

Afghanistan Policy Lab Event Report

On

Aid Effectiveness in Afghanistan

Centering Women and Girls in the Fight Against Food Insecurity

at the 79th UNGA Side Event

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AFGHANISTAN POLICY LAB



Welcome Remarks and Highlighting the Key Issues

On September 18, the Afghanistan Policy Lab (APL) at the Princeton School of Public and International Affairs (SPIA) and the Permanent Mission of Afghanistan to the United Nations, in collaboration with the Permanent Missions of Canada, Finland, and the United Kingdom to the UN, hosted a side event during the 79th UN General Assembly in New York on aid effectiveness in Afghanistan and centering women and girls in the fight against food insecurity.



Panelists at the APL event on Aid Effective in Afghanistan, Sept. 18, UN HQ, NY



Afghanistan is facing a deepening humanitarian and economic crisis, particularly following the Taliban's restrictive policies on women that have hindered aid delivery and exacerbated food insecurity. The side event convened key stakeholders to discuss strategies for improving aid distribution and ensuring women's engagement in aid delivery and economic policies, which are essential to reaching vulnerable Afghans and promoting sustainable development.

Amaney Jamal, Dean of Princeton School of Public and International Affairs (SPIA) delivered welcoming remarks, thanking everyone for speaking on such a crucial topic. She said that after launching the Afghanistan Policy Lab in 2022, the initiative was to the School's responsiveness to needs within the global community and our commitment to providing relevant conversation and discussions on the needs of Afghan people, including humanitarian aid. She mentioned that the work of its scholars and practitioners would influence policy recommendations for the country. She emphasized that APL plays a key role in elevating the perspectives of Afghans by partnering with organizations such as the United Nations, think tanks and experts to discuss policy options.

Ambassador Robert Rae, the Permanent Representative of Canada to the UN and the President of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), emphasized the extraordinary nature of the crisis in Afghanistan, highlighting that an estimated 23.7 million Afghans require humanitarian assistance, 6.6 million are internally displaced, and millions more have fled to Iran, Pakistan, and elsewhere. Women and girls are particularly vulnerable, facing severe restrictions on their rights to education, work, and participation in civil life. Ambassador Rae highlighted the shortfall in humanitarian funding to meet growing needs and called on the international community to increase support for Afghanistan and consider new paradigms to deliver aid more effectively to the people who need it most.

Kanni Wignaraja, UN Assistant Secretary-General and Regional Director for Asia and the Pacific at the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) advocated for an interconnected approach to the economic and humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, noting that no single sector, policy, or program could address the crisis alone. She urged the international community to step up their support and respond to what communities, especially women, are asking for, including



microfinance to grow their businesses and rebuild civil society structures that give them hope. *“Over seven million Afghan women keep telling us, ‘Don’t forget. Don’t let the world forget about us,’”* said Ms. Wignaraja. *“And we must continue to work on these multiple fronts...we cannot turn away.”*

Manizha Wafeq, Co-founder of the Afghanistan Women Chamber of Commerce and Industry (AWCCI), moderated the panel discussion, inviting the panelists to offer their perspectives on how to improve the effectiveness of aid delivery in Afghanistan. She posed engaging and insightful questions, particularly emphasizing the issue of food insecurity, one of the most pressing concerns in Afghanistan.

Policy Discussions: Research Study Presentations by Fellows

Dr. Ahmad Zia Wahdat, Founder of Data for Afghanistan, and Fellow of the Afghanistan Policy Lab, highlighted the increasing food insecurity and malnourishment in Afghanistan, noting the prevalence of food insecurity increased from 45% in 2015 to 81% in 2022. Female-headed households are more likely to face food insecurity and hunger, with a higher prevalence of coping strategies such as limiting meal portions, saving food for children, and cutting the number of meals per day. Dr. Wahdat offered concrete policy recommendations, including targeting aid delivery to female-headed households, supporting home employment for female-headed households, and providing access to markets via intermediaries and mobile phones. He elaborated on the topic as below:

“As food insecurity and hunger is more prevalent among female-headed households than male-headed households in Afghanistan, evidence suggests at least two specific policy areas for intervention. First, assisting female-led households in their home enterprises via market access and business services can reduce their food insecurity. In a recent study (Wahdat 2024), I show that home employment, access to market, and mobile coverage is protective against food insecurity and hunger. Perhaps, business services can be tailored to help with access to market.



