TAKE THE BLINDERS OFF

Responding to the Real Needs of the Afghan People

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Cover photo: Girls' shoes lay outside of a classroom in Maimana where students take accelerated learning classes to catch up on school missed due to displacement, poverty, and conflict. Many of these shoes are from Afghan girls who are attending school for the first time in their lives.

Photo by Kathryn Striffolino for InterAction 2019

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Afghanistan is a chronically neglected humanitarian crisis, manifesting itself over more than four decades of conflict and climate-induced disasters. Recent political developments have exacerbated, not mitigated, humanitarian risk and are resulting in a marked deterioration in conditions on the ground for the civilian population.

While the 2019 edition of the multi-year Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) is 69% funded[1], the current HRP is directed toward a subset of people in need defined by the cause of their displacement (conflict and climate) or circumstances through the form of time-bound, primarily one-off assistance packages as opposed to having a plan that accurately addresses the ongoing spectrum of humanitarian needs of conflict and climate affected populations across the country. Related, there is no accurate understanding on the part of humanitarian actors of the range and scope of humanitarian need in either government or non-government held areas.

The December 2019 release of the 2020 Global Humanitarian Needs Overview[2] provided an expanded definition of humanitarian need to include a modest range of resilience and recovery activities which is welcomed by all humanitarian actors; however, how this expanded definition will be implemented in practice will be a test of political and donor will moving into 2020.

Unfortunately, at this critical moment in time, Afghanistan risks falling further into conflict and unrest, and without the safety net of a well designed and sufficiently resourced humanitarian response coupled with development programming, its people risk continued suffering.

Considering the marked deterioration in humanitarian conditions across the country, and a request for support from humanitarian NGO Members of InterAction, the InterAction humanitarian team undertook a field mission to Afghanistan in September 2019 to assess what more could be done to support conflict and climate affected people in Afghanistan.

The team interviewed and met with over 50 U.N., NGO and donor officials, as well as over 75 conflict and climate affected Afghan people across three field locations and Kabul. Three overarching recommendations emerged from this mission, which if effectively implemented would significantly improve conflict and climate affected Afghan people's current situation and future prospects for regaining control over their lives and recovering from displacement and trauma.

> **Continue to shift the humanitarian response approach from status to needs-based**, while significantly improving context-specific data collection methods and collective analysis to better support current humanitarian need and a dignified future for the Afghan people.
>
> **Foster a safe and enabling operational environment for humanitarian responders** to deliver the right kind of services to people in need regardless of where they currently reside.
>
> **Develop a tangible arc from humanitarian emergency response** to early recovery, resilience, rehabilitation and development solutions.

This report provides analysis and evidence against each of these recommendations and builds out practical steps for the effective implementation of each.

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[1] See Financial Tracking Service: Afghanistan 2019 (Humanitarian response plan). (n.d.). Retrieved from **https://fts.unocha.org/appeals/672/summary**

[2] See OCHA 2020 GHO. Retrieved from **www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/GHO-2020_v8.7%2006122019%202pm.pdf**

AFGHANISTAN: CURRENT CONTEXT AND HUMANITARIAN RISKS

Afghanistan and its people have experienced a confluence of natural disasters and armed conflict for well over four decades. Between 2012 to 2018, there were 3.5 million people internally displaced,[3] and more than 2.6 million registered refugees[4] from Afghanistan residing outside of the country.

2018 proved to be the most lethal year for civilians, with over 11,000 recorded civilian casualties, an 11% increase from 2017, and nearly 360,000 internally displaced.[5] Almost 400,000 people have been internally displaced by conflict since the start of 2019. Verified civilian casualty data from July 1, 2019, to September 30, 2019, increased by 42% in comparison to the same period in 2018—indicating[6] failure by all conflict parties to institute appropriate measures to safeguard civilian life in line with international law.

Dialogue between the U.S. government (USG) and the Taliban was officially called off in September 2019 by President Trump and remains unclear as to if they are to proceed, and the first intra-Afghan peace talks have yet to be scheduled at the time of writing. It is likely that in an attempt to secure a favorable peace deal, warring parties will continue to intensify their use of military force so as not to weaken leveraging power at the bargaining table.

Even though the U.S. announced a withdrawal of military force,[7] Afghan and U.S. forces have already increased ground and aerial attacks. It is unclear what, if any time frame and criteria the U.S. Government would be working within to withdraw its military presence and how, if at all, their current responsibilities would be transferred to another NATO member or security force. This lack of transparency and clarity is resulting in a high degree of uncertainty for humanitarian actors. Humanitarians in Afghanistan are uncertain about security and stability and are unable to formulate contingency plans and access strategies to reach people in need across the country.

