

AFGHANISTAN

Localised vulnerability analysis: Behsud, Kot, and Surkh Rod districts, Nangarhar province



Thematic report
25 March 2026

OVERVIEW

“People try to avoid unnecessary celebrations and traditions. They avoid paying for health and education services that are not essential. They try to eat less and lower quality food. People are just alive, not living.” (EI 04/02/2026)

Households in Behsud, Kot, and Surkh Rod districts, Nangarhar province, have faced steadily increasing challenges meeting basic needs since 2021. Shocks including the significant influx of returnees from Pakistan and Iran since 2023 and IDPs since 2021, along with recurrent flooding, drought in 2024–2025, and escalating fighting between Pakistan and Afghanistan since 2025, have heightened the vulnerability of all community members to unmet needs. In this increasingly pressured context, households cite a **lack of electricity, shelter (particularly for returnees from abroad), clean and accessible water, affordable and accessible healthcare, and high-quality and accessible education** as their major concerns. In the face of unmet needs, many households increasingly rely on coping strategies with potentially harmful consequences, including food-related strategies and child labour. Both unmet needs and coping strategies impact households and individuals differently according to age, gender, displacement status, and other household and individual-level characteristics; for example, women and girls may be more likely to skip meals and travel long distances to fetch water, impacting their safety, security, health, and wellbeing.

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. The purpose of a localised approach is to identify location-specific causes and manifestations of vulnerability to unmet needs and better understand how people experience and mitigate them. The series on localised vulnerability also includes districts in [Baghlan](#), [Herat](#), and [Samangan](#) provinces.

Aim

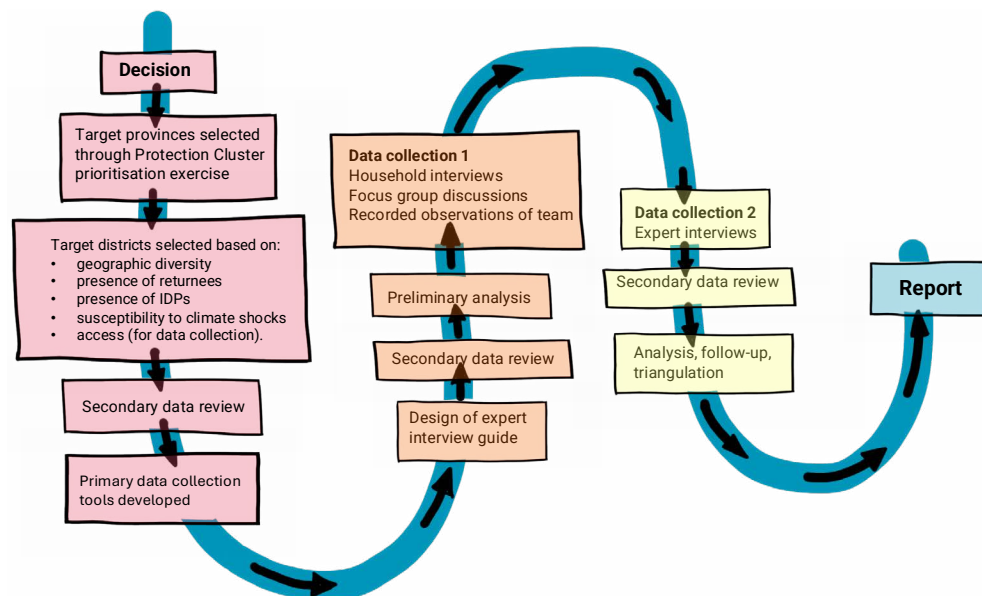
This report aims to support operational responders to identify programming priorities and potential entry points for improving the design and targeting of humanitarian activities by:

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

Methodology and limitations

Primary data for this study was collected in partnership with War Child Canada in Behsud, Kot, and Surkh Rod districts, Nangarhar province. Secondary data was also used to inform the selection of localised vulnerability analysis locations, design the data collection tools, and triangulate and substantiate findings from the primary data collection.

Figure 1: Research process



The themes and issues discussed are those that emerged from the primary data. Provinces were selected through a prioritisation exercise conducted with the Afghanistan Protection Cluster to identify locations facing the highest protection needs and risks. ACAPS then selected districts within these provinces that presented features with the potential to aggravate vulnerability, namely a presence of returnees and IDPs and exposure to climate shocks. The geographical diversity of selected districts and Protection Cluster partner access for primary data collection was also considered.

Table 1. Primary data summary

INTERVIEWS	NO
Number of households interviewed	29
Number of women-headed households	12
Number of men-headed households	16
Number of households that preferred not to identify the household head's gender	16
Number of households with 10 or more members	17
Number of households with 15 or more members	7
Number of interviews with Afghan context experts (all men, as it was challenging to find women context experts willing to be interviewed, partly because of the Interim Taliban Authority (ITA) restrictions on women's employment and engagement in public life)	8
Number of community focus group discussions (FGDs)	6 (approximately 12 participants in each)
FGD composition	3 with women participants, 3 with men; including a mix of IDPs, returnees, older people, youth, and people with disabilities.

Information from expert interviews, open-ended questions with households, field team observations, and FGDs are referenced in the text as shown in the table below.

