

Afghanistan: Humanitarian Assistance at a Crossroads

POLICY BRIEF

Afghanistan Policy Lab
School of Public and International Affairs
Princeton University
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AFGHANISTAN POLICY LAB



Introduction

More than 18 months after the Taliban seized control of Afghanistan, the country remains gripped in one of the world's worst humanitarian crises. The UN estimates that 28.3 million people in Afghanistan, more than half the country's population, will need emergency assistance during 2023.ⁱ A succession of fiscal and financial shocks that occurred when the Taliban seized the country in August 2021 triggered an ongoing economic crisis. Per capita income has collapsed to 2006 levels, and as many as 70 percent of households are struggling to afford basic needs.ⁱⁱ

Amid this crisis, humanitarian assistance organizations have provided a lifeline for millions of Afghans. The Taliban government has not only failed to provide essential services to its people, but it has also implemented policies that have constrained the ability of these aid organizations to operate.ⁱⁱⁱ The latest was an order issued in December 2022 forbidding non-governmental organizations operating in Afghanistan from employing women, who make up around 30 percent of all employees in the sector.^{iv}

For their part, aid organizations have taken extraordinary steps to adjust to this challenging new reality. But the Taliban's intransigence, unpredictability, and worsening restrictions are prompting implementing partners to reevaluate their activities and donors to reconsider their support.^v With the Taliban showing no sign of softening, humanitarian actors face an increasingly untenable status quo.

This brief provides an overview of the existing challenges and the dilemma facing international donors and their implementing partners operating in Afghanistan. It is based on literature reviews, independent research, and high-level discussions and interviews with personnel from non-governmental and inter-governmental aid organizations operating in Afghanistan. The brief argues that though the unpredictability of the Taliban makes a shift toward medium- or long-term development assistance nearly impossible, organizations should continue to find flexible, creative ways to deliver humanitarian and basic needs assistance to those in desperate need, women especially, and in transparent and accountable ways.

The Crisis and Response

Even before the Taliban took over in August 2021, the Afghan economy was struggling. The COVID-19 pandemic, a prolonged drought, increasing violence, and steadily declining foreign aid had all contributed to a 1.9 percent GDP contraction in 2020, accelerating a trend that had seen annual per capita income fall from US\$650 in 2012 to US\$508 in 2020.^{vi}

The Taliban's seizure of the country made things dramatically worse. In response to the takeover, the international community suspended financial assistance, which equaled 40 percent of GDP, and cut off the country from the SWIFT payment messaging network.^{vii} Many skilled workers fled or went into hiding, and Taliban edicts barring women from education and different sectors of the workforce further hampered the labor market.



The World Bank estimates that the economy contracted by a third from the end of 2020 to the end of 2022.^{viii} Inflation took hold, with prices of household goods increasing by 43 percent from July 2021 to July 2022.^{ix} At the same time, monthly household income for all population groups dropped 17% from an average of around \$41 in 2021 to around \$35 in 2022.^x In mid-2022, a UN-backed report found nearly 20 million people in Afghanistan, around half the population, were experiencing acute hunger.^{xi} The World Bank projects the economy will remain depressed, with no improvement in per capita income, poverty, or food insecurity over the next two years.^{xii}

Yet at the time lifesaving humanitarian assistance has been direly needed, delivering it has become harder than ever. The Taliban takeover changed the operational environment for aid organizations almost overnight, introducing a host of challenges, ranging from a liquidity crunch that made it difficult to access funds to regulatory uncertainty to fraught relations with government officials.

Aid workers have reported facing distrust and hostility from Taliban authorities, some of which view their organizations skeptically and suspect they have ulterior motives.^{xiii} Officials interfere in various operational and logistical aspects of service delivery, such as “staffing, selection of beneficiaries and expansion.”^{xiv} Reports suggest Taliban officials have sought to requisition aid funds, intimidate aid workers, and obtain identifying information about the populations they serve.^{xv}

Moreover, aid organizations have encountered a shifting, incoherent regulatory environment with conflicting instructions from central government ministries in Kabul, provincial authorities, and local authorities. Rules, requirements, and protocols for NGOs, foreign or national, are inconsistently issued, promulgated, and enforced. Such unpredictability has made every step, from hiring staff to delivering aid, more challenging.