Should the U.S. withdrawal of forces be conducted in a poorly planned manner that doesn't place priority on the protection of civilians, including aid worker safety, as well as humanitarian access, then, other actors such as

> **"It is our hope to have peace in Afghanistan, my hope is my children, our children, have an opportunity to develop. We want to create peace in Afghanistan."**
>
> *–A mother residing in an informal displacement site in Herat describing her future wishes to InterAction*

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[3] See A Third of Afghans Have Migrated or Been Displaced Since 2012: IOM. (2019). Retrieved from **https://www.iom.int/news/third-afghans-have-migrated-or-been-displaced-2012-iom**

[4] See Afghanistan's refugees: forty years of dispossession. (2019). Retrieved from **https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/06/afghanistan-refugees-forty-years/**

[5] Ibid.

[6] UNAMA. (2019, October 17). Civilian casualties in Afghanistan spike to record-high levels – UN report. Retrieved from **https://unama.unmissions.org/civilian-casualties-afghanistan-spike-record-high-levels-%E2%80%93-un-report**.

[7] See Snow, Shawn. (2019). The US has ramped up its air campaign in Afghanistan to highest level in nine years. Retrieved from **https://www.militarytimes.com/flashpoints/2019/10/08/the-us-has-ramped-up-its-air-campaign-in-afghanistan-to-highest-level-in-nine-years/**

Islamic State-KP (Islamic State Khorasan Province) will increase armed activity in an effort to take advantage of what is likely to be a power vacuum.

In recent years donors, including the U.S. government, have instituted a maze of regulatory and contractual requirements on partners to provide humanitarian principle-compromising contextual information as it relates to operating in areas where there are sanctioned/designated groups and individuals. These requirements, at times informal pressure, can undermine the ability of humanitarian organizations to undertake necessary liaison with local actors to negotiate for humanitarian operations, maintain a neutral posture, ensure the impartiality of humanitarian assistance, and maintain operational security. Given the various non-state actors functional in Afghanistan who are sanctioned multi-laterally through the Al Qaeda/ISIL–U.N. sanctions regime,[8] NGOs are faced with the nearly impossible decision in regards to funding. NGOs can accept funding linked to requirements that put NGOs' neutrality and impartiality into question, or not accepting funding in a context where funding is scarce and humanitarian need is high.

Related, and increasingly impacting every humanitarian context around the world, is the degree to which political and military actors view, treat and perceive humanitarian aid as a bargaining chip to achieve political or military gains. This gross politicization of humanitarian action runs counter to the humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality, and independence, which, if followed and supported, enable humanitarian actors to safely deliver lifesaving assistance to people in need. Considering 67% of Afghanistan is controlled by a NSAG, and there are NATO forces, including the U.S. government as conflict parties, the risk of politicization of aid by all conflict parties to gain leverage over one another is high.

These elements, taken against the backdrop of a complete disconnect between humanitarian and development programming further compounded by a poorly supported humanitarian response which—as witnessed by the InterAction humanitarian team during their visit—are contributing to a marked deterioration in humanitarian and human rights conditions at the very moment the Afghan people need enhanced support and opportunity to recover and regain control over their lives.

View from the plane as the InterAction team prepares to land in Maimana, a hard to reach location surrounded by the Taliban in northwestern Afghanistan. Photo by Kathryn Striffolino for InterAction, 2019

[8] See Resolutions 1267/1989/2253, sanctioned groups: including the Haqqani network, Hezb-e-Islami, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Islamic Jihad Union, Lashkari Tayyiba, Jaysh Muhammad , Taliban-Tehriki Pakistan

INTERACTION MISSION SCOPE

Noting the marked deterioration in humanitarian conditions across Afghanistan, a visible lack of collective humanitarian advocacy and in response to InterAction Members' request for support, InterAction's Humanitarian Policy and Practice team members[9] Patricia McIlreavy and Kathryn Striffolino traveled to Afghanistan from September 7, 2019, through September 17, 2019. Graciously hosted by InterAction Member the Norwegian Refugee Council, the team visited Kabul, Herat, Mazar-e-Sharif, and Maimana.

The InterAction team reviewed humanitarian practice and policy issues including: humanitarian response management and coordination,[10] access and civil-military coordination and engagement, International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and the protection of civilians, and the U.S. and other donor governments' role as it relates to the humanitarian situation (including an enabling environment vis a vis regulatory and contractual requirements). The delegation paid specific attention to the impact of the humanitarian situation on women and girls and the unique challenges facing humanitarian NGOs when serving them and other communities in need of humanitarian support across the country.