Table 2. Sourcing narrative primary data

TYPE OF INTERVIEW	IDENTIFIER
Expert interviews	EI dd/mm/yyyy
Household interviews	HH dd/mm/yyyy m/w (men or women)
Field team observations	FO dd/mm/yyyy
Focus group discussions	FGD dd/mm/yyyy m/w (men or women)

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

Table 3. Key concepts

KEY CONCEPTS	
Basic needs	The essential goods, utilities, services, or resources required to ensure survival and minimum living standards without resorting to coping strategies with potentially harmful consequences 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 at times of crisis. Some coping strategies can have potentially harmful consequences and increase vulnerability to future shocks, such as taking on debt, selling assets, child labour, and child marriage. Other examples of coping strategies identified in previous ACAPS research on Afghanistan include internal mobility, reliance on humanitarian assistance, and use of social networks and solidarity (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>Context-level factors 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; displacement composition of the community; and exposure to climate and natural hazards.</p> <p>Household-level factors include the characteristics that influence a household's vulnerability to unmet needs, harm, or overlooked interests. These could include gender and age of the household head, legal and displacement status, the household's sources of income, or other household characteristics, such as the number of dependants or members' health needs.</p> <p>Individual-level factors include the characteristics of an individual, such as gender, age, and disability, that influence that individual's vulnerability (or those dependent on them) to unmet needs, harm, or overlooked interests.</p>

Figure 2. Factors influencing vulnerability

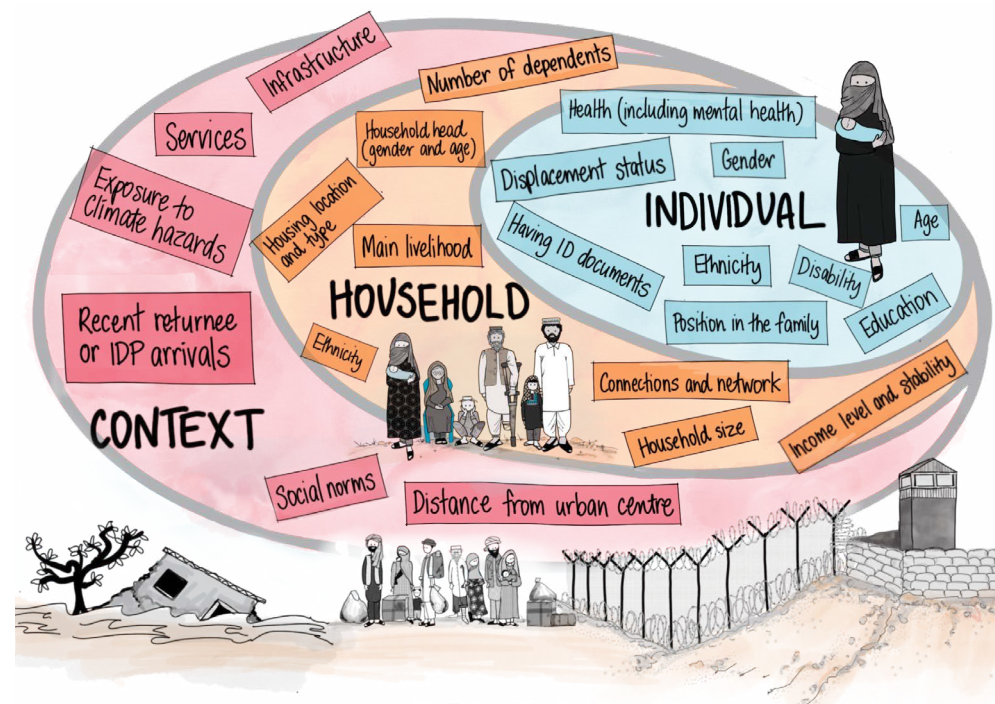


TABLE OF CONTENTS

Background: Behsud, Kot, and Surkh Rod districts, Nangarhar province	4
Context-level shocks and stresses	5
Vulnerability to unmet needs.....	8
Addressing vulnerability to unmet needs.....	11

BACKGROUND: BEHSUD, KOT, AND SURKH ROD DISTRICTS, NANGARHAR PROVINCE

Geography and demography

Nangarhar province, in eastern Afghanistan, sits along the Durand Line dividing Afghanistan from Pakistan. Nangarhar's landscape is primarily rangeland, bare soil, and rocky outcrops, which dominate the centre of the province (NPS accessed 19/03/2026). The majority of people in Nangarhar are Pashtuns, with smaller proportions of Arabs, Pashai, Tajiks, and other minorities (NPS accessed 19/03/2026).

Map 1. Nangarhar and surrounding provinces



Nangarhar's population has changed rapidly in recent years, primarily resulting from an influx of Afghans returnees from Pakistan. Recent estimates indicate that Nangarhar has the third-highest population among all of Afghanistan's provinces, at 3.89 million people, over 600,000 of whom live in the provincial capital, Jalalabad (OCHA accessed 15/03/2026; IOM accessed 10/03/2026).

Economy and livelihoods

Nangarhar's Jalalabad plain is one of Afghanistan's main agricultural areas (OCHA accessed 09/03/2026). The province contributes 15% of national corn production, 11% of rice production, and 4% of wheat production. Wheat farming in the province is particularly reliant on irrigation, provided through 78 canals that extend over a total length of 365km (USDA accessed 01/09/2025; Ghaforzai et al. 14/09/2022). The three districts covered by this report are primarily agricultural, with livestock sales representing the main household income source in Kot and Surkh Rod, and the sale of agricultural products being the main income source in Behsud, according to REACH data collected in early 2025 (REACH 27/04/2025; IOM accessed 10/03/2026).

Nangarhar is also a significant trade hub, as its location connects the city of Peshawar in Pakistan with Kabul and other eastern and central Afghan provinces, including Kunar, Laghman, and Nuristan. The Torkham crossing in Momand Dara district, eastern Nangarhar, is the busiest entry point between Afghanistan and Pakistan (OCHA accessed 09/03/2026; AAN 28/01/2020).

