aybak. Specifically, 24 of the 40 households reported being unable to access enough water for all their household needs, and 18 did not have enough water for drinking and cooking. Hygiene and latrine access were reported as concerns by seven and five of the 40 households, respectively. This is consistent with REACH data from early 2025 indicating that, in Aybak, 86% of households reported insufficient water and sanitation treatment capacity in their community and 76% reported that their water supply was not clean (REACH 27/04/2025).

**Once again, affordability was a significant determining factor in household access to water**, with 22 of the 40 households unable to afford water, even though 29 said water was available.

A WASH expert in Aybak stated that **vulnerability to unmet water needs affects almost everyone, at least to some degree**. They note that households that can afford it purchase clean water for drinking and cooking. In urban parts of Aybak, this service is available via water tankers or small, three-wheeled motorcycle tankers. **People without the financial resources to pay for water are the most vulnerable to unmet water needs**, alongside people living in rural areas, where water for purchase is less available and likely costs more because of the longer distances needed to transport it and travel required to access it (EI 17/01/2026). Another expert reported people knowingly consuming untreated water because they have no other choice (EI 08/01/2026). In one FGD with female IDPs, the participants reported that clean water was among their biggest challenges, as they obtained water from a river about 1km away, and consuming this water led to diseases, particularly during summer (FGD 08/12/2025 a). Waterborne diseases, including cholera, dysentery, and typhoid, are all prevalent in Afghanistan, and acute watery diarrhoea is one of the leading causes of death among Afghan children under five (Afghanaid 27/07/2023).



## Vulnerability to missing out on education

Across households, there were 103 school-aged children. **Fewer than half (46/103) were reported by their families to be attending school.** While the interviews did not gather data on children's gender, a disproportionate number of these out-of-school children were likely girls, given the ban on girls' education beyond grade six (Protection Cluster 31/10/2025). The interviewed experts observed that in Aybak, girls from families that can afford and are willing to educate them only do so up until sixth grade, indicating potentially low rates of education for girls even before sixth grade.

Aside from gender, when considering factors that impede education access for boys and girls below sixth grade in Aybak, 33 of the interviewed households said that inability to afford school fees is preventing their children from going to school. Several experts agreed that **the costs associated with sending children to school, even public schools without fees, were prohibitive for many families** (EI 08/01/2026).

Reinforcing this link between educational access and poverty, **23 households reported that their children are not going to school because they need to work to support the household.** This is consistent with experts' observation by experts that boys who start school are often dropping out by age 12–14 because of the pressure to earn money for their households (EI 08/01/2026).

**Long distances and unsafe routes to schools** were also discussed as major factors impeding education access in rural parts of Aybak district, reported by half of the 40 interviewed households. Experts added that although there are schools in the urban parts of Aybak, in rural areas of the district, children often walk two hours to get to school (EI 27/01/2026 b; EI 08/01/2026).

*"In rural areas, the schools are far away, and children have to walk for two hours to get there. Families are very worried about their children because of the long journey and security issues, such as the risk of children being bitten by dogs or being bullied by other children."* (EI 08/01/2026)

When considering other children who may be denied access to education in Aybak, one expert noted that they were not aware of any education facilities that enabled **children with disabilities** to attend classes (EI 08/01/2026). Secondary data on stigma against children with disabilities in Afghanistan indicates that discrimination based

on social norms may also play a role in the exclusion of children with disabilities from education (UNICEF 08/2021). Several experts also suggested that while the structural barriers preventing children from going to school were similar for IDP, returnee, and host community children, **returnees often face the additional barrier of being less likely to have the documentation required to enrol in school**, consistent with reports that a lack of Tazkera (the national ID document) prevents returnee children from going to school across Afghanistan (EI 08/01/2026; EI 27/01/2026 b; Protection Cluster 26/12/2024). This is reflected in household interviews, which revealed that only two of the 20 school-aged children in returnee households were attending school.