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[9] McIlreavy is InterAction's Vice President for Humanitarian Policy and Practice. Striffolino is Senior Manager for Humanitarian Practice.

[10] InterAction picked up on a number of issues identified in the May 2019 Peer 2 Peer mission report and would like to commend the HCT for progress against the recommendations notably the development and adoption of the HCT compact.

MISSION FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

InterAction spoke with over 50 actors from the United Nations (U.N.), International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGO), National Non-Governmental Organizations (NNGO) and donor communities as well as over 75 conflict and climate displaced Afghan women, men, girls, and boys. The team was struck by the high degree of resilience demonstrated by the Afghan people and humanitarian staff supporting them, particularly national staff members of INGOs and NNGOs. Gravely concerning, however, were the stories shared by displaced families and the conditions in which the displaced were living.

Three main sentiments were shared by all displaced Afghans interviewed: a feeling of utter abandonment and not being treated with humanity, a strong desire for peace across the country, and a willing and positive drive to figure out how to best care for themselves and their families pending a durable solution to their displacement.

Of particular highlight were the ongoing challenges faced by women and girls related to human rights protection and access to the humanitarian services needed due to security and free movement restrictions, coupled with the overall lack of availability of necessary lifesaving and sustaining support. Due to the lack of medium-term humanitarian services including livelihood and other income-generating support, men and women reported employing context-specific coping mechanisms as a last resort means of earning money. For example, forced early child marriage of girls was widely cited across all beneficiary groups InterAction met, with one father reporting he had to sell his 8-year-old daughter into marriage so he could buy clean water for the rest of his family. Related, families reported sending their wives and children into towns to beg for money or to collect drainage water, as opposed to being in school or formally working. Additional challenges faced by women and girls included barriers to accessing education, impediments to the ownership of property, and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment notably in and around informal displacement sites due to poor infrastructure and service provision.

Considering humanitarian actors are present[11] in 372 out of 401 districts[12] across the country, inclusive of government and non-governmental areas, the building blocks for greater support to populations in need are present. A shift in approach is required to meet the needs of the displaced and their host communities in Afghanistan. This shift is necessary across all actors—the U.N., NGOs, donors, the government and other parties to the conflict. There needs to be an approach that humanizes direct engagement, promotes community-defined support, and puts people, not numbers or status, first. This new approach must not act as a bandaid but as a durable solution to end the decades-long suffering of the people of Afghanistan.

Towards supporting such a shift in approach, InterAction identified three overarching and universal issues and related sets of recommendations.

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[11] Presence does not necessarily indicate quality, unfettered humanitarian access, rather it is indicative of the potential reach of humanitarian actors should they be supported in a manner that enables a principled response.
[12] See Afghanistan: Humanitarian Operational Presence (3W) (July to September 2019). (2019). Retrieved from **https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/afghanistan/infographic/afghanistan-humanitarian-operational-presence-3w-july-september-2**

1. Continue to shift the humanitarian response approach from status to needs-based, while significantly improving context-specific data collection methods and collective analysis to better support current humanitarian need and a dignified future for the Afghan people.

Afghanistan is a highly complex environment with conflict, climate, poverty-driven displacement and migration patterns, multiple conflict parties and shifting frontlines. Currently, the Taliban and other Non-State Armed Groups (NSAG) control or contest approximately 67% of the country while the Afghan government controls about 33%.[13] The location of people in need—rural under Taliban control and cities and urban areas for the government—is not an adequate proxy indicator for the level of assistance needed. However, these settings and the context dynamics require closer examination through the lens of humanitarian need and future risk to best determine how humanitarian action, and complementary development programming, could be more effectively implemented.

The fundamental data gaps that exist in the collective humanitarian response, and the development sector, require urgent action. For example, no actor supporting the humanitarian response—panning across the NGO, U.N. and donor communities at all levels—was able to provide InterAction with an estimated number of civilians residing in Taliban-controlled areas. Nor was anyone able to offer accurate data and analysis articulating the vulnerabilities of the civilian population, where people in need are located, and what their wishes were for their own futures. In a complex and dangerous operating environment like Afghanistan, it is understandable that this data is challenging to gather and analyze; however, it can be done.

In contexts with similar numbers and behaviors of conflict parties, and patterns and trends with regards to frontlines such as Syria and Yemen, there are data collection and analysis methods employed by humanitarian responders that could serve as examples for the Inter-Cluster Coordination Team (ICCT) and the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) to consider adapting and instituting for the Afghanistan context.