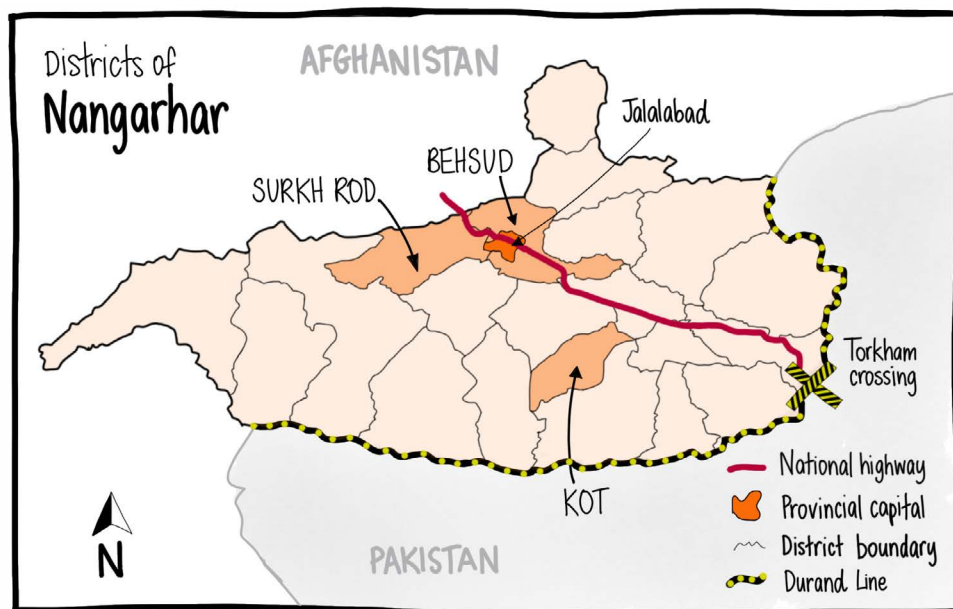
Climate and natural hazards

Nangarhar has a **primarily humid, subtropical climate**. Average temperatures approach 30° C from June–August and drop closer to 5° C from December–February, with precipitation peaking from February–April. Overall, annual precipitation in Afghanistan's eastern and northeastern provinces, including Nangarhar, is higher than the rest of the country, with the South Indian Monsoon (July–September) having a significant influence on regional precipitation and extreme weather events (WB accessed 10/03/2026; Ashfaq et al. 21/09/2023).

Nangarhar province, particularly Behsud district, is at high risk of flooding and landslides as a result of steep elevation differences and a dense network of rivers and streams, causing water to accumulate and flow rapidly during heavy rains. The risk is further heightened by high population density, poverty, and limited road access, making communities more vulnerable to flooding (Think Hazard accessed 16/03/2026; Ishanch et al. 29/04/2025). Nangarhar province is also at moderate risk of drought, with a high risk in Kot district. Nangarhar was one of the most drought-hit provinces in 2025, with precipitation deficits affecting water availability, crops, and pastures (OCHA 31/05/2025; FAO 05/08/2025).

Alongside hydrological and climatological hazards, **Nangarhar province faces a medium to high earthquake risk**, as its location along active fault lines is further compounded by poor construction, remote terrain, and pre-existing risks such as mines and other explosive remnants of war (Akhundzadah 18/09/2024; ACAPS 09/11/2025).

Map 2. Location of Behsud, Kot, and Surkh Rod districts, Nangarhar province



Source: ACAPS using information from IOM (06/2018, 06/2019, 11/2025, and 09/2025); DACAAR et al. (03/08/2015)

CONTEXT-LEVEL SHOCKS AND STRESSES

Returnees from abroad and within Afghanistan, along with newly arrived IDPs, have significantly increased populations in Behsud, Kot, and Surkh Rod districts since 2021

“The arrival of returnees has had a mixed impact. The positive impact is that [some] returnees arrived with money...and skills, and they have invested and started working. The negative impacts are greater, however, as they have increased competition for resources and raised the price of rent, meaning there are almost no houses for rent in Nangarhar province. Unemployment has increased, and many returnees are from the lower economic categories.” (EI 03/02/2026)

Since September 2023, **more returnees from abroad (primarily Pakistan) have indicated Nangarhar as their destination province than any other** (IOM accessed 10/03/2026). In 2025 alone, 194,000 new returnees from abroad (equivalent to nearly 5% of the province’s population) arrived in Nangarhar, making it the sixth-most common destination for returnees from abroad in the year (IOM 24/02/2026 b). Between 2021–2024, Behsud and Surkh Rod districts hosted the highest numbers of returnees from abroad in Nangarhar after Jalalabad city, at over 71,100 and 52,700 respectively (IOM 20/03/2025).

Nangarhar also has a **significant IDP population**, with nearly 101,000 new IDPs in 2025, making it the province with the third-highest number of IDPs. Most such IDPs were displaced from either other locations within the province or neighbouring provinces (IOM 24/02/2026 a and 24/02/2026 b). The majority of IDPs relocated for economic reasons, although drought and flooding also drive displacement (IOM unpublished). Between 2021–2024, Behsud and Surkh Rod hosted the highest numbers of IDPs in Nangarhar after Jalalabad city, at over 37,400 and 53,200 respectively (IOM 20/03/2025).

Context experts and FGDs emphasised the link between increased population in Behsud, Kot, and Surkh Rod and rising unemployment, rental prices, and pressure on services and assistance (EI 01/02/2026 a; EI 01/02/2026 b; EI 02/02/2026; EI 03/02/2026; EI 08/02/2026; EI 11/02/2026; FGD 16/12/2025 m; FGD 17/12/2025 m). While these pressures are significant, two context experts also noted positive impacts of returns from abroad,

including that some returnees bring useful skills acquired while living outside the country and the ability to invest and set up businesses in their destination communities (EI 02/02/2026; EI 03/02/2026). That said, IOM data on assisted returns from abroad indicate that the vast majority of those arriving in Behsud, Kot, and Surkh Rod since September 2023 identified ‘unskilled labour’ as their primary occupation while abroad (IOM accessed 19/03/2026). Another context expert mentioned rising social tensions as a result of the influx of returnees, indicating that positive perceptions are not necessarily widespread (EI 01/02/2026 a).

