



Adapting targeted support to Kuchi pastoralists in Afghanistan for COVID-19

Promoting COVID-19-safe migration and livestock markets while tailoring livestock packages and cash-for-work schemes

Context

Kuchi pastoralists number around 2.4 million people in Afghanistan - approximately five percent of the national population. "Kuchi" is not a defined collectivity, but rather a generic term assigned to all migratory herders and traders in Afghanistan, encompassing several ethnic groups but largely Pashtun-origin. An estimated 1.5 million still practice transhumance, moving seasonally between summer and winter pastures. A smaller percentage is fully nomadic.

Settled populations, many who still self-identify as Kuchi, live mainly in northwestern and central regions of Afghanistan, while nomadic and semi-nomadic herders migrate across the southern Registan Desert, eastern provinces and beyond the Pakistani border. Many factors - conflict and displacement, severe drought, pastureland usurpation, gender inequalities, and forced and encouraged settlement - have strained pastoralist livelihoods and livestock levels over the decades, making today's Kuchi households increasingly susceptible to a range of shocks, from animal disease and climate change-related natural hazards to market fluctuations. Low nutrition and education indicators among Kuchis and poor health outcomes are exacerbated by Afghanistan's ongoing four-decade-conflict.

Even prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, Kuchi pastoralists were considered the most vulnerable minority group in Afghanistan. Often excluded from most international donor assistance, recognition of basic human rights, including national social safety nets on account of their mobility, Kuchis dwell in the margins of society in Afghanistan, both literally and figuratively. Upwards of 89 percent live in poverty, compared to a national average of 51.7 percent. Thousands more are internally displaced without livestock or alternative livelihoods, inhabiting temporary settlements, unregulated urban peripheries or IDP camps in Afghanistan.

Key facts



Target group

The set of interventions targets Kuchi pastoralist communities in Afghanistan.



Partnerships

Dutch Committee for Afghanistan (DCA), Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development (ACTED), New Consultancy and Relief Organization (NCRO), Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (CHA), Afghanistan National Re-Construction Coordination (ANRCC), Organization for Relief Development (ORD), Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), OXFAM, and many others.

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) in Afghanistan is the co-chair of the Food Security Agriculture Cluster (FSAC) of Afghanistan and part of the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) and the UN Country Team (UNCT).



The COVID-19 Global Humanitarian Appeal

The intervention addresses components II, III and IV of FAO's emergency response: Ensuring availability of and stabilizing access to food for the most acute food-insecure populations, continuity of the critical food supply chain for the most vulnerable populations, and that food supply chain actors are not at risk of virus transmission.



FAO Implementing Partner
ACTED distributes sensitization
materials at a livestock market in
Badakhshan.

Given the migratory and semi-settled lifestyles of the Kuchis - often on the fringes of settled communities - coupled with the prevalent traditional socio-cultural norms and gender roles, Kuchi women often get excluded from collective decision-making processes, while also having a comparatively higher workload. They face hardships in accessing basic facilities (e.g. education, water sanitation, health, markets, and livelihoods) and daily necessities. As per the *National Vulnerability Analysis Report of Afghanistan* (2016) and the *Afghanistan Multi-Dimensional Poverty Index Analysis of Afghanistan* (2019), Kuchi women perform more poorly than women from other social groups on development indicators. Kuchi children, both girls and boys, are the most vulnerable, with close to half engaged in child labour. Lastly, Kuchi households in general reported less food security and lower household dietary diversity.

Direct and secondary impacts of COVID-19 and FAO re-programming and anticipatory actions

COVID-19 was first detected in Afghanistan during the third week of February 2020. As of 8 November 2020 there were 42 033 confirmed cases throughout the country. Virus transmission has spiked rapidly since April 2020, with a COVID-19 test positivity rate of around 41.6 percent during the summer of 2020. Cases have also risen during the winter of 2020 and into the spring of 2021, evidence of a second wave.

Close to 80 percent of the Afghan population depends on agriculture for their primary livelihood. Along with the health risks posed by the pandemic, the secondary impacts of COVID-19 in Afghanistan have had significant adverse impacts on agricultural households. The price of animal feed and fodder and livestock transportation has spiked, and the cost of basic food supplies has risen by around 20 percent. While farmers have been able to harvest crops, marketing and storage capacities are now strained, jeopardizing future crop cycles. Around one third of livestock and poultry farmers have reported disrupted access to feed and veterinary services.