The commendable recent shift by the HCT from an approach to humanitarian response based on status[14] to one based on needs[15] was welcomed by everyone with whom InterAction spoke. InterAction was highly encouraged by this shift, believing that by effectively doing so, the response would graduate from a "truck and chuck" short-term mentality to a nimbler and more fit for purpose response that supports the range of humanitarian and early recovery needs.

A successful transition to this approach will require an additional investment towards improving both the real-time humanitarian vulnerability data collection and collective humanitarian needs analysis. Data and analysis would be able to inform the HCT's planning and prioritization and allow for the establishment of stronger linkages with peacebuilding and development actors.

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[13] See Roggio, Bill, & Gutowski, Alexandra. (2019). Mapping Taliban Control in Afghanistan. Retrieved November 12, 2019 from **https://www.longwarjournal.org/mapping-taliban-control-in-afghanistan**

[14] Status-based assistance only focuses on short term assistance packages curated differently for conflict and climate displaced people, looking only at the current causes of displacement.

[15] Needs based assistance takes into account more than location and the cause of displacement and examines the overall arc of displacement and differing needs amongst the displaced people, typically this is not time bound.

As with many crises where security is a barrier to travel, the team noted the limited understanding of displaced people's current living conditions and wishes for their futures, across senior officials, notably U.N. and donors. It was stated by one donor that NGOs who are known to travel more regularly could assist with ensuring the conditions faced by displaced people were reported more effectively to those whose security parameters did not allow the same freedom of movement.

Girls taking accelerated learning classes supported by NRC in Maimana, Northwest Afghanistan. When asked "what do you want to be when you grow up" the young girls overwhelmingly declared: "doctors, teachers, and engineers!" They also said they enjoyed studying languages, including English.

Photo by Patricia McIlreavy for InterAction, 2019

Recommendations

- Prioritize the full implementation of the expanded definition of humanitarian assistance for 2020 as outlined in the Global Humanitarian Overview as a priority for the HCT. This shift should include advocacy and education with and for the government of Afghanistan[16] (at the local, regional and federal levels) to assist their understanding of humanitarian need and the new approach to response, supporting the move from standardized, time-bound assistance packages and orienting activities against the range of vulnerabilities and needs of those requiring support.
- The HCT to publicly advocate that the 2020 HRP has expanded in scope and highlight early recovery, education, health, and livelihood activities that are underfunded and under-resourced and intentionally communicate those gaps to development actors.
- Donors, including but not limited to the U.S., U.K., E.U. Canada, Germany, Switzerland, Norway, and others should fully fund the expanded 2020 HRP.
- An effort must be made by donors, U.N., and NGOs to work together and urgently develop a robust, collective system for humanitarian vulnerability data collection, information management, and accompanying analysis that allows for the integration of real-time, context-specific data, and integration of perspectives from conflict and climate affected Afghan people.
    - Building off the IOM site-management household data collection efforts[17] that were reportedly underway in September.
    - Examining the former OCHA facilitated information management system in Colombia 'UMAIC" for an example of a best practice;[18]
- To support an increased need for humanitarian actors to operate throughout the country, the NNGO/INGO consortia Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief and Development (ACBAR) should consider hiring a donor-funded dedicated humanitarian advisor who would support collective humanitarian engagement and advocacy across the country.
- Humanitarian and mixed-mandate organizations (humanitarian/development) should invest further resources for humanitarian advocacy capacity in-country and at the headquarter level.
- Donors, U.N., and NGOs should advocate for displaced Afghan people, framing them as a positive asset for host communities vis-a-vis integration instead of a burden or a problem. NGOs should increase the level of communications with U.N. agencies and donors on the experience and intentions of Afghan people, especially displaced women and children. Related, the Government of Afghanistan should be supported in fulfilling their obligations as they relate to IDP and refugee protection and support.

[16] The InterAction team was unable to meet with Afghan government officials during this visit because of heightened risk of political violence due to the September election period.

[17] The IOM site management household data collection effort was a project to do household level needs and intentions data collection in informal displacement sites to better understand the needs and future intentions of displaced people. At the time of writing, InterAction understands this project has lost funding and the future of it is uncertain.

[18] See Learning Missions: Colombia – The Nexus. (2018). Retrieved from **http://www.deliveraidbetter.org/missions/colombia-2/**

2. Foster a safe and enabling operational environment for humanitarian responders to deliver the right kind of services to people in need regardless of where they currently reside.

