National agrifood systems and COVID-19 in Afghanistan

Effects, policy responses and long-term implications
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Effects, policy responses and long-term implications

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has put significant pressure on health systems all around the world. The drastic measures established to contain its spread are creating serious impediments to economic activity (including agrifood systems) and, consequently, to livelihoods and food security and nutrition.

The COVID-19 outbreak demonstrates both how health and food systems are linked to one another, and how local food systems are linked to global systems. High rates of urbanization and the globalization of trade and travel have contributed to the spread of the virus across countries. Lockdowns and movement restrictions within countries and across borders have disrupted national and local food and agricultural output and input markets and have caused sharp reductions in overall economic activity globally. In poorer countries, disruptions have further exacerbated the fragility of systems (including agrifood systems) and livelihoods.

The Global Report on Food Crises 2021 found that 155 million people in 55 countries and territories are facing acute food insecurity at “crisis” level or higher – a situation that requires urgent action. The report further concluded that over 208 million people were experiencing a “stressed” level of acute food insecurity and bore a high risk of sliding into a “crisis” level if confronted by with additional shocks (FSIN, 2021). The situation is particularly worrisome in light of the evolving nature of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As the situation evolves, the question arises as to how, or whether, food, health and financial and economic systems could become better prepared to prevent similar outbreaks from escalating into a full-blown economic and social crisis.

This report is part of a series of country profiles that describe: (i) policy measures enacted by governments to contain the spread of the virus; (ii) policies and measures to stabilize the functioning of agri-food systems; (iii) potential effects of policies on agri-food systems and vulnerable groups. Finally, the profiles also assess longer-term options for agri-food system policies and investments so as to make them more resilient.
BACKGROUND

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted lives and livelihoods throughout the world, particularly in vulnerable and resource-poor countries with insufficient coping capacities. Protracted conflict and insecurity, limited health care services, high rates of poverty and food insecurity, poor education services, and gender disparities are some key factors that have made Afghanistan one of the most vulnerable countries in the world. In 2019, Afghanistan faced one of the most severe food crises in the world (FAO, 2020a).

Afghanistan recorded its first COVID-19 case in late February 2020. Table 1 presents the officially recorded number of COVID-19 cases as of 10 March 2021.

Table 1. Confirmed COVID-19 cases in Afghanistan (10 March 2021)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Confirmed</th>
<th>Recovered</th>
<th>Deaths</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>55,901</td>
<td>49,499</td>
<td>2,451</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The health sector in Afghanistan has improved significantly over recent years but it remains critically unprepared to mount a systematic, timely and effective response to a pandemic. Afghanistan has 7.2 physicians per 10,000 people in urban areas and as few as 0.6 in rural areas, which is below the required standard under normal conditions (Safi et al., 2018). According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the Government of Afghanistan has made significant strides in containing the pandemic despite these challenges. In April 2020, as the number of COVID-19 cases increased, the Government converted several facilities, including university dormitories and schools, into isolation centres with a capacity of just over 1,000 beds. As a result, the President of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan issued a circular on converting Darul Aman Palace into a COVID-19 isolation centre.

POLICY MEASURES TO CONTAIN COVID-19

On 18 March 2020, the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GoIRA) placed restrictions on movements across the country for three weeks, later extending the restrictions until late May 2020. Public gatherings were banned and people were advised to employ hygienic practices to prevent the spread of the disease. Venues accommodating large crowds, such as entertainment sites, sports grounds, swimming pools, fitness clubs and wedding halls, were closed. However, grocery stores, food vendors, and banks remained open. In addition, the GoIRA took precautionary measures such as the disinfection of public places with support from civil society organizations, private sector and Afghan citizens. Public transport carrying more than four passengers was banned; however the implementation of this measure differed across provinces (UNDP, 2020a).

Densely populated major cities, such as Kabul, Herat, Kandahar, Nengarhar and Balkh, were placed under a strict lockdown from 28 March until late May 2020. The lockdown ensured that residents stayed at home and avoided all non-essential travel and gatherings. People adhered to the lockdown rules and regulations in the major cities, although it was not fully respected in less densely-populated areas, where restrictions on movement were looser. The movement of agrifood products, both imported and local, was not restricted in order to avoid a shortage of food in the local markets. Thus the availability of fresh fruits, vegetables and grains was not seriously disrupted during the lockdown period.
Closing the borders with neighbouring countries, such as Pakistan and the Central Asian countries, in order to control the spread of COVID-19 virus exacerbated the challenges for Afghanistan. Farmers could not export their harvest and, as a result, suffered the loss of their perishable products. Cross-border trade of agriculture products ceased from late March to late May 2020. In early June, the restrictions were exceptionally eased for the import and export of agrifood products in order to help farmers sell their agricultural produce and ensure enough food availability through imports. This latter point is essential considering that in 2018 approximately half of the domestic supply of cereal was imported (FAO, 2020b).

In early June 2020, the Government of Afghanistan began to gradually ease the national lockdown but urged the Afghan people to continue to limit their movements.

In November, a second wave of COVID-19 hit Afghanistan. This was partly due to further repatriation of returnees from Iran and cross-border movements between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Infections increased drastically and the Government was obliged to take precautionary measures. It announced restrictions on group gatherings throughout the country from 21 November 2020 until further notice. Government employees were encouraged to work from home. In late December, additional containment measures were introduced, including the reduction of working hours of government employees and the closure of schools and universities. The movement of agrifood products movement remained free from restriction and the borders between neighbouring countries remained open so the trade of agrifood products was not affected.

**AGRIFOOD POLICY MEASURES TO RESPOND TO THE EFFECTS OF THE CRISIS**

**What major policy measures are in place or anticipated that target the food system directly?**

Despite extreme financial resource constraints – which jeopardized government capacity to deliver services and limited the reserve funds available to address emergency needs – the GoIRA has been quick to respond to the pandemic. Some of the response measures included:

- supplying and distributing solar dryers to selected women farmers so they can dry and conserve fresh fruits.
- allocating 75 million United States dollars (USD) to strengthen post-harvest agricultural product management (of wheat, fruits and vegetables) and minimize the impact of the pandemic on food losses due to a decreased demand or disrupted market chains. This included the construction of 71 modern cold storage facilities (each with 20 000 tonnes storage capacity) for farmers groups and/or cooperatives. The funds were also used to build traditional storehouses at the farm level. Beneficiaries were selected based on their land ownership and production capacity. The storehouses required zero energy and were made of local materials only. They included:
  - 4 000 small scale raisin storage houses in Herat, Kandahar and Parwan with 1.5 tonnes capacity per unit;
  - 7 000 onion and potatoes cold storage facilities;
  - 11 000 pomegranate, apples and apricot cold storage facilities to increase shelf life of high value fresh fruit.

In addition to reducing food losses, this initiative also created short term job opportunities by providing cash for work.
A number of additional actions in support of the agrifood sector were taken:

- The market prices of essential food and commodities in municipalities were carefully monitored.
- To avoid the potential shortage of wheat, a staple food for the Afghan people, the GoIRA allocated an additional USD 18 million to the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock (MAIL) to purchase wheat from local farmers’ associations and neighbouring countries for strategic reserves in order to stabilize prices and assist vulnerable households during the crisis.
- To keep prices from rising, the government distributed free food to needy and vulnerable communities from the strategic reserves and sought to prevent hoarding and price fixing. Despite this measure, prices increased temporarily (11 percent according to the FSAC Afghanistan Newsletter July-September 2020), affecting the purchasing power of consumers.
- Starting in late May 2020, the Government took action to ensure that all supply routes were open to people and merchandise, both inside Afghanistan in neighbouring countries such as Kazakhstan and Pakistan. This also helped to mitigate food price hikes by maintaining relatively stable market supply.