These indirect effects of COVID-19 have intensified the preexisting vulnerabilities of Kuchi communities. Thirty percent of Kuchi herders were unable to access traditional grazing lands during their summer migration on account of international and provincial border closures, while just under half face major marketing challenges. Livestock markets in both western and eastern provinces operated under capacity due to movement restrictions over the spring and summer. Containment measures blocked veterinary services and inputs as well as Kuchi access to adequate fodder, intensifying localized tensions with farmers.

Over one third of all surveyed Kuchis reported using negative coping mechanisms to save their livestock. Fodder prices have risen by as much as 25 percent across all provinces, and even 50 percent within certain provinces. COVID-19-related restrictions on movement during the spring and summer months, coupled with eroded coping capacities of Kuchi herders and limited awareness of COVID-19 safety measures during migration, now pose additional risks to Kuchi households during their autumn and winter seasonal transhumance.

Women in Afghanistan, particularly rural and Kuchi women, are disproportionately impacted by the pandemic in a number of ways. Because of their limited access to resources, information (including on COVID-19 safety measures), technology, markets, financial assets, local institutions and decision-making, the COVID-19 crisis has reduced their economic opportunities and access to nutritious foods while increasing women's workloads and escalating gender-based violence.



Distribution of sensitization materials at an agriculture market in Herat.

Multi-risk challenges: acute food insecurity, climate change and conflict

Even prior to the COVID-19 crisis, the 2020 edition of the *Global Report on Food Crises* ranked Afghanistan as the world's third-worst food-insecure country. According to the latest Integrated Phase Classification (IPC) report, 39 percent of the population is facing acute food insecurity at crisis or worse levels – almost 11 million people overall. Over 41 percent of children are stunted and 2.5 are severely malnourished, with rates expected to worsen as the pandemic continues.

The ongoing food crisis is underpinned by conflict and climate change-related weather extremes. Both pastoralism and rain-fed agriculture depend on precipitation, but droughts are increasing in frequency and intensity. This has sparked new rivalries over diminishing natural resources as pasturelands and arable fields become further degraded, all against the backdrop of Afghanistan's continuing forty-year conflict.

In 2019 alone, over 40 000 people fled conflict and a record number of civilians were killed. Conflict-related displacements have strained the coping capacities of local populations, and outbreaks of violence often prevent humanitarian workers from reaching crisis areas. To date, four million people in Afghanistan remain internally displaced out of a population of 32.2 million.



“A few days ago, a vehicle entered this market whose loudspeaker was announcing to keep distance from each other at least 2 meters, do not shake hands, do not hug, wear facemasks, wear gloves and etc. They also distributed flyers to all of us. I am illiterate and kept to myself at home. My children read the messages, which were all announced through loudspeakers. Selling animals in the market is my job and I should come for this, but after hearing these messages I will try a lot to stay far from others, wear facemask, do not shake hand or hug. This was the first time someone was coming to this market for announcing such messages. We are so thankful.”

Abdul Raziq, livestock vendor in Robat Gholoq market, Ghoryan district, Herat

Methodological approach

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) of the United Nations in Afghanistan has several ongoing interventions that target Kuchi communities and other vulnerable smallholder households and that address both direct and secondary effects of the ongoing COVID-19 crisis, taking into account the specific needs of men and women within Kuchi households. Several existing emergency and longer-term development projects are also in the process of being adapted to mitigate and manage the adverse impacts of COVID-19 and its containment measures.

Activities are spread across different project streams and intervention typologies, some that predate the global COVID-19 crisis and others recently developed to address specific challenges posed by the pandemic as well as related restrictions:

- The preexisting **livestock protection package** for vulnerable herding households has been modified to include **Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)**, coupled with specific awareness- building and sensitization of the Kuchis on COVID-19-safety measures to take during livestock keeping, transhumance and participating in livestock and other markets Other elements of the package include deworming medicine, animal feed and fodder, fodder seed distribution, anticipatory animal health monitoring, and technical training. Around 59 500 Kuchis in total will benefit from the COVID-19-adapted livestock protection package. Special efforts will be made to ensure women can equally participate in and benefit, and to monitor the gender-related impacts.
- **Unconditional cash transfers and/or cash-for-work** are being implemented to facilitate the uninterrupted self-purchase of animal feed and fodder and household food baskets, creating critical cash flows at the household level. These are targeting Kuchi herders, landless laborers and other vulnerable, food insecure or women-headed households. The selection of households for this cash transfers is based on a quick vulnerability assessment of the most affected households to identify and target the needs of the most vulnerable and at-risk men and women.
- One of the technical trainings, conducted through Implementing Partners, focuses on **COVID-19 sensitization** and specific **safety measures related to herd management**, including distancing guidelines and sanitation measures during herding, shed cleaning, vaccination and deworming, and the processing and packaging of livestock products, as well as safety measures for livestock workers and extension service providers.
- Support for **COVID-19-safe livestock markets and their continued, uninterrupted functioning**: This is being done by working with market stakeholders to adopt good practices for minimizing the spread of the **COVID-19 virus**. Kuchi herders frequent livestock markets for the sale and purchase of animals. Left unregulated, these bustling sites of exchange can easily become channels for virus transmission.
 - On-site activities involve support for the **safe and continuous functioning of livestock markets** through the adoption of new



“We were hearing that there is a virus by the name of corona but we were not taking it seriously - we were not wearing face mask or gloves while dealing with customers. But after [Implementing Partner] CHA staff came to this market before Eid holidays, they started awareness programs and talked to everyone. We are thankful to the CHA office that they informed us to do our deals more in the free space, keep physical distance and wear masks. Now most of the people in this market are trying to keep distance from each other and wear face masks.”

Esmatullah, vegetable and fruit vendor in Herat

Efforts are currently being made both to scale up the scope of Kuchi-targeted interventions while also linking emergency assistance to longer-term resilience building of Kuchi communities and Afghanistan’s agricultural sector.

safety and sanitation measures pertaining to COVID-19 developed by FAO Afghanistan, the **distribution of hygiene and disinfecting agents**, the provision of COVID-19 PPE including thermal screening equipment, and **sensitization trainings with market stakeholders**, including managers, vendors, traders, porters, and other workers.

- Customers are targeted through regular announcements of COVID-19-safety measures over loudspeakers, complemented by the in-person **dissemination of Information, Education and Communication (IEC) materials** throughout the market, which is continuously monitored to ensure compliance with new health regulations.
- Contingency planning and safety provisions at provincial level for **COVID-19-safe seasonal pastoralist migrations**, including **support to facilitate transhumance to winter pastures**, which typically begin in September or October but are impacted by COVID-19-related closures.
- On-site **awareness-raising sessions to migratory herders** and the distribution of Kuchi-specific **hygiene kits along seasonal transhumance routes**.
 - Containing **PPE, soap, and sanitizers**, the hygiene kits, combined with in-person **sensitization trainings**, encourage **sanitation good practices** as mitigation strategies against virus transmission.

Replicability and upscaling

Both immediate and long-term impacts of COVID-19 and its containment measures are still being determined, as well as the pandemic’s trajectory in Afghanistan. While the number of COVID-19 positive cases appeared to plateau in mid-September, the possibility of a second wave signals that the crisis is far from over. More than 38 500 Kuchi have already been reached to date, and an additional 21 000 Kuchis will be supported over the next several months. The continuing nature of the emergency allows for ample room to upscale further. However, the efficacy of the COVID-19-related interventions should be determined through sufficient qualitative and quantitative evidence generation before being scaled up or expanded. It is crucial to collect qualitative and quantitative sex-disaggregated data and evidence to assess the gendered impacts of COVID-19 and the measures to contain it in order to inform policy interventions and new programmes.

The interventions can be replicated in contexts where there are nomadic and semi-nomadic communities and where livestock keeping forms a significant part of local livelihoods. While short-term shocks to herding communities have been addressed with feed distribution and access to veterinary services, among other inputs, the effects of the COVID-19 crisis have only exacerbated the underlying vulnerabilities of Kuchi pastoralists. More work is also needed to amplify ongoing interventions that address these deeper drivers of vulnerability and existing gender inequalities in order to give equal economic opportunities and access to resources and services to men and women and empower the most marginalized and at risk groups.