*"I saw cases where returnees' children could not be admitted because of a lack of ID and other documentation from their previous school."* (EI 08/01/2026)

## COPING STRATEGIES

Most of the expert interviews confirmed that households and individuals have adopted a range of strategies to continue to meet needs (EI 01/01/2026). **Most of the strategies were potentially harmful**, including taking on debt, drinking unsafe water, reducing food quantity and quality, and child labour. Households frequently reported food-related coping strategies, including strategies around consuming less expensive foods, borrowing food, eating smaller portions, eating fewer meals, and **going entire days without eating (14/40 households)**. Other strategies that households mentioned frequently and experts considered important are discussed below.

As one female respondent said, when asked about actions the household had taken to overcome economic challenges,

*"What action have we NOT taken? We live in fear. We cannot travel without being accompanied. We do not have clean water, so we drink canal water. What action have we not taken?"* (HH15 13/12/2025)

This statement echoes many others given in response to this question, where there is a sense that no matter how hard a household tries, their day-to-day economic challenges are insurmountable.

*"No matter how much I work, it is not enough to cover the living expenses of our ten-person household."* (HH12 09/12/2025)

*"I look for work day and night. I do not refuse any work and do it wherever I find it."*  
(HH94 17/12/2025)

### Taking on debt

33 of the 40 households reported **accruing debt**. This echoes findings from an IOM study, which found that borrowing money was the most common coping mechanism in Samangan (mentioned by 82% of the respondents) in response to hazards and climate shocks (IOM 20/03/2025). When discussing the dynamics of debt in Aybak, context experts indicated the predominance of informal loans, such as borrowing money from extended family, community members, and landlords. Under the currently extremely challenging economic conditions in Aybak, it is likely becoming harder to find a family member with finances to lend (EI 01/01/2026; EI 27/01/2026 b; EI 28/01/2026 b).

Debt is widespread across all population groups in Afghanistan, with 80–90% of households relying on debt to meet basic needs and likely to become trapped in a cycle of financial vulnerability (UNDP 12/11/2025). If repayments are not made, the consequences can be serious. Experts discussed cases in Aybak where indebtedness had resulted in early marriages or even the exchange of a family member to settle household debts (EI 01/01/2026; EI 27/01/2026 b; EI 28/01/2026 b).

### Alternative livelihoods

In light of depleting opportunities for livelihoods based on agriculture and livestock, there was evidence that some households are attempting to diversify or change their livelihoods. Context experts said that some households have managed to **start small or household-level businesses** as street vendors, selling poultry, or making handicrafts. Context experts viewed these as positive ways of coping with financial challenges and a way to potentially pay back debts (EI 17/01/2026; EI 28/01/2026; EI 01/01/2026; EI 28/01/2026 a; EI 28/01/2026 b).

Experts indicated **that anyone in the family who can find ways to make an income will usually do so, with women** turning to jobs such as domestic labour or washing clothes for more affluent households (EI 08/01/2026; EI 28/01/2026 a). Two experts reported cases where people had learnt new vocational skills to find more secure work (EI 27/01/2026 b; EI 28/01/2026 b).

A further alternative source of employment available in Samangan province that has increased since the ITA takeover is **working in coal mines** in the districts of Dara-e-Suf Payin and Dara-e-Suf Bala. Recent data on the number of people working in the mines is not available, but in 2017, before the increase in production, the mines employed 5,000 people (EI 17/01/2026; IWPR 05/04/2017). Work in the coal mines is difficult and dangerous; there are frequent media reports of accidents, and actual numbers are likely higher than reported (SBS 11/06/2020; Xinhua 13/02/2025; AJ 15/12/2024). Despite this, **children in Aybak are also known to work in coal mines**; across Samangan, over 20% of workers in 2019 were estimated to be underage (IWPR 05/04/2017). Given the increased coal production under the ITA, this is likely to have increased (AAN 30/08/2025).

