

On the Brink:

Displacement-affected communities in Afghanistan during the Covid-19 pandemic

The impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic in Afghanistan threatens to push it to the brink. Vulnerable displacement-affected communities, already at high risk for the rapid spread of Covid-19, are struggling to cope.

Background

In Afghanistan, where decades of war have left a fragile health system, developing economy and vulnerable population, the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic in Afghanistan threaten to push it to the brink. Amidst a fragile peace process and escalating conflict, Covid-19 has created new risks and humanitarian needs across the country and severely exacerbated existing vulnerabilities - most notably for internally displaced persons (IDPs), returnees and host communities.

Almost the entire population of Afghanistan needs a social safety net with an estimated 14 million people in acute humanitarian need. The economic impacts of Covid-19 in Afghanistan, resulting from a national lockdown and other accompanying public health measures, severely disrupted trade and commerce and limited access for the most vulnerable to humanitarian assistance and services. The knock-on effect of the global economic crash has compounded these impacts and now threatens the very future of an already fragile economy.

For displacement-affected communities, already at high risk for the rapid spread of Covid-19, the shocks of the pandemic more than six months into the crisis have left families and communities struggling to cope. The loss of livelihoods and a dire food security and nutrition situation has left people to use up their savings and take on debt, cut meals and medical expenses, and risk being evicted from their homes. The pandemic and subsequent loss of families' livelihoods has further disrupted children's access to education, already limited amidst an ongoing conflict. While the world struggles to cope, the long-term effects of the Covid-19 pandemic will continue to ripple through Afghanistan and will require concerted and coordinated support from the international community.

In August 2020, the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) conducted a survey of more than 1,400 refugees, IDPs and host communities in eight countries, including Afghanistan, to understand the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on income, work and coping mechanisms and what further impact this would have on food security, housing and education.

[Downward Spiral: the economic impact of Covid-19 on refugees and displaced people](#)

documents the devastating economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic that is tipping many displaced and conflict-affected people into a hunger, homelessness and education crisis.

Lost livelihoods, intensifying hunger

IDPs have told NRC staff that they are more concerned about the lack of livelihood opportunities and lack of food than Covid-19. In Afghanistan, over 80 per cent of the population live on less than the internationally applied poverty line (US\$1.90 per day)¹ and the vulnerability of IDPs, returnees, and host communities has been exacerbated by the ongoing pandemic. Lockdown measures earlier in the crisis significantly decreased daily labour opportunities, reducing household purchasing power and access to food – in a recent survey conducted by NRC, 78 per cent of respondents reported that they had lost a job as a result of the crisis.² In turn, further displacement can be expected as people move to find work.³

Now nearly 17 million people will face acute food insecurity in the coming months, including 5.5 million at 'emergency levels'.⁴ In the survey, 4 out of

5 respondents in Afghanistan said members of their household had cut the number of meals they eat each day.

The Covid-19 pandemic has compounded the already dire food security and nutrition situation and, although prices for basic food commodities have shown signs of stabilizing in recent months, prices continue to be higher than pre-crisis levels – with some goods now nearly 30 per cent more expensive.⁵ This has left the poorest households across Afghanistan now largely dependent on cheaper, nutrient-poor staple goods to meet their daily food needs.

Ever-present danger, mounting debts

Amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, escalating conflict and natural disasters in Afghanistan present ongoing challenges and risks for Afghans. In addition to the 4.1 million people displaced since 2012 who remain in some form of protracted displacement, more than 155,000 people have been displaced by conflict since the onset of the pandemic in mid-March.⁶ More than six months into the Covid-19 crisis, people across Afghanistan are struggling to cope having used up savings and taking on new debt, but now face additional fears such as being evicted from their homes or having to resort to negative coping strategies.

Amongst some of the most vulnerable displaced populations, over 80 per cent of families have reported debts⁷ leading to difficulties in paying rent or other basic housing. This has prompted increased levels of borrowing by families to cover food, education or rent. In interviews with displacement-affected people in Kandahar, 83 per cent had received threats of eviction and 97 per

¹ Humanitarian Needs Overview, Afghanistan. Issued December 2019.

https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/afg_humanitarian_needs_overview_2020.pdf

² NRC, Downward Spiral: the economic impact of Covid-19 on refugees and displaced people, September 2020.

https://www.nrc.no/globalassets/pdf/reports/nrc_downward-spiral_covid-19_report.pdf

³ 77 per cent of respondents reported that they are likely to move somewhere else because of lack of work or income.

⁴ OCHA, Afghanistan: COVID-19 Multi-Sectoral Response, Operational Situation Report, 22 October 2020.

https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/strategic_sitrep_covid-19_22_october_2020_final.pdf

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ OCHA, Afghanistan: Conflict Induced Displacements, 7 March March – 18 October 2020.

<https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/afghanistan/idps>

⁷ NRC Protection Monitoring Reports

cent saw a high risk of eviction, with women particularly affected.⁸ As these multiple crises continue, protection issues are likely to worsen as families adopt negative coping strategies, including child labour, early marriage and decreased food consumption.