Government support for the private sector helped to enhance conservation and processing capacities for key agricultural products, such as fruits and vegetables, and facilitated access to factories for transportation and labour forces, while still adhering to COVID-19 precautionary measures. Measures also included subsidizing electricity for small and medium enterprises (SMEs), with special arrangements to pay the expenses in instalments.

What measures are in place or anticipated that aim to mitigate the effects of the crisis on vulnerable groups?

With support from a World Bank grant, the authorities rolled out a relief package, amounting to 21.6 billion afghani (AFN) (USD 277 million / 1.6 percent of GDP) to Afghan households with incomes of USD 1.90 per day or lower. Since about 90 percent of all households fall below that threshold, the programme is nearly universal. Thanks to this initiative, in 2020, targeted households in rural areas received an equivalent of USD 50 in essential food staples and hygiene products, while those in urban areas received a combination of cash and in-kind equivalent to USD 100 (IMF, 2020a; Neha, 2020).

A new programme called Dastarkhan-e-Mili (free food distribution) with a budget of USD 360 million is being implemented by the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD) and MAIL through community development committees in 34 provinces around the country. Through this emergency response, which was financed through the national budget, Kabul Municipality distributed bread to 250 000 of the most vulnerable households in urban areas of Kabul during the first three months of the crisis. Implementation reports have not yet been published by the ministries but more information on these programmes (especially on implementation status and impact) should be available in 2021.

In May 2020, the Government waived electricity bills of less than AFN 1 000 (USD 13) for families in Kabul for two months and paid two months’ worth of utility bills for 50 percent of households in Kabul. The initiative benefited more than 1.5 million Kabul residents (IMF, 2020a).

To increase employment opportunities and generate income for vulnerable communities, who were left with no income or lost income during the crisis, the government allocated
USD 13 million to cash-for-work projects aimed at reconstructing potable water systems and irrigation canals. The project was implemented in the most economically-affected provinces, such as Badakhshan, Nooristan, Kunar, Samangan, Bamyan, Logar and Ghazni (MoEc, 2020).

Anticipating the economic strain of the pandemic response, the Government quickly initiated emergency grain distribution in Kabul and across the country. But strategic reserves were not sufficient to cover the population’s urgent needs. Shortages created panic and rising resentment. Over the past couple of years, a transition to cash-based assistance has proved a useful option for dealing with food distribution, yet this has been challenging during lockdown, since the currency exchange markets and money transfer services have been shuttered and other adaptive measures, such as smartphone money transfers, have limited reach.

**How is the government funding COVID-19 related measures?**

In 2020, the authorities spent 2.2 percent of GDP to fight COVID-19 including:

- a health package of around AFN 10.2 billion (USD 131 million);
- a social package of around AFN 14.6 billion (USD 187 million);
- support for the COVID-19 response in the provinces, at a cost of approximately AFN 1.5 billion (USD 19 million);
- support for agriculture and the cash-for-work programme described above, at a cost of AFN 5.2 billion (USD 67 million) and AFN 1.0 billion (USD 13 million) respectively (IMF, 2020a).

The international community’s support to Afghanistan came from available and newly pledged resources, however only 49 percent of the Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) was funded in 2020, compared to 76 percent in 2019 (OCHA, 2021), which indicates a significant increase in unmet humanitarian needs in 2020.

**What initiatives have been taken by the humanitarian and development community to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19 on food security, nutrition, agriculture, water and sanitation and health?**

In 2020, international humanitarian agencies provided support to vulnerable people across Afghanistan through cash-based transfers, food assistance and seasonal support to food-insecure individuals, especially during the winter cultivation season from October to December, when farmers needed timely agricultural inputs to enable them to cultivate and produce their own food (OCHA, 2021). Assistance also targeted conflict-displaced people and returnees from the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan.

Donor organizations adhered to their regular mandates and procedures, nor was there any particular coordination of efforts, especially in terms of planning and governance in the context of the COVID-19. International donors and some United Nations agencies repurposed funding from existing programmes. For example, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is repurposing funds to support Afghanistan’s national response, prevention, and mitigation activities and preparation for longer-term development interventions (UNDP, 2020b). As noted, coordination among international organizations and between government and international actors remain limited and the mechanism to report on progress and achievements is yet to be harmonized.
Some significant initiatives taken by the humanitarian and development community are reported below.

The European Union allocated close to EUR 70 million in humanitarian support to victims of war, forced displacement and natural disasters prior to the pandemic. Interventions focused on emergency healthcare, shelter, food assistance, access to clean water and sanitation facilities, as well as various protection services targeting women and children. A large part of funding in 2020 was diverted to the health emergency posed by the pandemic and the needs of the people affected by the crisis. This support focused on treating coronavirus patients and preventing the further spread of the virus through case investigation and testing, medical equipment, and training and awareness-raising activities. The European Union supported a nutrition response in view of the nearly three million children under five years of age suffering from malnutrition in Afghanistan.

The European Union continued to fund the Emergency Response Mechanism (ERM) – a programme implemented by a consortium of five international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which predates the COVID-19 crisis – ensuring timely and flexible emergency assistance to people who have been recently displaced. In 2020, the ERM reached more than 200,000 people in all provinces with cash grants, clean water, and access to sanitation services. The ERM’s provision of emergency life-saving assistance has allowed other humanitarian agencies to plan further assistance in the medium- and long-term and enabled European Union partners to advocate the early mobilization of development and stabilization funds. This mechanism is not specific to the pandemic, but a COVID-19-specific response was integrated into the programme.

In May 2020, the Executive Board of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) approved a disbursement of SDR 161.9 million (about USD 220 million; 50 percent of the yearly quota) for Afghanistan under the Rapid Credit Facility (RCF). The funds will help meet the urgent fiscal and balance of payments needs stemming from the pandemic, catalyse donor support and shore up public confidence. The COVID-19 pandemic is inflicting heavy damage on Afghanistan’s economy, creating a projected USD 857 million (4.5 percent of GDP) balance of payments deficit in 2020. The IMF estimates that authorities are boosting critical health spending and rolling out social assistance to households hit hard by the crisis (IMF, 2020b).

In August 2020, the Executive Directors of the World Bank Board approved a USD 200 million grant to help Afghanistan mitigate the impacts of COVID-19 and provide relief to vulnerable people and businesses.

The United States Government, through its State Department and its Agency for International Development (USAID), allocated approximately USD 36.7 million to help the health sector address the COVID-19 pandemic, provide assistance to returnees and migrants and provide economic support to the most vulnerable households as part of the nationwide support by GoIRA (USAID, 2020). India provided 75,000 tonnes of wheat to support food availability in the country.

The Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) supported efforts to reduce the effects of COVID-19 amongst Afghanistan’s most vulnerable people through health protection, water, sanitation and hygiene. As the focus turns to relief and recovery, Australia’s regional humanitarian strategy is providing lifesaving services to displaced people and their host communities on both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, including vaccinations and sexual and reproductive health services.