Importantly, no foreign government has officially recognized the Taliban as the legitimate authority in Afghanistan, and for many organizations, dealing with a violent regime that violates human rights, especially when it comes to marginalized groups and women, carries ethical dilemmas, not least of which is the question of whether complying with Taliban restrictions to provide aid amounts to appeasement of the regime. Though aid workers report the situation was similar in the 1990s when the Taliban first held power, with the regime issuing erratic and inconsistent guidance to aid organizations in what many saw as a strategy for exerting leverage over these organizations and preventing them from coordinating, that has made it no easier to overcome today.^{xvi}

For international donors, making financial commitments in Afghanistan posed a challenge, given the absence of a recognized, trustworthy government that could be counted on to abide by a compliance mechanism. The United Nations became a crucial partner for donors to direct aid money to, as it and its specialized agencies had compliance measures in place that assuaged donor concerns about the management of funds.

Nevertheless, despite facing immense challenges, UN agencies and other humanitarian partners reached nearly 25 million people with some form of assistance in 2022, helping to save lives and mitigate the humanitarian crisis.^{xvii}



The Challenge Ahead

In late 2022, a major question facing donors and other humanitarian assistance actors involved in Afghanistan was whether to transition from simply providing lifesaving aid to longer-term economic recovery and stabilization measures. Some donors and implementing partners reported that the situation had stabilized enough that they were exploring such a shift in focus from emergency relief to medium-term economic development.^{xviii}

Then a sudden Taliban order put everything on hold. On December 24, 2022, the Taliban issued an edict banning women from working in NGOs.^{xix} The order, plus a related one permanently barring women from attending university, sparked global condemnation and caused many humanitarian organizations to suspend their operations.^{xx} The ban not only contravened the values of these organizations, but it also crippled their operating capacity.

The Taliban's order underscored the difficulty of adopting any sort of medium- or long-term engagement framework in such a restrictive and unpredictable implementing environment. The ban is the latest, most significant step in a pattern of moves taken by the regime to exert control over NGOs and international organizations operating in Afghanistan. There is little evidence to suggest the Taliban will deviate from that pattern and could be trusted to not issue even stricter orders in the future. For instance, many are already speculating that the ban on employing women will soon be extended beyond NGOs to include UN agencies.^{xxi}

In a sense, humanitarian actors in Afghanistan are at a crossroads, forced to face difficult questions regarding how and whether to operate in a country controlled by an unpredictable, pariah regime. At what point does complying with Taliban restrictions become impossible, both morally and operationally? Does staying and acquiescing to each round of demands just serve to embolden the regime to take ever more draconian and controlling steps? Should NGOs and international organizations leave the country in protest, hoping the withdrawal of all aid would compel the Taliban to change its behavior?

The Way Forward

Given the Taliban's track record, it is unrealistic to expect that the withdrawal of humanitarian assistance will compel a change in behavior. An unelected, repressive regime, the Taliban has shown little interest in improving service delivery or responding to the needs of much of the country's citizens. The cessation of aid would, however, add to the suffering of millions of Afghans. Moreover, the withdrawal of aid organizations from the country would mean even greater isolation of Afghanistan from the world. International aid actors are one of the few conduits by which the global community can have a presence in the country, and by which many Afghans can have a window to the outside world. Thus, it is important that there is **continuity** of humanitarian assistance.



Despite the challenging environment, many organizations have devised creative workarounds and have made adjustments to ensure aid delivery. At the same time, the urgency of delivering aid should not come at the expense of transparency and accountability, as it is critical that both donors and beneficiaries have confidence in the effectiveness of the mechanism for aid delivery. That means NGOs should operate within accountability frameworks, but while staying within those parameters, should adopt more flexible and agile approaches to guarantee assistance reaches those in need, especially women.