“It [the arrival of returnees from abroad] has affected the community, with both positive and negative effects. The negative impact is greater, causing an increase in population, overcrowding, competition for resources, and a high level of poverty among returnees. The positive impact is that some returnees have skills that are useful for small businesses.” (EI 02/02/2026)

Behsud, Kot, and Surkh Rod have experienced significant flooding, along with drought in some areas

In 2025, communities in Nangarhar experienced among the highest levels of flooding and flood-related loss and damage across Afghanistan (IOM 24/02/2026 a). This was reflected in FGDs in Behsud, Kot, and Surkh Rod, as participants detailed the severe, widespread impacts of recurrent flooding on access to clean water, livelihoods, shelter, and critical infrastructure, including roads and solar panels (FGD 15/12/2025 m; FGD 15/12/2025 w; FGD 16/12/2025 w; FGD 17/12/2025 m; FGD 17/12/2025 w). Context experts emphasised multiple factors contributing to flood risks in these communities, including a lack of canalisation, insufficient drainage systems, and the proximity to mountains in the more elevated Kot district, which increases water accumulation and runoff during heavy rains (EI 08/02/2026; EI 04/02/2026).

Drought was also raised as a driver of displacement and loss of agricultural livelihoods and access to clean water, particularly in Surkh Rod and Behsud districts (FGD 16/12/2025 w; FGD 17/12/2025 w; EI 03/02/2026; EI 02/02/2026; EI 08/02/2026; EI 11/02/2026). Overall, 20% of communities assessed by the IOM in Nangarhar in 2025 reported drought-related infrastructure damage, including failure or depletion of water supply systems, cracked or damaged pipelines and roads, and degraded building foundations (IOM 24/02/2026 a). Context experts portrayed drought, which severely

affected Nangarhar in 2024–2025, as a driver of longer-term displacement because of its long-lasting impact on agricultural productivity (EI 03/02/2026; EI 11/02/2026; OCHA 27/07/2025 and 12/02/2026).

Behsud district experienced damage from the August 2025 earthquake, which also increased strain on limited services and assistance across Nangarhar

On 31 August 2025, a 6+ magnitude earthquake hit Nangarhar province, with its epicentre around 30km northeast of Behsud. While Dara-e-Noor district was the worst-affected district in Nangarhar province, casualties and damage also occurred in Behsud (OCHA 01/09/2025). Experts interviewed for this study noted that the earthquake had destroyed or damaged shelters in Behsud and reduced the overall availability of humanitarian assistance, which was diverted to the worst-affected areas in Nangarhar and Kunar provinces (EI 02/02/2026; EI 01/02/2026 a). IOM data also recorded over 1,000 earthquake-related displacements in Behsud in 2025 (IOM unpublished).

The closure of the Torkham crossing, and others along the Durand Line, since October 2025 has disrupted supply chains and livelihoods, recently compounded by the Iran conflict

The Durand Line has been closed for commercial trade and transit since October 2025, when clashes escalated between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The closure has significantly affected humanitarian supply routes, with cargo stranded in Pakistani ports (WFP 04/03/2026; OCHA 18/03/2026).

As communities in Nangarhar are reliant on cross-border trade, transportation, and labour opportunities, the province is among the worst affected by this closure (FEWS NET 12/01/2026; WFP 04/03/2026). Towns near the Durand Line such as Torkham are hubs for interconnected service providers – including transporters, clearing agents, porters, and traders – linked to cross-border businesses, most of which are now closed, resulting in significant livelihood losses (WFP 04/03/2026). By mid-March, Afghan traders were losing an estimated USD 2.5 million per day (The Diplomat 12/03/2026).

Further, Afghanistan relies heavily on Pakistan for imports of wheat flour, edible oil, fuel, pharmaceuticals, and other consumer goods. As such, the **closure is affecting markets and access to food** across the country (WFP 04/03/2026). By February 2026, prices of staple goods, including rice and oil, had risen 20-40% across Afghanistan since December 2025 (OCHA 18/03/2026; FEWS NET 09/02/2026). In the last quarter of 2025, WFP monthly market monitoring already indicated month-on-month increases in high-quality rice and cooking oil prices in Nangarhar and other eastern provinces bordering Pakistan (WFP 11/02/2026 and 15/01/2026).

Although instigated after primary data had already been collected for this study, escalating conflict in Iran and throughout the Middle East has compounded the shortage of basic goods, constraints on humanitarian logistics, and rising prices across Afghanistan. Since October 2025, Iran, along with northeastern central Asian countries, had been providing alternative supply routes for commercial traders and humanitarian responders – although with higher associated costs and longer delivery times – to offset the closed border with Pakistan (Reuters 06/01/2026; WFP 12/03/2026; OCHA 18/03/2026). By mid-March 2026, however, Iran had suspended food and agricultural exports as a result of escalating conflict and the Iran transit route was effectively unusable (WFP 17/03/2026; OCHA 18/03/2026).