The following table (figures are as of October 2020) (OCHA, 2020) presents other interventions relevant to food security and nutrition as reported by Afghanistan Humanitarian Fund/United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).
Table 2.1. Key interventions for food security and nutrition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Implementing organization</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Field Cluster</th>
<th>Funded (USD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WHO</td>
<td>To decrease the further transmission of COVID-19 and reduce mortality and morbidity caused by severe acute malnutrition (SAM) in targeted high-risk districts in the context of the pandemic</td>
<td>Nutrition COVID-19</td>
<td>428 824</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WFP</td>
<td>Treatment and prevention of moderate acute malnutrition in the provinces most affected by COVID-19 through distribution of nutritious biscuits and nutrition-sensitive free food as well as cash voucher/cash transfers</td>
<td>Nutrition COVID-19</td>
<td>1 028 618</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FAO</td>
<td>Reducing the impact of COVID-19 on food security, minimizing the potential impacts of COVID-19 and COVID-19 response measures on the agriculture sector</td>
<td>2 070 213</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNICEF</td>
<td>Delivery of lifesaving nutrition services to COVID-19 priority areas</td>
<td>Nutrition COVID-19</td>
<td>1 139 003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency for Assistance and Development of Afghanistan</td>
<td>Provision of lifesaving health and nutrition services in COVID-19 high risk districts in Herat province</td>
<td>Nutrition COVID-19</td>
<td>342 525</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danish Refugee Council</td>
<td>Emergency food assistance to meet the immediate needs of COVID-19-affected internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Kandahar.</td>
<td>Food Security COVID-19</td>
<td>837 700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IOM</td>
<td>Population mobility data and community engagement for informed COVID-19 response</td>
<td>Coordination COVID-19</td>
<td>500 000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OXIFAM (NOVIB)</td>
<td>Food Security support for IDPs in Nangarhar as part of COVID-19 response</td>
<td>Food Security COVID-19</td>
<td>689 400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Save the Children</td>
<td>Emergency nutrition services in COVID-19 high risk areas of Balkh, Kunduz and Faryab provinces</td>
<td>Nutrition COVID-19</td>
<td>399 578</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World Vision International</td>
<td>Emergency lifesaving nutrition support under CoVID-19 response in Herat and Badghis priority districts</td>
<td>Nutrition COVID-19</td>
<td>600 000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZOA</td>
<td>Food assistance to DPs affected by COVID-19 in Nangarhar</td>
<td>Food security COVID-19</td>
<td>300 600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OXIFAM</td>
<td>Live-saving cash support for vulnerable households in Nangarhar facing extreme food insecurity</td>
<td>Food security COVID-19</td>
<td>689 400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WFP</td>
<td>Food assistance to ensure the resilience of farmers with fragile livelihood status and to support vulnerable IDPs and recent returnees affected by COVID-19</td>
<td>Food security COVID-19</td>
<td>1 424 440</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development</td>
<td>Provision of emergency food assistance through vouchers for most vulnerable protracted IDPs in Mazar-e-Sharif</td>
<td>Food security COVID-19</td>
<td>693 000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

How are the humanitarian and development communities funding the COVID-19 response?

Development partners – such as the governments of Belgium, Australia, Denmark, Germany, Sweden, the United States of America, Switzerland and the United Kingdom, as well as the

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1 According to the IOM, More than 865 700 Afghans returned to Afghanistan during 2020, including approximately 859 000 from the Islamic Republic of Iran and an estimated 6 700 from Pakistan, representing the largest return of undocumented, including deported, Afghans of any year on record.

2 ZOA is an international NGO operating in Afghanistan.
European Commission’s Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection Department, the Central Emergency Response Fund and the Afghanistan Humanitarian Fund – have contributed financially to support Afghanistan’s response to the COVID-19 crisis in terms of food security and nutrition, health, coordination, emergency shelter and the distribution of non-food items.

Afghanistan’s revised HRP for 2020 called for USD 1.1 billion in 2020 to provide 11.1 million of the most vulnerable people with life-saving assistance. The HRP addressed not only new needs arising from COVID-19, but also pre-existing needs in different sectors, as illustrated in Table 2.2. The revised HRP included USD 396 million to respond to the direct and indirect effects of the pandemic and USD 735 for non-COVID-19 activities. The revised HRP estimated that 35 million people needed social safety net coverage, 14 million of whom were in acute need of humanitarian services by May 2020. This was up from 9.4 million at the start of 2020 (OCHA, 2020b).

Table 2.2. Afghanistan Humanitarian Response Plan (January – September 2020)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sector</th>
<th>Funding required (USD million)</th>
<th>Funding received (USD million)</th>
<th>Percentage disbursed</th>
<th>Gap (USD million)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education in emergencies</td>
<td>68.1</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>2.20%</td>
<td>66.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emergency shelter and non-food items</td>
<td>122.9</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>3.99%</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food security and agriculture</td>
<td>370.3</td>
<td>144.4</td>
<td>39.00%</td>
<td>225.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>171.1</td>
<td>37.5</td>
<td>21.92%</td>
<td>133.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nutrition</td>
<td>114.6</td>
<td>29.2</td>
<td>25.48%</td>
<td>85.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protection</td>
<td>91.9</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>41.35%</td>
<td>53.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water, sanitation and hygiene</td>
<td>152.2</td>
<td>18.7</td>
<td>12.29%</td>
<td>133.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: OCHA, 2020c.

**IMMEDIATE EFFECTS OF THE CRISIS ON VULNERABLE PEOPLE AND THE AGRIFOOD SYSTEM**

**Food security and nutrition: latest data and projections**

In Afghanistan, the extreme poor (individuals living on USD 1.90 income per day or less) are bearing the brunt of the economic disruption triggered by COVID-19. Over 55 percent of the population lived below the national poverty line prior to the pandemic (World Bank, 2020).

Under normal circumstances, people often have ways to cope with shocks, but this time was different: workers (especially vendors, daily wagers, shopkeepers and construction workers) could not make up for lost income by simply working longer hours because demand for labour dropped significantly as access to markets for non-essential commodities was restricted. Most people cut back on their spending to tackle reduced income and lack of employment opportunities. A sharp reduction in demand and the effect of lockdown have led to a slowdown in economic activity, bringing most businesses (particularly restaurants, travel agencies, construction services, clothing retailers) to the brink of bankruptcy or even permanent closure (MoEc, 2020). As such, the Government’s interventions to boost incomes and demand were critical to saving the economy.
A substantial share of household income in Afghanistan depends on activities that were vulnerable to the lockdown and social distance measures prompted by the pandemic. At the national level, over 50 percent of household income in the poorest quintile depends on activities like shopkeeping, street or market sales, or daily labour in construction, agriculture or personal services. The people involved in these activities have been severely impacted by the crisis since the measures to slow down the spread of the virus reduced their ability to make a living. This is especially true for urban households, two-thirds of whose average income is linked to such activities (IPC, 2021).

Based on Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) analyses and reports over the past five years, the number of food-insecure people has almost doubled and is predicted to reach 10.9 million between March – May 2021 (IPC, 2020a). The IPC has estimated that before the COVID-19 crisis, more than 35 percent of the population required emergency support; the pandemic has further exacerbated the situation with the result that much larger resources are urgently needed to address emergency needs in the country (MAIL and FAO, 2020).