### Child labour

During household data collection, researchers also observed many **children working** in family businesses, farming or herding, selling goods, and even collecting and selling food or other items from rubbish (DO 08/12/2025). Experts indicated that they frequently saw children working in different activities to earn money for their families, including in agriculture, as street vendors, as house cleaners, or collecting wood, plastic, and metal (EI 27/01/2026 b). This is consistent with findings from the household interviews, with 23 out of 40 households reporting that their children are not going to school because they need to work to support the household. Children's work differs by location and gender. In rural areas, girls' work is usually domestic work in or around the home, while boys' work is outside. In Aybak city, experts say both boys and girls work in the bazaars doing different activities, including working as street vendors or in tea shops or begging. Context experts suggested that the increase they observed in child labour was based on an extreme need for money to pay for essentials such as water, food, and healthcare, and they expressed **concern that it exposed children to risks of harassment and violence** (EI 01/01/2026; EI 27/01/2026 b; EI 28/01/2026 a).

## Reliance on remittances

A small number of the interviewed households (4/40) said **remittances** were their main form of income. Although it is not clear from the study how widespread the reliance on remittances is in Aybak, several households indicated that they saw having a family member working abroad as a way of helping to meet their financial challenges; reflecting this, five households said they had or were exploring sending a family member abroad. One expert also framed remittances as a lifeline, observing that

*“some people receive remittances, and their lives are much better than others”* (EI 08/01/2026).

Available data on remittances in Afghanistan suggests that remittance flows fell by 60% after the ITA takeover, although annual statistics on remittances have not been updated since, so it is unclear whether remittances have fluctuated in subsequent years (WB accessed 15/02/2026). Although overall remittances may decrease as more Afghans return from Pakistan and Iran, one 2025 study, which sampled 325 households in Samangan, found that remittances still represented about 25% of these households' income (Barlas et al. 21/01/2025).

## Child marriage

**Child marriage** was mentioned multiple times by context experts as something they observed increasing as households looked for ways to cope with financial pressures. Girls and boys are both considered at risk, but experts indicated that known cases most often involved girls, for whom the risk is significantly greater (EI 28/01/2026 a; EI 01/01/2026; EI 27/01/2026 b). The marriage of a girl is expected to give her family economic benefits and potential connections. At the same time, because daughters marry out of the family home, it means one fewer person to feed (Girls Not Brides accessed 20/02/2026).

## Community support

Context experts outlined some **community-level coping strategies** where people come together to support those most in need or those affected by shocks and stresses (EI 08/01/2026). These included:

- **Short-term emergency support**, such as providing accommodation or food for several days, **organised collectively by neighbours** for people who experience shocks (EI 17/01/2026; EI 28/01/2026 b).
- **Sharing and pooling resources within the community**, such as sharing the cost of a water tanker (EI 01/01/2026).
- **Community savings groups**, where groups of people (often women) come together and make monthly contributions so that members have access to savings and credit if needed (EI 01/01/2026). These groups were established under the previous Government's Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development and, according to experts, continue under Taliban rule (WB 07/12/2016).
- **Village-level support through committees (shura)** or organised through mosques, which can be extremely helpful in providing short-term support from within the community when needed in times of crisis, such as floods or earthquakes.

*“During emergencies such as floods or earthquakes, the shura plays a crucial role in managing the situation immediately when a crisis occurs. They organise male youths from the community to rescue the injured, collect extra resources from families to distribute to those in need, and manage shelter situations. For instance, those who have lost their shelter are accommodated in houses that remain standing within the community. This support is valuable for the short term until government or other humanitarian assistance arrives at the crisis site.”* (EI 17/01/2026)

Given the current economic challenges facing Aybak, one expert noted that even though there remains a willingness for communities to support one another, the practical means to show this support are often lacking or reduced given so many households struggling to meet their own daily needs (EI 08/01/2026). Another context expert observed that as shocks and stresses have become more intense, the increase in population, from the presence of IDPs and returnees, means that needs are greater and the composition of the population has changed. This erodes some traditional structures of community-based support and connections (EI 17/01/2026).