Escalating conflict between Afghanistan and Pakistan has caused civilian casualties and displacement in Nangarhar, including in Behsud district

Conflict between Pakistan and Afghanistan escalated in late February following several months of fragile ceasefire (NRC 13/03/2026). On 21 February, Pakistani airstrikes in Behsud and Khogyani districts, Nangarhar province, killed at least 13 civilians and injured seven others, including women and children (UNAMA 23/02/2026). Between 26 February and 16 March, fighting killed another 76 people, injured 213, and displaced up to 115,000, including in Nangarhar province. Women and children accounted for more than half of these casualties. 16 March airstrikes that hit a drug rehabilitation centre in Kabul caused scores of further casualties, which are still being verified (OCHA 18/03/2026; UNICEF 19/03/2026). **While primary data collection for this study occurred before the current escalation, this is likely to aggravate many of the vulnerabilities to unmet basic needs and protection risks discussed throughout the report.**

The combination of these shocks contributes to widespread livelihood losses and unemployment across Behsud, Kot, and Surkh Rod districts

“We do not have work opportunities. Our men have no jobs, and there is no business for women either.” (HH 15/12/2025 w)

Experts and FGD participants emphasised the **significant impact of flooding, drought, earthquakes, landslides, and rockfalls on access to agricultural livelihoods** in Behsud, Kot, and Surkh Rod. Drought, in particular, has affected traditional irrigation systems, while flooding has damaged agricultural land (EI 01/02/2026 a; EI 01/02/2026 b; EI 03/01/2026; EI 08/02/2026; EI 11/02/2026; FGD 15/12/2025 m). One expert also observed that agricultural land is being used to house the province’s increasing population (EI 11/02/2026). Field team observations indicated that many of the people are now reliant on, or looking for, daily wage labour once worked in farming, but challenges related to the lack of water had forced them to seek other livelihoods (FO 15/12/2025; FO 16/12/2025). Daily wage labour – an unreliable and inconsistent income source – was the main livelihood for 24 of 29 host community, returnee, and IDP households interviewed for this study, including six of the eight households that reported changing their income in the last six months. Multiple context experts and FGDs also emphasised the **link between population increases in Behsud, Kot, and Surkh Rod, and rising unemployment**, with an insufficient number of daily wage opportunities relative to the numbers of people in need of work (EI 01/02/2026 a; EI 01/02/2026 b; EI 02/02/2026; EI 04/02/2026; EI 03/02/2026; EI 08/02/2026; EI 11/02/2026; FGD 16/12/2025 m; FGD 17/12/2025 m).

Several context experts emphasised the **economic impact of the closure of the Durand Line on livelihoods across Nangarhar**, particularly affecting traders, farmers, and livestock owners who export goods to Pakistan (EI 02/02/2026; EI 08/02/2026; EI 11/02/2026).

Decades of conflict and resulting explosive ordnance contamination, which is particularly high in Nangarhar, may also pose a barrier to livelihoods, as fear of explosions prevents communities from using agricultural land. One context expert emphasised the risk of mines and other explosive ordnance across both agricultural land and mountainous areas (EI 01/02/2026 a; OCHA 19/12/2024 a; Protection Cluster 19/03/2026).

VULNERABILITY TO UNMET NEEDS

“Basic services exist, but the reason people can’t access them is poverty: most people cannot afford them. Access to clean drinking water is a challenge, with most people using unclean water. The health sector has challenges, such as a lack of health services because of long distances and poor service quality.” (EI 03/02/2026)

16 of the 29 households interviewed for this study perceived **living conditions in Behsud, Kot, and Surkh Rod as having deteriorated over the past year**, while 11 reported conditions had stayed the same, and two felt conditions had improved. Context experts also indicated that people’s living conditions were generally declining, with many facing significant challenges meeting basic needs. Context experts attributed this decline to a variety of household- and individual-level factors that, when combined, make conditions difficult and needs challenging to meet, **including a lack of financial resources to pay for goods and services, largely attributed to increased unemployment** (EI 01/02/2026 b; EI 02/02/2026; EI 03/02/2026; EI 04/02/2026; EI 08/02/2026; EI 01/02/2026 a). The challenge of affordability is compounded by the distance required to travel to access goods and services, further adding to costs (EI 01/02/2026 a; EI 03/02/2026; EI 05/02/2026).

Vulnerability to unmet electricity needs

27 of 29 households reported they had no access to electricity. Several context experts also noted that **electricity is largely unavailable** in rural parts of Nangarhar, particularly in Behsud and Kot (EI 08/02/2026; EI 11/02/2026; EI 04/02/2026). This is consistent with the most recent IOM Afghanistan Climate Vulnerability Assessment data, which indicates only 1% of communities in Kot have meaningful access to electricity and 16% in Behsud; in Surkh Rod, rates are higher, although still fewer than half (44%) (IOM accessed 12/03/2026).

The implications of living without electricity include impeded access to water from borewells and limited (often zero) access to mobile phone connectivity and communication. Without electricity, people are also unable to use fans or access sufficient water in Nangarhar’s hot summers, posing potential health risks (EI

08/02/2026; EI 11/02/2026; EI 04/02/2026). FGD participants mentioned that Nangarhar’s strong winds also damage solar panels, compromising an alternative source of electricity (FGD 16/12/2025 w).

Vulnerability to WASH needs

For the households interviewed, **lack of nearby water sources is a major driver of vulnerability to unmet water needs**. 16 of 29 households reported an inability to access enough water to meet their needs and 15 reported that water is unavailable in their area.

FGD participants (both women and men) in Behsud, Kot, and Surkh Rod explained that **many women and children have to travel to fetch water** for their households. This includes children collecting water from neighbours’ wells, although there was no mention of whether there is a cost associated with this water (FGD 15/12/2025 w; FGD 16/12/2025 m; FGD 17/12/2025 m). Most of the 21 households that needed to collect water relied on girls (12) and women (5), showing the gendered impact of this barrier. While FGD participants and interviewed households did not mention safety and security incidents, particularly affecting women and girls, while fetching water, such may be occurring.

The information on community members travelling to fetch water is supported by REACH data from the first half of 2025, which noted the lack of water points as a barrier to accessing clean water across Nangarhar, including in 100% of assessed communities in Kot, 93% in Surkh Rod, and 76% in Behsud (REACH 27/04/2025). This data was collected prior to **the earthquake and heavy rains/flooding in the second half of 2025, which may have damaged the already limited number of water points**, further constraining access to water. Both FGDs and field team observations highlighted damaged or non-functional water infrastructure and traditional underground water management systems (karez or qanats) as a key driver of unavailability (FO 15/12/2025; FO 16/12/2025; FGD 15/12/2025 m). Karez is a traditional water management system of underground tunnels that tap into the water table in the highlands and gravity feed lower areas for irrigation and domestic use (Ilhnyaz et al. 30/08/2025). A combination of factors – including lack of maintenance, changes to the water table, and overexploitation of groundwater – have rendered many karez dry and non-functional (UNESCO 12/04/2016; ACAPS 03/07/2024).