According to an IPC analysis, 11.24 million people (36 percent of the population) were estimated to be in Food Crisis and Emergency (IPC Phase 3 and Phase 4) as of September 2020. An estimated 3.7 million people were classified in IPC Phase 4 and another 7.54 million people were classified in IPC Phase 3. This calls for urgent action to reduce food consumption gaps and to protect livelihoods and reduce acute malnutrition. The analysis suggested that the Phase 3 and 4 estimates represent a 3 percent increase (from 33 percent to 36 percent) compared to the same period in the previous year (2019): the number of people in IPC Phase 4 increased from 2.43 million to 3.7 million, while the number of people in IPC Phase 3 decreased slightly from 7.7 million to 7.54 million. This indicates that a greater number of people moved into IPC Phase 4 in 2020 primarily due to the impacts of COVID-19, including loss of employment, reduction in income and food price increases. The prolonged conflict in Afghanistan and the absence of any major support mechanism for people in IPC Phases 3 and 4 may also explain the increase (IPC, 2020b).

The multiple shocks directly experienced by households between March and August 2020 halted any improvements to the acute food insecurity situation that had started last year as Afghanistan began to recover from the severe drought that hit the country in 2018. The yearly seasonal assessment conducted by Food security and Agriculture Cluster (FSAC) shows the combined effects of recent shocks (e.g., conflict, natural disasters and COVID-19) on all dimensions of food security at the national level; these include reduced employment opportunities, reduced income, loss of employment, death or illness of family members, crop pests and livestock disease outbreaks (IPC, 2020c).

The IPC analysis showed an increase in the proportion of households with poor food consumption (+5 percent) compared to 2019, as well as an increase in the proportion of households consuming less than five different food groups (+15 percent). Most subsist on bread, oil and sugar. In the meantime, the proportion of households with a moderate to severe level of hunger has increased (+11 percent), as has the proportion of households that allocate more than 75 percent of their monthly expenditure to food (+12 percent) (IPC, 2020c).

The findings of the 2020 SFSA show that around seven out of ten households experienced shocks arising from conflict, extreme weather and the COVID-19 crisis. The provinces of Nuristan, Wardak, Uruzgan, Kandahar, and Laghman faced the highest level of shocks (90 percent of households were affected) (IPC, 2021).
The most recent IPC Acute Food Insecurity analysis was conducted over two time periods. Analysis of the current period (March-May 2021) was mainly based on Food Security Monitoring System (FSMS) data collected in January 2021, along with other secondary data sources. A projection analysis (June-November 2021) was based on FSMS and other secondary data sources as well as forward-looking assumptions around conflict, the expected impact of La Niña, precipitation, remittances, food prices, trade and economic outlook, and crop harvests. The analysis covered all of Afghanistan’s 34 provinces. In 23 provinces, the analysis was carried out at the provincial level and in the remaining 11 provinces, rural and major urban centres were analysed separately, with the result that the total analysis units amounted to 45 (IPC, 2021).

An analysis of the 2021 lean season, carried out in March 2021, revealed that an estimated 10.9 million people (35 percent of the total population) face high levels of acute food insecurity (IPC Phase 3 or above). The previous analysis, conducted in April 2020 during the lean season, also found that 10.9 million people faced high levels of acute food insecurity. However, a comparison of the projection analysis conducted in September 2020 with the March 2021 study shows a decrease of 2.3 million people (7 percent), from 13.2 (42 percent) to 10.9 (35 percent), facing high levels of acute food insecurity. Barring inaccuracies surrounding the estimates, it is possible that the impacts of COVID-19’s second wave have been less dramatic than anticipated, possibly due to the easing of restriction following the first wave but due to the improved level of remittances, trade flows, etc. The impacts of humanitarian food assistance provided through the Dastarkhwan e Meli initiative and other humanitarian actions have been significant in terms of enhancing the food security situation of the people. In addition, the March-May 2021 data analysis which also includes the harvest in lowland areas is going to enhance the food availability in this season compared to the pre-harvest period (IPC, 2021).

Overview of projected food insecurity (June-November 2021)

The number of people in IPC Phase 3 (Crisis) and IPC Phase 4 (Emergency) is expected to decrease during the projection period to 9.46 million (30 percent of the population), with 6.7 million people (21 percent) in Crisis (IPC Phase 3) and 2.7 million (9 percent) in Emergency (IPC Phase 4). The downward trend in food insecurity follows the expected seasonal patterns of harvest. The number of Phase 4 (Emergency) areas will remain the same, however, the number of areas classified as IPC Phase 3 (Crisis) is expected to decrease from 37 areas in the current analysis to 35 areas in the projection period. The number of areas classified as IPC Phase 2 (Stress) will increase from four to six as Kunduz province rural areas and Kapisa provinces are expected to be included in Phase 2. The food security situation is therefore likely to improve if the impact of harvest and other positive changes is accurately captured in the projections (IPC, 2021).

According to data from FEWSNET (Famine Early Warning Systems Network), most of Afghanistan received below average precipitation in 2020, and several provinces in the north, northeast, west, south and east experienced a precipitation deficit. Wheat cultivation and production, especially in rainfed areas, depend heavily on adequate and timely precipitation. Based on the precipitation and remote sensing data collected by FEWSNET, it is estimated that the harvest will be below average this year. Nevertheless, it is expected that the food security situation will improve somewhat after the harvest as well as due to increased agricultural wage labour opportunities, especially in rural parts of the country. The positive impact of the harvest will likely outweigh the negative impacts of factors, such as conflict, displacement, returnees from the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan, and the food security situation will slightly improve accordingly (IPC, 2021).

Afghanistan is in a precarious moment with respect to the long-standing conflict. Although the Government is in the process of negotiating a peace deal, the insurgent group still continues to attack Afghan forces. If a peace deal does not materialize, conflicts will increase during the
projection period. This will likely trigger further internal displacement and food insecurity. With the spring offensive, food security will be negatively impacted as rural areas become battlegrounds. Food security will also be affected in urban areas, as people are displaced into cities due to conflicts (IPC, 2021). Such factors may reverse the more optimistic outlook concerning food security.

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), cross-border movement from the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan will remain a key challenge in 2021, mainly due to reduced employment opportunities and economic crises in those countries, partly caused by COVID-19. People will face decreased remittances – mainly from the Islamic Republic of Iran due to its currency depreciation – low to no employment opportunities and more competition in the job market due to people returning from the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan and internal displacement. At the same time, it is assumed that the level of remittances from Gulf countries will likely improve during the projection period (IPC, 2021).

Emergency humanitarian food and livelihood assistance will be provided to vulnerable populations such as IDPs, returnees, refugees, people affected by natural disasters and people classified as IPC Phase 3 or above. The GoIRA will also assist the vulnerable populations through the Dastarkhwan e Meli initiative until November 2021.

**Food security situation in selected urban areas:**

Eleven major towns in selected provinces were analysed (October-December 2020) to determine the specific vulnerabilities of urban households. Around 2.73 million people (36 percent) in urban areas face high levels of acute food insecurity (IPC Phase 3 or above), 717,000 of which (10 percent) were classified as IPC Phase 4 (Emergency). All urban areas were classified in Crisis (IPC Phase 3). Forty-five percent of the population of Mazar (Balkh) and Kandahar are classified in IPC Phase 3 or above, making them the most vulnerable urban centres, followed by Maimana (Faryab), Pul-e-Khumri (Baghlan), Jalalabad (Nangarhar), each of which have 40 percent of their population classified as IPC Phase 3 or above.