For donors, **flexibility** means empowering implementing organizations to adjust and improvise in the field. Donors should recognize that the environment will remain unpredictable and challenging, and thus should avoid overly rigid or burdensome terms that might not need lead to practical changes on the ground but may be only “feel-good public statements” as one former diplomat in Afghanistan put it.^{xxii}

For aid delivery organizations on the ground, a more flexible approach means relying less on formal procedures and protocols, but instead on personal relationships and contacts to get things done. Organizations that have reported success in delivering humanitarian aid, especially in remote parts of the country, have emphasized that relationships with influential local figures and community networks have been absolutely essential. Similarly, many organizations have attempted to make themselves more agile, by, among other things, reorganizing, streamlining operational and procurement processes, and creating hiring workarounds such as internship programs to quickly find and deploy new staff. These types of changes are important and should continue.

The ban on female NGO workers creates another imperative for donors and implementing partners alike to find flexible new approaches. Donors should urge implementing partners to refrain from simply replacing female staff with male staff in response to the ban. Instead, organizations might consider restructuring existing programs to find ways of keeping women engaged and employed in project activities. This may include remote working or skills training in relevant technical fields such as analysis, research, and other roles that can be performed from home.

One factor that limits the ability of women to be in the field arises from the Taliban’s “Mahram” policy. Under the policy, a woman can only conduct public activities if accompanied by a male guardian. Especially in rural areas, where unemployment is high, few men have incentives to act as a guardian. If aid organizations were to offer more employment opportunities in their programs to men who could simultaneously act as guardians while performing job duties, as support staff, for instance, then that would in turn create more opportunities for women to conduct aid-related work in the field.

Another possible solution is to hire, contract, or otherwise engage women who are older with maternal family status and who are thus, under cultural norms, able to freely move in public and to meet with men. The rationale here is to emphasize the cultural significance of the family unit and its established structures. As an example, elderly women in the family (known familiarly as the “Ade,” “Ana,” “Apa,” “Acha,” “Aja,” or “Bibi”) have social influence and power in a community. They could be critical members of beneficiary selection teams, as their family status



confers on them the ability to meet with women or men in their homes, travel the country, and otherwise meet one-on-one with aid recipients.

Other principles donors and implementing partners can adopt to improve humanitarian assistance delivery are to pursue greater **coherence** and **coordination** among themselves. These actors took a key step in that direction in May 2022, when a consortium of international donors, financial institutions, and UN agencies formed the Afghanistan Coordinating Group (ACG) to improve coordination, share information, engage in strategic dialogue, deliver policy recommendations, and bring cohesion to key partners in support of humanitarian and basic needs projects.

Importantly, the ACG should act as a united front through which international humanitarian actors can collectively bargain for access and concessions with the Taliban. Though the unpredictable, fickle nature of the regime might make it tempting for an organization to obtain exemptions to restrictions on an individual, ad hoc basis, such an approach ultimately emboldens the Taliban to coerce and extort aid actors.

At the same time, one size does not fit all. It is important for aid organizations to identify which practices work in different localities. Local social and cultural context and dynamics matter immensely for the success of aid delivery. Aid organizations might consider sharing region-by-region best practices and lessons learned, both in terms of what works and what doesn't, as a means to strengthen coordination and effectiveness of aid delivery.^{xxiii}

Finally, major donors and international organizations should take greater action to **support** and **engage** with small, rights-based, and especially women-led humanitarian and private sector organizations in Afghanistan that have been disproportionately affected by the Taliban's restrictions and stringent administrative requirements. This could include providing targeted financial and technical assistance to help them adapt to the new implementation landscape, and overcome liquidity challenges. This may include more engagement with foreign and domestic private sector actors, as well, who in some cases may have greater means to travel to and within Afghanistan and can develop strategies for contributing to the economy through the provision of basic development services.



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^{xxiii} Interview with Thomas Ruttig, head of the Kabul office of the UN Mission in Afghanistan (UNSMA) from 2000 to 2001 and then a diplomat and advisor with subsequent UN and EU missions to Afghanistan until 2006.