One context expert explained that clean drinking water for purchase is only available in urban areas and, even then, affordability is often an obstacle. In line with this, **21 of 29 households reported that water is not affordable**. In rural areas, even if the water is unsuitable for drinking, many still do not boil it, exposing themselves to waterborne diseases such as acute watery diarrhoea, of which there has been a recent outbreak in Nangarhar, as described in the following section (EI 11/02/2026).

Vulnerability to unmet health needs

“The problem is that even in the public health centre, people must pay a consultation fee of 20 afghanis, as well as a fee for medicine and laboratory diagnostic services. The cost of transportation is also a challenge.” (EI 01/02/2026 b)

Households reported significant issues accessing healthcare, **driven both by affordability and availability**, with 28 of 29 reporting an inability to afford regular, recurrent medical expenses, forcing many to take on debt to pay for essential healthcare (18) or delay care because of financial constraints (11).

20 of 29 households across all three districts also reported **travelling long distances to access healthcare**, and several context experts emphasised the **insufficient number of health facilities** in the assessed districts. Transportation to distant facilities increases the overall cost of seeking care. Multiple experts reported lower or no access to mobile health services in their communities, potentially because of both ITA directives affecting mobile health clinics and funding cuts (EI 01/02/2026 b; EI 04/02/2026). Nangarhar is also among the provinces worst affected by the suspension and closure of US-funded health facilities, with 51 facilities closing between April–December 2025, affecting nearly 454,000 people (over 13% of Nangarhar’s population) (Health Cluster 24/12/2025).

Challenges accessing healthcare in the assessed districts are especially concerning given the disease outbreaks in Nangarhar over the last 12 months and barriers to accessing clean water. In 2025, Nangarhar experienced outbreaks of measles, dengue, Crimean–Congo haemorrhagic fever, acute watery diarrhoea, and malaria. By mid-August 2025, the province accounted for the fourth-highest incidence of malaria in Afghanistan, with 52.7 cases per 10,000 population (WHO 05/07/2025, 16/08/2025, and 24/05/2025; UNICEF 28/08/2025). Several context experts emphasised **returnees’ heightened vulnerability to contracting communicable diseases**, as

they are often forced to live in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions because they lack the resources and documentation necessary to obtain adequate shelter (EI 01/02/2026 a; EI 01/02/2026 b; EI 02/02/2026; EI 03/02/2026).

All six FGDs mentioned mental health as a major challenge, attributing poor mental health to the multiple obstacles people face daily, including the impact of flooding, economic challenges, and lack of access to clean water and basic services (FGD 15/12/2025 m; FGD 15/12/2025 w; FGD 16/12/2025 m; FGD 16/12/2025 w; FGD 17/12/2025 m; FGD 17/12/2025 w). FGD participants in both Kot and Behsud specifically reported a need for **better access to mental health and psychosocial support services for men**, reporting that the services provided by an NGO in their community were only available for women (FGD 15/12/2025 m; FGD 17/12/2025 m). This does not signify, however, that sufficient mental health and psychosocial support services are available for women either.

“To address mental health issues, only limited counselling services for women are provided by international organisations, but men face many problems and have no access to these services.” (FGD 17/12/2025 m)

Vulnerability to unmet shelter needs

“...hazards affect people who have no shelter, while others suffer little damage and can reach a safe place.” (FGD 17/12/2025 w)

Interviewed households noted that returnees from abroad and IDPs are particularly vulnerable to unmet shelter needs in Nangarhar. Of the 29 households, 24 named returnees and 25 named IDPs as groups facing the greatest challenges accessing shelter. Household interviewees noted that IDP and returnee households were also more likely to rent than host community households. This is consistent with nationwide data on the high rates of renting among returnees from abroad, Pakistan in particular, often without formal rental agreements, exposing them to insecure tenure and the risk of forced eviction (UNHCR 30/12/2025; IOM 16/12/2025). Context experts further noted that the influx of both returnees from abroad and IDPs has left almost no houses available for rent in the assessed districts, increasing the price of any remaining rentals for host community members as well (EI 03/02/2026; EI 11/02/2026; EI 01/02/2026 a).

Exposure to varied hazards increases vulnerability to unmet shelter needs.

Hazards affecting households interviewed for this study included flooding and rain (22), drought and desertification (18), and sand and dust storms (18). Of the 29 households, 24 reported that their shelter or home had been damaged by hazards and 12 continue to live in damaged or makeshift homes, making them vulnerable to insufficient protection from the elements and a lack of privacy, personal security, and security for their possessions. Overall, Nangarhar reported the fourth-highest number of flood-related shelter damage incidents across Afghanistan in 2025 and the third-highest number of earthquake-related incidents (IOM 24/02/2026 a). One context expert noted that people in Behsud affected by the August 2025 earthquake continue to live in partially damaged homes and tents, likely because, as in other earthquake-affected areas, households cannot afford to repair their homes and reconstruction assistance is insufficient (EI 02/02/2026; Protection Cluster 19/03/2026). Field teams observed that all shelters in a rural area of Kot district are semi-permanent structures made of mud, stone, and wood, with roofs of thatch and straw. Teams noted that most of the houses are old and damaged by natural hazards (FO 15/12/2025). This is consistent with IOM data indicating that 100% of homes in Kot district are mud structures, which are particularly vulnerable to flood and earthquake damage (IOM accessed 17/03/2026; UNHCR 28/08/2025).