The number of people facing high acute food insecurity (IPC Phase 3 or above) is expected to decrease during the projected period to 2.2 million (29 percent) people, due to the upcoming harvest, improved food availability and job opportunities. However, higher food prices due to an expected below average harvest and potential displacement if the conflict intensifies, threaten food security in the urban centres (IPC, 2021).

**How have the pandemic and associated measures affected agrifood systems?**

The FAO/MAIL survey (May 2020) indicated that the pandemic and associated measures had limited impact on the harvest, but significant impact on processing, suggesting that 50 percent of wheat mills and 46 percent of rice mills functioned regularly in 2020, while 42 and 38 percent, respectively, reported only partial operations.

As previously noted, this reduction mainly stems from movement restrictions and the reduction of demand and production activities. In a similar vein, only 43 percent of fruit and 30 percent of vegetable processors reported regular operations and over 66 percent of vegetable processors and 82 percent of dairy processors reported partial operations. The analysis indicates that despite the substantial logistical disruptions caused by COVID-19, challenges to the harvest of wheat, fruits and vegetables have been so far limited. However, more than 50 percent of cereal processors, 57 percent of fruit processors, 70 percent of vegetable processors and 97 percent of
dairy processors were reported to be highly impacted and operating at reduced capacity or closed (FAO, 2020a).

Export restrictions and related challenges have affected farmers too. Following the harvest, the export of fruits and vegetables starts in May and the critical time for cereal exports is June and July. Although restrictions on exports of agrifood products were quickly lifted, unclear trade policies and border management practices (especially between Pakistan and Afghanistan), export-related procedures (including disinfection and certification) had an effect on trade. In addition, despite Government efforts, the lack of adequate food storage facilities led to severe food losses, particularly of fresh agricultural produce. So far, there has been no survey or investigation to quantify the economic impact of such losses.

According to the SFSA 2020, COVID-19 was expected to increase the challenges faced by farmers. The closure of the borders between Afghanistan and the target markets affected access to international markets during part of 2020. While most international borders opened in June 2020, the situation remained volatile, reducing the scale of most operations.

Around 90 percent of farming households reported they would not have access to certified wheat seed and another 66 percent said that they would not have access to any kind of wheat seed (certified or not) for the coming cultivation season as a result of economic hardship created by the COVID-19 crisis. According to the SFSA 2020, overall herd size has decreased by 14 percent (16 percent sheep/goat decrease, 14 percent buffalo decrease and 4 percent cattle/yak decrease). Of the 45 percent of households who reported owning livestock, 48 percent reported a reduction in livestock production. Lack of pastureland, the high price of fodder and concentrated animal feed, lack of access to veterinary services, and unreliable water supply are the main challenges reported by households (IPC, 2020b). It is too early to estimate precisely how the COVID-19 pandemic affected each of the factors mentioned above, but that information should be available in future.

At the national level, more than one-third of farmers reported difficulties in selling their produce (dairy, fruits, vegetables, honey) due to temporary market closures (FAO, 2020a). A significant number of small-scale, provincial and national traders also reported problems with procuring fresh agricultural produce and transporting produce to local markets due to increased transportation costs and road closures linked to containment measures. Across all provinces, just over half of markets (and only food supply markets) were reported to be functioning as usual. Around 40 percent of wholesale vegetable markets appeared to have been affected adversely, while just about half of the total street vendors were functioning as usual (MoEc, 2020).

The cessation of non-essential economic activities between March and late May 2020 affected Micro, Small and Medium enterprises (MSMEs), in all sectors. The Ministry of Economy (MoEc) estimated that a prolonged period of restrictions threatened to drive at least 218 000 micro enterprises and 30 000 small businesses to the brink of ruin. The service industry, secondary products, such as construction material and cloth production and the transportation of non-essential goods, were expected to bear the brunt of the damage.

The Afghanistan Centre for Economic Analysis (ACEA) at the MoEc assessed 256 531 businesses including MSMEs, retailers in manufacturing services and non-essential supplies (home appliances, housewares, luxury food). The ACEA study estimated that close to 74 percent of the micro enterprises in Kabul (57 300 units) and 78 percent in the provinces (109 662 units) were extremely vulnerable due to the inaccessibility of the markets to the public. Small businesses are
even more vulnerable in the face of the pandemic. Approximately 84 percent of small businesses in Kabul (365 businesses) and 93 percent in the provinces (1,562 businesses), as well as 93 percent of medium enterprises in Kabul (13,448 businesses) and 94 percent in the provinces (5,058 businesses) were found to be vulnerable to the lockdown (MoEc, 2020).

According to the ACEA study, large enterprises were better able to cope with the challenges caused by COVID-19 because they have access to more resources and facilities. However, as the restrictions continue, close to 91 percent of these enterprises are expected to experience a major slowdown in business, which may continue even after the pandemic has run its course due to lower incomes, continued unemployment and a shift in demand to more affordable goods by households with limited resources (MoEc, 2020). In addition, the temporary restrictions imposed by neighbouring countries, such as Pakistan, Uzbekistan, the Islamic Republic of Iran and Turkmenistan, limited the movement of food products across borders, further reducing the production and supply of commodities such as wheat flour, cooking oil, sugar, and rice in Afghanistan (MoEc, 2020).

Although the ACEA study has revealed the impact of the pandemic on MSME activities, the long-term effect on the livelihoods of people involved in such businesses has yet to be assessed, especially in urban areas where it is expected to be significant. Understanding the long-term impact of the crisis will also require insights on household and businesses debts and the loss of productive assets and livelihoods.

**Which have been the short-term effects of the COVID-19-related health and economic crises and associated measures on livelihoods, food insecurity and malnutrition, and future prospects?**

The IPC anticipated that prices would be a key factor determining the extent of household access to food in early 2021 (IPC, 2020b). In September 2020, the World Food Programme (WFP) reported that almost all main food commodity prices were higher than they had been pre-COVID-19 (variations do not follow usual seasonal trends):

- The average price of wheat was 13 percent higher.
- The average prices of high and low quality rice were 8 percent and 18 percent higher, respectively.
- The average price of cooking oil was 29 percent higher.
- The average price of pulses was 27 percent higher.
- The average price of sugar was 21 percent higher.
- The purchasing power of casual labourers and pastoralists has deteriorated by 6 percent and 8 percent respectively, mainly due to increased wheat prices (WFP, 2020).

As noted above, the 2020 SFSA shows that around seven out of ten households reported experiencing first-hand shocks due to the pandemic; these included the loss of employment (36 percent), reduced income (18 percent), severe sickness or death of breadwinners due to COVID-19 (12 percent), increased food prices (11 percent), and serious illness of breadwinners for reasons other than COVID-19 (8 percent). Eighty-one percent of households reported that

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3 Some small businesses may be forced to close because the work in sectors, such as accommodations, food service and educational services, that are heavily affected by the physical distancing and operational restrictions that began during the pandemic.
their income was down from last year, with 54 percent reporting that reduced employment opportunities were mainly responsible, followed by conflict (17 percent) (IPC, 2020b).