For example, offering marketing services can help with product sales. Second, extra efforts are needed to get aid to female-led households because they have a higher prevalence of not receiving aid relative to male-led households. More specifically, if the goal of an aid operation is to reduce food insecurity, a simple question about preference for cash versus in-kind food can be helpful. Households that prefer in-kind food actually have a higher rate of food insecurity. However, aid can also take the form of kitchenware, heating devices, and water containers because all such assets reduce [food insecurity in Afghanistan](#).”

Aman Farahi, Former Economist at the World Bank, UNDP, and Ministry of Finance in Afghanistan and Fellow at the Afghanistan Policy Lab, described the decline of Afghanistan’s economy since the Taliban takeover in 2021, noting the country’s GDP contracted about 27% in the first 18 months of Taliban rule. He urged the international community to increase humanitarian aid levels in the short-term and help stimulate demand in the economy. He also urged support for women-owned businesses, including home-based production and agribusiness, and called on donors to help address issues around access to finance and markets. In addition, Mr. Farahi argued that grant financing alone is unsustainable and called for improving loan terms, including lower interest rates, and focusing on developing specific sectors to address value chain challenges. He gave detailed information below:

“Afghanistan’s economy remains in a downturn, with the full extent of the hardships obscured by a lack of data. However, the available indicators paint a stark picture: GDP per capita continues to decline, and 62% of households could not meet their basic needs in 2023. The economy is faced with several urgent risks: continued uncertainty, high poverty, a demand shock, exposure to climate and natural disaster risks, the short-term impact of the loss of farmers’ income, and reduction of economic activities due to the opium ban, and the return of an estimated 2 million Afghan refugees from Iran and Pakistan in 2024 adds to the humanitarian needs of an estimated 6 million Internally Displaced People. A rapid decline in



humanitarian aid is also underway, and ongoing restrictions on women further exacerbate the economic risks. Under the current policies, Afghanistan will not reach its economic potential despite peace. Afghanistan's private sector also faces several challenges, with new concerns like low demand and banking system issues compounding pre-existing problems such as limited access to electricity and finance. The restrictions on women make it improbable for women-owned businesses to run profitable and sustainable enterprises. Gender discrimination is now a systematized norm at the firm level, as the authorities enforce their myriad edicts limiting women's voice, agency, and right to participate in the economy. Despite these immense challenges, the international community, with the limited support still available, must recognize the importance of targeted interventions. Prioritizing women-owned businesses, supporting home-based production in the short term, and learning from past lessons are critical. By shifting toward better risk-sharing and agribusiness sector support, there is a chance to foster resilience.”





APL fellows, Mohammad Aman Farahi and Ahmad Zia Wahdat delivering presentations

Dr. Erica Gaston, Senior Policy Advisor and Head of the Conflict Prevention and Sustaining Peace Programme at the United Nations University Centre for Policy Research, offered insights from the independent assessment mandated by the Security Council focusing on humanitarian aid delivery to Afghanistan. Through consultations with UN staff, other aid workers, and Afghans, the assessment identified myriad obstacles to effective aid delivery, including restrictions imposed by the Taliban and donor governments as well as basic cash flow and supply issues.

Dr. Gaston emphasized that many of Afghanistan’s challenges are not purely humanitarian assistance issues and demand more long-term development responses, which will require some degree of dialogue with the de facto authorities. *“That is unpalatable to many in the international*

community,” Dr. Gaston said, “But it’s the only way the [international] community can respond to some of the concerns that Afghan women have.”



Participants sharing opinions at the event

Following the panel discussion, several stakeholders offered comments from the floor. ~~For Henrik~~ Jess Lambert-Gray, Deputy Political Coordinator at the UK mission to the UN concluded the event by urging the international community to ensure that Afghanistan does not slip off the global agenda. “We simply cannot allow the Taliban to continue to erode women and girls’ rights in the way that they are doing,” Lambert-Gray said.



Panelists Discussing Aid Effectiveness in Afghanistan