Vulnerability to unmet education needs

There were a total of 123 school-aged children in the households interviewed for this study, of whom only 64 were attending school. While this assessment did not collect information on children according to gender, it is likely that ITA restrictions on girls' education after sixth grade mean that girls accounted for a large proportion of the out-of-school children.

Aside from gender, lack of income constitutes a significant driver of unmet education needs.

When asked about barriers to education, 13 households reported mobility restrictions and transport costs, ten identified other associated costs, and eight noted that children needed to work to support the family. This indicates that not only are some households unable to meet education costs, but also that many need children to contribute to household income.

Context experts indicated that even for boys and girls below sixth grade in households able to afford education and associated costs, **lack of employment prospects and the low perceived quality of available education discourage families from sending children to school** (EI 01/02/2026 a; EI 05/02/2026; EI 08/02/2026). FGD participants and several context experts expressed concerns about the investment required versus the perceived benefits of education, with some noting that many young people with university degrees work as daily labourers. Specific quality concerns included low teaching standards and a lack of educational materials (EI 01/02/2026 a; EI 05/02/2026; EI 08/02/2026; FGD 15/12/2025 m). REACH data from early 2025 also found that a lack of teachers, educational materials, and furniture posed significant barriers to school attendance across all the districts assessed for this study (REACH 27/04/2025).

“Yes, there are public schools, but people are not interested in [their children] attending because there is a lack of clear goals. They say that even if children study, there are no job opportunities. Because of poverty, children are involved in work, and even at school there is a lack of qualified teachers and books.” (EI 01/02/2026 a)

Secondary data indicates additional barriers to boys' education in Nangarhar – including increased use of physical violence under the guise of discipline, the elimination of subjects such as sports and English, and increased anxiety about attendance – have resulted in lower attendance and a loss of hope for the future (Govt. UK 11/2024; HRW 06/12/2023).

ADDRESSING VULNERABILITY TO UNMET NEEDS

“People cope by eating only twice a day, avoiding traditional ceremonies, using low-quality food, and avoiding health services, even if someone needs them.” (EI 05/02/2026)

From all the context expert interviews, FGDs, and field team observations, a strong sense emerged that, while people in Behsud, Kot, and Surkh Rod are still trying to meet needs by employing diverse coping strategies and exploring alternative livelihoods, many are increasingly forced to rely on coping mechanisms with potentially harmful consequences, including decreasing the amount and quality of food consumed and resorting to child labour, child marriage, debt, and irregular migration.

Community support exists but is extremely stretched

“...there is a traditional support system at the community level, where neighbours, relatives, and villagers support each other in times of crisis, but it has really decreased compared to 20 years ago.” (EI 03/02/2026)

Three context experts spoke to a degree of mutual support within communities, as people want to help each other in times of need (EI 01/02/2026 b; EI 02/02/2026; EI 04/02/2026). As previously noted, some households send children to collect water from neighbours, indicating a level of sharing for essentials (FGD 16/12/2025 m; FGD 17/12/2025 m; FO 15/12/2025). One FGD also highlighted that, at least in that location, villagers come together to repair flood-damaged roads because it benefits them all (FGD 15/12/2025 m). That said, the combination of escalating climate and natural hazards, economic shocks, and increased competition for goods and services is so **challenging that most people are no longer able to support themselves, let alone others in the community** (EI 01/02/2026 b; EI 02/02/2026; EI 04/02/2026).

Discussions with context experts generally revealed limited organised support at the community level, except for very short-term, one-off assistance such as businesspeople giving zakat or specific support after a significant shock, such as the earthquake (EI 05/02/2026; EI 11/02/2026).

Pressures on essential services, lack of work and income opportunities, and the inability to afford essential food and NFIs, linked to the increased population, raise concerns of potential social tensions, with one expert observing that competition over scarce resources between returnees, host communities, and IDPs has led to verbal altercations in their community (EI 01/02/2026 a).

Food-related coping strategies are prevalent and particularly affect women and girls

“The first thing in Nangarhar province is that people are decreasing their food consumption to low quality and quantity.” (EI 08/02/2026)

Context experts indicated that **changing household food consumption patterns, including the quality, quantity, and frequency of meals, was one of the first things households do to curb expenses** (EI 08/02/2026; EI 05/02/2026; EI 11/02/2026). Households similarly reported a variety of strategies to spend less on food, including eating less expensive food (22 households), limiting portion sizes (12), and acquiring food on credit (12). Nearly all households reported that some family members skip meals when food is scarce, including eight who specified that the mother, women, and/or woman head of household skip meals, five who specified older people, and six who specified young girls as the ones who miss out. In the remaining eight households with family members who skipped meals, it was both the mother and father. Secondary data indicates that 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). The gendered use of this coping mechanism has significant, negative implications for women’s health and wellbeing and girls’ development.

Communities continue to diversify livelihoods where possible and travel to find work

“To solve economic problems, young people go to other areas for daily labour work.” (FGD 17/12/2025 m)

To cope with mounting livelihood pressures, ten households reported taking on additional work, three had sought work in a different job or sector, and three had adjusted their work patterns by finding a different employer or changing crops or livestock. The three FGDs with men reported that young people from their communities travel to other areas for daily labour opportunities, even though many have university qualifications (FGD 15/12/2025 m; FGD 16/12/2025 m; FGD 17/12/2025 m).

Context experts all gave positive examples of households attempting to find alternative ways to increase their income, including through starting different types of small businesses, in which both men and women are involved (although it is unclear if this is a change from before); street vending; and using the household vehicle to run a taxi service (EI 01/02/2026 b; EI 05/02/2026; EI 03/02/2026; EI 08/02/2026). Several context experts noted the use of skills returnees bring back from abroad with the potential to create job opportunities in their communities of settlement (EI 04/02/2026; EI 01/02/2026 b).