The Kuchis are a traditionally migratory people that depend almost entirely on livestock and dairy products for their sustenance. Their migration routes usually follow traditional rights of access between summer and winter pastures across the country. Some of these rights have been disturbed by the prolonged civil strife. The National Multi-sectoral Assessment on Kuchis (NMAK), conducted by MRRD in 2005, estimates a total Kuchi population of 2.5 million in Afghanistan, 1.5 million of which continue to follow the Kuchis lifestyle. The NMAK found that the major reason for departure from the Kuchi lifestyle is the increased frequency and severity of droughts, which has driven many Kuchis to destock and live as internally displaced people. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and Relief International (RI) consider Kuchis to be the most vulnerable minority group in the country. Their traditional livelihood system is increasingly threatened by climate change, which promises more frequent and severe droughts, floods and high temperatures over the coming decades. COVID-19 has had a severe impact on the Kuchis. The restrictions on movement have made their nomadic lifestyle nearly impossible. Many have been forced to sell their chief livestock assets at low prices to support their families and feed their remaining herds (IFAD, 2020). Going forward, it will be necessary to develop an inclusive strategy to assist Kuchi households that wish to continue the pastoralist lifestyle while supporting those that opt for a more sedentary lifestyle. The latter are highly vulnerable as they have neither the skills nor the assets (land in particular) to adopt alternative livelihoods (MAIL et FAO, 2020).

It is important to emphasize that the socio-economic cost of the pandemic in Afghanistan greatly exceeds the health costs (UNDP, 2020c). Families bear significant costs of care, transport and the isolation of family members that have been in contact with confirmed cases. The UNDP socio-economic impact assessment report indicated that with 10.3 million people in acute food insecurity in 2019, Afghanistan was already extremely vulnerable even before the pandemic (UNDP, 2020c). WFP is now warning that the number of people experiencing acute food insecurity may double as a result of COVID-19, giving rise to a new wave of hunger.

The Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI), which comprises three dimensions (health, education, and standard of living), is reported to have deteriorated since the start of the pandemic (UNDP, 2020c). The effect of COVID-19 on the MPI is estimated based on a range of deprivation indicators. For example, work-related deprivations are most likely to affect people in households where all working members have vulnerable employment characterized by informal work arrangements and insecure tenure (75 percent of the population). If the effects of pandemic concentrate only in the work-related deprived vulnerable population, then the MPI could rise from 51.7 percent to 67.3 percent. In particular, the proportion of people living in households that are deprived of food security the impact of the pandemic will deteriorate the MPI by a two-digit figure across the country (UNDP, 2020c).

With an increase in unemployment, underemployment and young people not in education, employment, or training (NEET) and given the high dependency ratio (fewer than one out of every six household members is employed), the multidimensional poverty headcount could rise from 51.7 percent to 73.5 percent according to the report. In short, COVID-19 could push Afghanistan’s multidimensional poverty rate from 54 percent to nearly 70 percent. While it continues to strain the country’s weak health system and requires interventions far beyond what the government can afford (UNDP, 2020c).
Which groups are most likely to be severely impacted by COVID-19 and associated measures?

A limited capacity to mitigate the effects of income losses during the COVID-19 crisis has forced most Afghan families to rely on coping strategies that have potentially long-term negative effects on household welfare. For example, affected households may be forced to reduce their expenditures on education and nutritious food or to sell their assets, with implications for livelihoods and human capital accumulation (although the real impact of COVID-19 in terms of livelihoods and household economy has yet to be evaluated).

COVID-19 has had specific consequences for women, particularly during lockdown, including increased levels of domestic violence and reduced access to schools and medical care. The pandemic has set back many years of effort to see more girls in school or university or participating in the labour market. Schools were closed for five months to prevent the spread of the virus, reopening in September 2020. Educational awareness and incentive programmes by the Ministry of Education and international organizations like the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) were suspended (AAN, 2020b).

On 14 October 2020, the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women), UNICEF and Human Rights Watch jointly issued their fifteenth alert to highlight the gender-specific implications of COVID-19 for Afghanistan. The alert focused on the impact of the pandemic on women and girls’ education and its likely long-lasting consequences on gender equality, women’s rights and the country’s peace and development efforts (HRW, 2020). It is estimated that around 5.6 million children do not attend school and this could increase due to the pandemic. This is not insignificant: if these children cannot return to school, the incidence of multidimensional poverty could increase (Gwavuya, 2020).

A UNICEF report predicts that the socio-economic vulnerabilities of children will be further deepened by the pandemic (UNICEF, 2020):

- Eight out of 10 people and nine of 10 children may face at least one type of deprivation in the post COVID-19 crisis, making the poverty impact of the pandemic on children higher.
- Nine out of 100 people will face deprivations in all four predisposing factors (Predisposing factors to COVID-19 which include i) food insecurity, ii) lack of adequate sanitation, iii) lack of a safe source of drinking water and iv) lack of access to clean cooking fuel) simultaneously. Most of the at-risk population is highly likely to be the multidimensional poor.
- On average, children up to 17 years of age will bear the highest burden because of strict restrictions on their movements, lack of access to education and family-based issues resulting from the crisis.
- The number of children aged 6-18 that do not attend school could rise from 5.6 to 9.7 million. If these children are unable to go back to school, the incidence of multidimensional poverty could increase from 51.7 percent to 60.9 percent based on this parameter alone.

A protection analysis processed and analysed through the Emergency Response Mechanism (ERM) in May-July 2020 also pointed to a number of concerns:

- Even prior to the shocks of conflict, natural disaster, displacement and COVID-19, child labour was increasing in Afghanistan and the average age of workers was falling as a result of stressed household finances and the overall economic environment.
• Households residing in rental properties faced additional risks of reduced savings, debt incurrence and reliance on negative coping mechanisms to afford rent payments along with the risk of exploitation and eviction.

• Reduced access to services for women and girls, particularly education and healthcare, due to strong gendered power dynamics, were exacerbated by shock and displacement.

• Lack of civil documentation resulted in reduced access to services, as well as under-enrolment of children in schools (ERM, 2020).

The impact of the pandemic on other vulnerable groups, such as migrants, displaced people and informal labourers must be further documented, however, displaced populations generally show lower scores on food security indicators than any other population category.

The economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic were the main factor influencing the high rates of return migration, with more than 75 percent of returning migrants – the majority of whom lived in neighbouring Islamic Republic of Iran – citing the loss of employment as the primary cause of their decision to return. Additionally, approximately 40 percent of surveyed individuals reported an inability to afford basic food and shelter needs, with 33 percent reporting the need to take on additional debt (MAIL and FAO, 2020). Afghanistan and its neighbours have maintained border restrictions to curb the spread of COVID 19, increasing the demand for smugglers, who have in turn increased their fees and sought alternative – often riskier – routes to avoid detection, increasing protection risks for migrants, according to Mixed Migration Center (MMC). In addition, the pandemic has increased food insecurity and debt among households throughout Afghanistan, with relief actors warning that protection issues are likely to worsen as households adopt negative coping strategies, including child labour and early marriage (USAID, 2021).

The overall situation suggests that continuing the lockdown and restrictions on movement would lead to further suffering and upheaval for most skilled and unskilled wage labour, small businesses and household remittances, in urban and rural areas, and into the projection period (November 2020-March 2021). Purchasing power will be further limited by reduced income and access to food will be strained.

These conclusions are supported by preliminary data from the Whole of Afghanistan Multisector Assessment, which show that household debt is spiralling in terms of the number of people in debt and the scale of that debt. Average household debt is now AFN 46 299 (USD 604), up from AFN 9 813 (USD 128) in 2019. For many households, the main reason for taking on this debt was to pay for food (53 per cent).