Global lockdowns and closures related to COVID-19 containment measures have had particularly challenging repercussions for pastoralist communities, whose lives and livelihoods depend on unfettered movement. While more work needs to be done to incorporate the unique needs of pastoralists and agro-pastoralists into intervention design, a few emerging COVID-19 responses have sought to mitigate the effects of the ongoing crisis on migratory herding communities.

In Kenya:

In the Arid and Semi-Arid Lands (ASALs) of Kenya, over 80 percent of pastoralists depend on livestock for their livelihoods. Mobility restrictions, coupled with closures of livestock markets because of COVID-19, have put their earning potential on hold.

- FAO Kenya is supporting the Kenyan government at national and local levels to target and deliver cash-based assistance to pastoralists and agro-pastoralists, among other vulnerable households, to meet their immediate food needs. Agricultural inputs and services will also be made available using a two-pronged approach to support food security.
- The targeted households are facing a “triple threat” of flooding, desert locust invasion, and COVID-19 crisis.
- Awareness around COVID-19 and recommended guidelines is also being raised through targeted health messaging, including radio messages recorded in local languages that pastoralists and agro-pastoralists can easily access. These sensitization trainings include the distribution of PPEs.

In South Sudan:

Already weakened by years of armed conflict, South Sudan is poised to reach higher levels of food insecurity on account of pandemic-related shocks. The FAO strategic response is seeking to stabilize incomes and access to food while reducing the risk of COVID-19 transmission among food supply chain actors, including pastoralist communities.

- The upcoming migration to rainy season cattle camps is likely to pose transmission risks, compounded by low sanitation levels within the camps themselves. FAO will work with existing community animal health workers (CAWHs) to campaign for the adoption of COVID-19-safe measures and practices and to mitigate health risks to pastoralists and agro-pastoralists.
- FAO will also support the uninterrupted functioning of emergency livestock services within communities most likely to be impacted by COVID-19 and still recovering from severe flooding in 2019, as well as a possible extension and upscaling of intervention areas.
- The pastoralist livelihood and education field schools (PLEFS) will be upscaled to include radio programming that mitigates the indirect effects of COVID-19.
- FAO is supporting disinfection operations in key food hotspots, including markets and slaughter slabs. Good practices will also be promoted among market stakeholders through on-site awareness-raising activities.



"I am very happy to be part of this great initiative that has not been done so far. The markets are overcrowded, and people who live in remote places from every district of Kandahar come to find and fulfil their needs. They don't have access to media information provided through TV, radio and banners. FAO is providing an opportunity for our NGO to help vulnerable people in Kandahar, encouraging them to use simple steps to avoid the spreading of the disease. These activities will have significant impacts in dealing with COVID-19."

Mohammad Dawood,
[Implementing Partner] ANRCC
staff, Kandahar livestock market

Key learning

- A thorough **baseline analysis** is an essential prerequisite for **understanding the existing vulnerabilities** and inequalities that predate the spread of COVID-19, as well as the socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic. Drawing on these underlying factors for informing the design of the COVID-19 response is also encouraged.
- Having a **scenario analysis** that anticipates potential impacts of COVID-19 and pandemic-related closures and containments ahead of time helps in the design of response interventions. This can be coupled with available evidence to present a clearer picture of potential adverse impacts on both immediate and longer-term livelihood and food security.
 - It is also recommended to include a combination of existing and anticipated impacts within the analysis, for example a **Rapid Assessment Survey**, and to collect sex-disaggregated data to support the design of gender-responsive interventions.
- An **institutional background in emergency response and support**, including experience in assisting nomadic communities, is advised. A wide network of partners should be in place in order to maintain technical standards, initiate a rapid response and enforce quality control, ensuring the adequate participation of women and their (formal and informal) networks.
- **Innovation is key.** The COVID-19 crisis has presented an opportunity to **think outside of the box** in terms of designing the response interventions. It is important to envision a new set of forward-thinking initiatives that go beyond standard response options, using a human rights-based, gender-responsive and inclusive approach.
- FAO internal procedures need to be better calibrated and made more dynamic to be able to quickly overcome the constraints posed by a pandemic-induced emergency.



Man reading IEC materials at a livestock sensitization in Kandahar

Resource partners

- German Federal Foreign Office

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