“The skills returnees brought from Pakistan have enabled them to start small businesses, which have created job opportunities for others.” (EI 04/02/2026)

Labour migration to Pakistan and Iran remains an option, despite significant risks

“Returnees take the risky route of [irregular] migration back to Pakistan, even though they were forcibly returned. The younger generation take risks and migrate illegally.” (EI 02/02/2026)

Three context experts indicated that irregular labour migration was one of the riskier coping strategies employed in assessed communities (EI 01/02/2026 b; EI 02/02/2026; EI 11/02/2026). Both documented and undocumented Afghans in Pakistan and Iran face significant risk of deportation and protection risks, including arbitrary arrest, detention, labour exploitation, extortion, and harassment, along with notable barriers

to accessing livelihoods (Protection Cluster 31/10/2025). One expert noted that despite these risks, returnees, especially young men, were known to return to Pakistan through informal channels in search of employment opportunities, indicating the severity of unmet needs following their initial return to Afghanistan (EI 02/02/2026).

Children work to support their families, sometimes as an alternative to costly schooling

“[Children are not] attending school [in order] to help with family work. This includes keeping livestock, collecting wood, working in street markets, handicraft centres, shops, and street stalls, and so on...both boys and girls are involved in child labour. The girls are street vendors and work in households, among other things. Over the last year, the number of children I see working has increased and I think the number of children involved in child labour has increased, and the main reason for this is poverty and a lack of household income.” (EI 01/02/2026 a)

Of the 27 households with school-aged children, eight said at least one child was not attending school in order to work to support the family. One expert observed that if boys continue to attend school, they are often required to combine schooling with labour (EI 05/02/2026). The field team observed children engaged in both non-hazardous work – such as assisting with family businesses, farming, and herding – and potentially hazardous forms of labour, including collecting firewood, pulling carts, and begging (FO 15/12/2025; FO 16/12/2025). An expert highlighted that children are at risk of harassment in public places and in the areas where they work, although did not specify whether this applies to both boys and girls or includes sexual harassment (EI 05/02/2026).

Child marriage continues to be a common practice

Nearly all context experts mentioned the practice of child marriage in Behsud, Kot, and Surkh Rod districts, with girls as young as ten facing a higher risk than boys (EI 01/02/2026 a; EI 01/02/2026 b; EI 02/02/2026; EI 03/02/2026; EI 05/02/2026). This includes marriages arranged to resolve debts that could not otherwise be paid, indicating the use of child marriage as a coping strategy with potentially harmful consequences in the face of economic pressures. Several experts also noted an increase in child marriage following the ban on girls’ schooling after sixth grade, consistent with

findings on the impact of this ban across Afghanistan (EI 01/02/2026 b; EI 01/02/2026 a; Afghanistan Protection Cluster 07/02/2025). Two others, however, observed that child marriage had already been common in Nangarhar; they had not noticed a recent uptick in the number or a decrease in the age at which such marriages are occurring (EI 01/02/2026 a; EI 05/02/2026).

Households take on debt, which can lead to serious protection risks and further economic loss if unpaid

“Most loans are taken from relatives or people in the village. At the beginning, if a person lends money to someone, they expect something in return, such as land, a house, or even a girl, which can result in assets being acquired at a very low price.” (EI 03/02/2026)

Context experts indicated that people take on debt for a variety of reasons, including when they need a sudden injection of cash (such as for a funeral), and, most concerning, **to cover basic needs such as food, other essential supplies, healthcare, and rent** (EI 01/02/2026 b; EI 05/02/2026; EI 08/02/2026; EI 04/02/2026; EI 11/02/2026). 18 of the 29 interviewed households reported borrowing money to pay for healthcare, 16 reported taking on debt to reduce their exposure to risk, and 12 reported purchasing food on credit.

Context experts explained that, in rural areas, loans are taken from traders, relatives, and other villagers (EI 05/02/2026; EI 04/02/2026; EI 08/02/2026; EI 11/02/2026). Several experts also noted that it is not always easy to find someone ready to loan money when needed (EI 01/02/2026 b; EI 03/02/2026). One expert highlighted that extended family members often do not have money to lend and another noted that wealthier people sometimes wait for the debtor to default on the loan in order to acquire assets at below market value, indicating potential exploitation of economically vulnerable community members (EI 01/02/2026 b; EI 03/02/2026).

Context experts highlighted that the risks associated with taking on debt that one cannot repay are serious, including physical assault, the child marriage of girls in particular, and the potential loss of important assets (such as land) (EI 01/02/2026 b; EI 03/02/2026, EI 05/02/2026).

All communities have insufficient access to humanitarian assistance

“The number of people in need of assistance in Nangarhar far exceeds the limited assistance available. Certainly, there are people who are eligible but miss out because of these limitations, including returnees, women, and children.” (EI 02/02/2026)

All context experts stressed that humanitarian assistance is vastly insufficient to meet the scale of need in all assessed districts (EI 01/02/2026 a; EI 01/02/2026 b; EI 02/02/2026; EI 03/02/2026; EI 04/02/2026; EI 05/02/2026; EI 08/02/2026; EI 11/02/2026). Several noted that the large-scale influx of returnees from abroad has forced humanitarian responders to divide limited assistance between returnees and host communities, with returnees often prioritised, potentially aggravating the rising social tensions previously noted (EI 08/02/2026; EI 04/02/2026; EI 01/02/2026 a). Another expert emphasised that, following the August 2025 earthquake, much of the limited humanitarian assistance and services previously available across Nangarhar were diverted to the most earthquake-affected districts (EI 01/02/2026 a). In general, experts emphasised that **many people in need, including returnees, IDPs, and host community members, miss out on humanitarian assistance** because there is simply not enough available (EI 01/02/2026 b; EI 02/02/2026; EI 05/02/2026; EI 11/02/2026).