In sum, an estimated 18.4 million people are projected to require humanitarian assistance in 2021, compared to 14 million people in June 2020 and 9.4 million in January 2020, according to the humanitarian need overview (USAID, 2021).
FOOD FOR REFLECTION: LONG-TERM POLICY IMPLICATIONS

What are the long-term implications of COVID-19 in terms of managing the food system to prevent a health crisis from becoming a food security and nutrition emergency?

While the COVID-19 crisis has had immediate effects on food and agricultural supply chains, the impact of the pandemic is not limited to short-term disruptions in supply and demand. Considering that the food and agricultural sector accounts for 25 percent of Afghanistan’s GDP and employs an estimated 60 percent of the population, the outbreak of COVID-19 will likely have long term social and economic consequences for the sector (FAO, 2020c). For example, closing restaurants and street food outlets removes a key market for many producers and processors that may create a temporary glut or trigger upstream production in meat production and dairy production sector (FAO, 2020d). The long-term consequences of this loss of revenue have yet to be assessed.

To help keep Afghanistan’s economy moving forward, development partners and the GoIRA must support the viability and growth of agrifood enterprises. This support should include facilitating private sector development by improving business regulations and encouraging private investment in innovation. There should be a strong focus on helping the GoIRA to assist farmers by, for example, distributing improved seeds, subsidizing agricultural inputs, strengthening technical extension services and buying produce from farmers for strategic reserves.

The Comprehensive Agriculture Development National Priority Programme (CAD NPP) aims to create an enabling environment to produce a surplus, raising productivity and household incomes in rural areas, developing an agroindustry triggering import substitution, generating revenue through increased exports, all the while shifting from the previous institutional focus towards a more farmer-centric one, both in programmatic and organisational terms. The framework follows the World Bank’s 2014 Agricultural Sector Review recommendations to adopt a two-pillar strategy: 1) boosting intensive agriculture by prioritizing Value Chains and 2) addressing extensive agriculture by responding to the needs of the rural poor. To reach the first goal the CAD-NPP targets medium to large farm holders, organizing them to create economies of scale in view of increasing production. The Agribusiness Charter (ABC), which is the subsector strategy guiding programming and public and private sector investments in agribusiness, needs to improve the productivity and competitiveness of Afghan products, both domestically and abroad. Supporting subsistence farmers, including landless households and Kuchi animal herders, through social protection services and safety nets should be a consideration. A coordinated effort by MRRD and MAIL to this end, however, does not appear to have been initiated. Indeed both strategies require addressing issues such as legal land ownership, pasture and rangeland management; rights of passage, access to water resources, provision of agricultural inputs; conflict resolution mechanisms, among others (FIRST, 2020).

The 2014 World Bank Agriculture Sector Review (World Bank, 2014) identified the development of products, such as irrigated wheat, horticultural crops (defined here as fruits, nuts, and vegetables), and intensive livestock production (milk, eggs, and poultry meat) in peri-urban areas, as one of the best ways to develop the agriculture sector in Afghanistan. The study identified limited access to water, extension services, rural credit, inputs and land, and gender disparities as the main constraints to such an effort. This recommendation remains a valid option for increasing the productivity and resilience of agrifood systems in the wake of COVID-19.
Addressing the needs of the rural poor will also be critical to surmounting the long-term challenges faced by the agricultural sector in Afghanistan during and after the pandemic. Recommended interventions include community development programmes (e.g., the development of effective and appropriate infrastructure, the implementation of labour-intensive projects, and enhancement of the skills, knowledge and capacities of community members), relief programmes in drought years, education and training, settlement programmes for nomadic people, the creation and expansion of inclusive social protection programmes, and improved access to basic services (health, education, water and electricity).

What are some policy implications for the humanitarian and development community in the medium term?

Large-scale humanitarian operations were already stretched in Afghanistan well before the pandemic began. Afghanistan hosts four million people (Amnesty International, 2020) that have been displaced by conflict and disasters and the COVID-19 crisis presents a huge challenge to the response capacity of the humanitarian community. As the virus spreads and access to field operations is blocked, humanitarian and development organizations have started to conduct programme assessments with the view to reprioritizing their interventions.

In terms of food security and food systems, recommended short-term actions (especially in the context of a second COVID-19 wave) should relate to: i) ensuring availability and stabilizing access to food for the most food-insecure populations; ii) ensuring continuity of the food supply chain; and iii) ensuring that food supply chain actors are not at risk of transmission (FAO, 2020e).

The COVID-19 crisis has also drawn the attention of humanitarian and development actors to the importance of a humanitarian–development–peace (HDP) nexus approach. The impact of the crisis on vulnerable groups, including farmers and food producers, could be a starting point for interventions that address local needs and build resilience across the country. After nearly four decades, the divide between humanitarian, development and peace projects in Afghanistan has proven that better linkages are needed to ensure the sustainability of interventions. The country’s many challenges, including COVID-19, and continuing political instability and humanitarian crises, and increase in the number of vulnerabilities call for the effective streamlining of interventions around broadly shared objectives.

The HRP 2018–2021 aims to respond to the needs of affected people across the country, but the gap in funding and resources is likely to hinder delivery on all fronts. In this context, it would be useful to propose policy approaches that reduce Afghan dependency on humanitarian assistance. The government seeks to build its capacity to manage humanitarian and development programmes. With this in mind, measures should be put in place to increase of national income through tax collection and better management of government income.

The COVID-19 crisis has revealed the important role that national capacity can play in delivering services related to health, relief and development. With the disruption of external assistance during the crisis, production lines, service delivery mechanisms and the food supply system in Afghanistan were unable to function to full capacity and resources were exhausted and overstretched. In these challenging circumstances, humanitarian and development projects, including those managed and implemented by UN agencies, international and local NGOs, have contracted their presence and most have not sought to re-establish programmes.

The Anti-Government Elements (AGE) demands for the taxation of aid have created problems for the humanitarian community and the COVID-19 outbreak has become an additional complicating
factor. The necessary scale-up of humanitarian assistance is, in any case, largely undermined by insufficient financial resources.

The lack of policy coherence among development partners and with the GoIRA makes complementarity of actions and rational resource management nearly impossible. As a first step, the role of the AFSeN⁴ (Afghanistan Food Security and Nutrition) coordination secretariat should be strengthened and formally reflected in the government structure and the national budget to ensure that ministries and donor agencies purposefully integrate their COVID-19 interventions.

Afghanistan is also at a precarious moment with respect to the long-standing conflict in the country. Although the government is negotiating the terms of a peace deal in Doha, Moscow and most recently in Istanbul, insurgent groups continue to attack Afghan forces. This will likely trigger further internal displacement and exacerbate food insecurity.

The COVID-19 impact Assessment, conducted in May 2020 by the FAO Representation in Afghanistan in partnership with MAIL and NSIA (National Statistics and Information Authority), recommends a number of actions to strengthen coordination and coherence among actors and decision-makers in Afghanistan:

**Substitute investment and strengthen policy support for the recovery of agrifood systems**

- The GoIRA and donor community should customize financial assistance and support through private sector funds, grants, guarantee funds, small- and medium-scale credits, and interest-free loans to private investors, including SMEs and should prioritize sustainable investments, such as the adoption of energy-efficient technology and staff training on viable approaches in agrifood value chains.