This is likely to worsen as the global economic fallout of the pandemic continues to snowball. Remittances to Afghanistan, estimated in recent years to be as high as 5 per cent of the country's GDP⁹, are already being hit. Two-thirds of respondents to our recent survey Downward Spiral who had previously received money from family members working in other places or countries were receiving less than before.

Interrupted education

While disruptions to education have been the daily reality for generations of children in Afghanistan, lockdowns and school closures in response to the pandemic impacted more than seven and a half million girls' and boys' access to learning. Nearly seven months into the crisis, children are just starting to return to school.

In the meantime, where they existed, alternative learning modalities met the needs of only a fraction of children – just 23 per cent of villages in six provinces assessed by NRC had access to TV. None of those surveyed had access to and awareness about educational TV channels in their areas, nor access to the internet or smartphones.¹⁰ Girls have been particularly affected by more limited access to smartphones and internet at home and freedom of movement limitations meaning they are not able to travel to provincial or district centres to access the internet and download materials.

While school reopening is starting, the economic impacts of Covid-19 and the strain on family incomes is likely to make it more difficult for children to return to school.¹¹ Girls are even more at risk of being deprioritized when it comes to the cost of schooling and already face more limited access to education because of other issues, including security.¹² For the 3.7 million children who were already out of school – it is likely to be even more difficult to get them back.

While the challenges of missed education are just beginning to be understood, ensuring schools are safe places for children to be is crucial. Over the past six months at least 40 schools have been attacked, with reports as high as sixty schools attacked or burnt down in 23 provinces and 400 schools closed due to conflict and fighting across the country. In addition, throughout the prolonged closure, a high number of schools were used as part of the Covid-19 response, for example, as testing centres, or for medical treatment, quarantine or other related purposes.¹³ As children and teachers return to school it is even more urgent to implement protective measures such as physical distancing, reduced class sizes and teaching hours, and improving WASH facilities.

Time is critical. Caregivers have reported to NRC losing interest in education and having to send their children to work. Some students, including boys previously attending NRC Accelerated Learning Programme (ALP) classes, have reportedly had to travel abroad for work while other families seek alternatives, including sending their children to religious schools or private language courses outside of their villages.

⁸ Women received threats of eviction 50 per cent more than men

⁹ World Bank, Personal remittances, received (per cent of GDP) – Afghanistan.
<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.DT.GD.ZS?locations=AF>

¹⁰ NRC Brief Monitoring Report on Accessibility of NRC students to TV and Radio Education Programmes.

¹¹ 83 per cent of respondents to NRC's recent survey with children previously attending school reported that they are less likely to send them back because of the economic situation

¹² Afghanistan Analysis network, Covid-19 in Afghanistan: The effects of the pandemic on the private lives and safety of women at home, 1 October 2020. <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/economy-development-environment/covid-19-in-afghanistan-7-the-effects-of-the-pandemic-on-the-private-lives-and-safety-of-women-at-home/>

¹³ NRC's Downward Spiral Survey in Afghanistan found 60 per cent of respondents reported the use of schools as part of the Covid-19 response.

Surging needs

Forty years of crisis in Afghanistan has precipitated one of the world's most complex humanitarian emergencies. The unprecedented nature of the Covid-19 pandemic was something few governments and humanitarians had anticipated. As a result, the delivery of humanitarian assistance has been seriously interrupted while needs have skyrocketed.

The Covid-19 pandemic has only further strained Afghanistan's already struggling public services and displacement-affected communities face additional barriers in accessing government services. The long-term effects of the pandemic will require concerted and coordinated support from the international community, yet the 2020 Afghanistan Humanitarian Response Plan remains only 38 per cent funded, more than three-quarters of the way through the year, and funding for 2021 remains uncertain.

2020 Afghanistan Conference

As the Government of Afghanistan and international community come together at the 2020 Afghanistan Conference in November to make commitments for Afghanistan's future, it will be imperative to ensure that displaced populations are not left behind. The humanitarian situation, and needs and vulnerabilities exacerbated by the pandemic, must be front and center.

The Government of Afghanistan and the international community must commit to ongoing humanitarian support to address the immediate and long-term impacts of Covid-19 and seek to identify actions that promote durable solutions.

NRC recommendations:

To the Government of Afghanistan:

- identify, plan for and address the long-term consequences of Covid-19 on displacement-affected communities
- ensure that displaced populations have sustainable access to safe and appropriate housing
- actively facilitate humanitarian access to support the Covid-19 response

To Donors:

- increase funding for food security and nutrition programmes, as well as livelihoods support
- support the widespread use of cash interventions, including cash for protection, education and shelter
- provide additional immediate and long-term flexible funding in order to address the secondary impacts of Covid-19

To Humanitarian Actors:

- provide livelihoods support to small, medium and micro businesses and utilise cash interventions, including cash for rent and protection
- redouble efforts to understand and address the immediate and long-term challenges as a result of missed education due to the Covid-19 lockdown
- prioritize ongoing monitoring of the secondary impacts of Covid-19 to ensure that new and emerging needs are identified, planned for, and addressed