- The GoIRA, with MAIL and Ministry of Commerce and Industry (MoCI), should establish investment mechanisms for private and public sector entities to support the transformation to more resilient and sustainable food systems through rapid and appropriate value chain analysis and business modelling capacity building.

**Improve the policy and institutional environments**

- Analyse the trade-offs faced by agrifood system actors and policy-makers, by mapping vulnerable populations, their agrifood market environments and access to nutritious food, including supplies produced in urban and peri-urban areas.

- Promote dialogues to facilitate the interaction of academia, experience and policy and provide space for new opportunities to build more resilient and sustainable agrifood systems through the establishment of multistakeholder and multisectoral food governance mechanisms at subnational and national levels, i.e., AFSeN.

- Explore collective solutions to ensure that agrifood systems innovation delivers on objectives and societal commitments by enhancing capacities to review and develop national policies and programmes to address emerging challenges resulting from COVID-19, while developing strategic coordination among sectors and stakeholders using existing platforms, i.e., AFSeN.

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⁴ AFSeN’s mandate is to coordinate GoIRA activities in food security and nutrition with international actors and donor communities at the national and subnational level. It is a preferred platform for both GoIRA and donor communities to harmonize objectives and address pre-existing issues and the challenges arising from the COVID-19 crisis.
INFORMATION AND GOVERNANCE

Implications of the crisis and related policies for conflict and ongoing social tensions

Any uptick in tensions among Afghanistan’s neighbours and other regional powers could make recovery from the pandemic more complex. Potential triggers of cross-border crises remain unpredictable and even when regional dynamics are calm, fits and starts in Afghanistan’s commercial routes are routine. In the case of any flare-ups, the flow of goods could be slowed dramatically. Pakistan, which sits between Afghanistan and India, has severed trade with Afghanistan in the past when relations with India grew strained. To mitigate the impact of trade restrictions by Pakistan, the GoIRA with support from the Government of India further strengthened the trade and diplomatic efforts and began exporting high-value agriproducts to India by air.

The pandemic has jeopardized access to food and income for both city-dwelling Afghans and those in the countryside. With lockdowns in urban centres leaving hundreds of thousands of day labourers out of work, and rising food prices prompting panic and desperation, crime is on the rise. In Kabul, for example, criminality has been steadily worsening over the past year, carried out by organized groups and petty criminals alike. Politically-connected citizens and professionals, such as lawyers, doctors and polio vaccinators, are killed in broad daylight by unknown assailants, while businesspeople, medical professionals and aspirational middle-class families are targeted for ransom kidnapping (AAN, 2020a). Fewer people on the street may make it easier for kidnappers to survey and seize targets. During the initial weeks of Kabul’s movement restrictions, it was believed that the crime rates had dropped – but as restrictions were eased, opportunistic crime was expected to rise again (Kumar, 2020).

The insurgents in Afghanistan have so far ignored calls for a comprehensive ceasefire on humanitarian grounds. These calls have been made by the United Nations Secretary General, the United Nations Security Council, Afghanistan’s neighbours and other international bodies, along with the Afghan government and much of Afghan civil society. The nationwide violence has not been halted for humanitarian reasons in the past, despite numerous reasons to do so: annual flooding, harsh winter weather, devastating drought or displacement due to conflict. There is little reason to expect the insurgents to change its calculus on violence and human suffering now (USIP, 2020). A ceasefire will probably only come when progress is made in the peace process. Parties to the conflict have been pressed to move forward with intra-Afghan peace talks, which are going on in Doha, Moscow and Istanbul.

Government structure and crisis management

In response to the COVID-19 outbreak, the government developed the National Emergency Response Plan for COVID-19 (NERP) and established high-level emergency coordination committees in the health sector supported by various technical working groups. The Ministry of Finance (MoF), through its Aid Management Department, has been coordinating with the Ministry of Public Health (MoPH), among others, and with development partners to source emergency assistance funds.

The following committees are working to ensure effective COVID-19 coordination among different stakeholders:

- Emergency assistance for COVID-19 pandemic response and external committees (COVID-19), established by the decree of the President of Afghanistan, and chaired by the MoPH minister; to be chaired by MoPH Minister and the committee members are as follows;
• high-level committee on coordination of resources and response to COVID-19 headed by the vice-president;
• multisectoral monitoring committee at the national security council;
• multisectoral committee headed by the MoPH minister, health cluster group members (MoPH and development partners);

- emergency preparedness response (EPR) committees; the MoPH chairs one EPR committee in each province of Afghanistan. EPR committees are composed of all relevant stakeholders and they play an important role in the coordination of the response to COVID-19 at the provincial level.

The Command and Control Centre (CCC) is located at the MoPH and coordinates EPR activities and oversees the technical COVID-19 subcommittee at national and subnational levels. The MoPH, under the NERP, has adopted a structured approach to its COVID-19 management and treatment response. This includes five implementation sub-committees for: i) surveillance and early detection; ii) coordination and resource mobilization; iii) health care provision; iv) health promotion and risk communication; and v) infection prevention and control.

The provincial health coordination committee is mainly responsible for the provincial coordination of surveillance, health care services and risk communication in addition to monitoring the COVID-19 situation. It is chaired by the governor in collaboration with WHO, UNICEF, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), and other relevant UN agencies, NGOs, the heads of provincial health departments and private and community organizations. The provincial health directorate acts as secretariat.

To support the government efforts to contain the disease, the inter-cluster coordination team (ICCT) has also developed a COVID-19 multisector country plan that outlines the strategic response approach to the outbreak. This multi-sector humanitarian country plan outlines preparedness and response efforts that complement the health response to the COVID-19 outbreak. This multi-sector plan extracts the emergency humanitarian elements of the WHO plan with regard to health, but also looks more widely to include activities by other clusters that support the response. Some are existing activities within the HRP that can be scaled-up or extended to new areas, others are entirely new activities that are necessary because of COVID-19. It is important to note that this plan is only for the initial three months of the response and is intended as a living document that will inevitably need to be revised or extended as the situation evolves.⁵

⁵ https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/covid-19_multi-sector_country_plan_afghanistan_final.pdf
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The Food and Nutrition Security Impact, Resilience, Sustainability and Transformation programme (FIRST) is a strategic partnership between the European Union and FAO. Through a network of policy officers embedded in government bodies, it works hand in hand with over 22 countries on setting the right conditions to promote both public and private investments in sustainable agriculture and creating an enabling environment for these investments to contribute to achieving food security and nutrition.

Launched by the European Union, FAO and the World Food Programme at the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, the Global Network against Food Crises is an alliance of humanitarian and development actors united by the commitment to tackle the root causes of food crises and promote sustainable solutions to eradicate hunger and malnutrition through leveraging analysis and knowledge sharing, strengthened coordination in supporting evidence-based policy responses and collective efforts across the Humanitarian, Development and Peace (HDP) nexus.

A joint effort between FIRST with the Global Network has produced assessments on policy responses related to COVID-19 and their impact on agrifood systems in 13 countries. In particular, FIRST brought policy analysis capacities to support the programming priorities of FAO’s Office of Emergencies and Resilience (OER) and the Global Network in these countries; FAO’s OER and the Global Network provided quantitative assessments of the impacts of the pandemic on food security and nutrition.

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