Access to populations in need across Afghanistan has never been an easy task, and additional operational impediments continue to arise from the parties to the conflict, donors, the U.N., and NGOs. The obstacles, such as attempts by the Taliban to tax humanitarian actors, are not always intended to block access to populations in need. However, there is limited analysis being done to understand these obstacles, how the humanitarian community and their donors are currently addressing them, and how all obstacles should be collectively addressed. This negative trend, combined with the lack of adequate humanitarian data analysis, results not only in a limited humanitarian response but in a lack of understanding of the actual needs of the people of Afghanistan. A greater understanding of the access challenges and concerted, collective action by all concerned parties is needed to enable a response that ensures affected people can access the assistance to which they are entitled, regardless of where they are located. Humanitarian NGOs, both international and national, are facing countless bureaucratic impediments and security challenges. The NGO community needs to improve its collective information gathering and analysis and utilize the well-functioning Humanitarian Access Group (HAG) to ensure issues are being raised for action by the HCT, the donors and political actors.

"We've been told time and time again, just wait and see, wait and see. Well, in Afghanistan, we've been waiting to see for 18 years and it's just getting worse and worse."

-INGO Country Director

Through multiple discussions with the NNGO and INGO communities, several threats and attacks against humanitarian operational space were documented by InterAction:

- Concerted efforts by NSAGs, notably the Taliban, to tax humanitarian actors while they fulfill their lifesaving mandate. This is companioned with donor pressure on NGOs to not comply with these demands.
- The consensus across the NNGOs InterAction spoke with is they are forced by donor partners, including the INGOs, to choose between asking for sufficient funds for security or to demonstrate low cost-per-beneficiary program costs. This has resulted in what appears to be a common practice of inappropriate risk transfer through partnerships between U.N.-INGO-NNGO actors resulting in the use of partnership as a cost-saving measure as opposed to quality and safe program delivery.
- Lack of adherence and respect for international law by all conflict parties, resulting in an increasingly volatile security environment, paralyzing humanitarian actors from improving and expanding services across the country.
- Insufficient humanitarian funding and a perceived lack of support for complementary community–based development programming;

- Pressure from one major government donor of humanitarian NGOs working in and around Taliban-controlled territory to collect information from national staff and beneficiaries regarding Taliban activities, locations, and perceived affiliation with civilian populations.

The Humanitarian Access Group (HAG) was widely praised across all actors with whom InterAction spoke as efficient and effective. OCHA-led humanitarian civil-military coordination (CMCoord), in particular, was documented as playing a critical role with regards to humanitarian access and security, and the team's recently expanded capacity was welcomed by all. Increased resourcing and support for OCHA CMCoord, especially now given the current security and access risks and challenges, would help expand access and reach across both government and non-governmental areas through informed advocacy and action. Related, the NGO community would benefit from increased in-house analytic expertise focusing on conflict, climate, political, security, and economic analysis to better feed into collective mechanisms such as the HAG and HCT for strategic decision making regarding a new or emerging threat to humanitarian space.

All partnerships need to effectively balance the mitigation of security and other risks vs 'direct program' costs, ensuring that the safety and security of national organizations and staff on the frontlines of service delivery are prioritized and resourced. While InterAction did not closely examine partnerships, the anecdotal reports provided to InterAction regarding the U.N.-NNGO and INGO-NNGO partnership were concerning.

In a high risk and complex environment such as Afghanistan, reports that NNGOs, "decided to spend more money on programs than security because we only had a certain amount of money to spend" are troubling. Current partnership models and localization approaches across the country should urgently be examined and adjustments made to policies regarding eligible direct costs and indirect cost recovery. If adjustments are not made to policies regarding eligible direct costs and indirect recovery costs, implementing organizations, notably NNGOs will continue to be forced to choose between programs and security costs, as opposed to having the appropriate security costs built into a budget whereby the implementing actor is not put in an impossible situation.

> **"It's sad, we are now more scared of being attacked from the air [by the U.S.-led NATO forces] as opposed to the NSAG. At least when the NSAG conduct operations, we sometimes get a heads up. When it's the ANSF or NATO, we have no idea."**
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> *-INGO Country Director*

Lastly, the reports of donor-driven barriers to principled humanitarian action through formal and informal means must cease immediately, or the already limited operations in place will be compromised, in part due to increased risk on the safety and security of staff working in and around NSAG controlled areas. As 67% of Afghanistan is reported to be under NSAG control, tactics to expand, not shrink, humanitarian access into and within these areas should be employed. Furthermore, the NSAG taxation issue needs to be viewed as an urgent collective problem that the HCT, with the full backing of the donor group, must address.

Threats and attacks against humanitarian operational space in Afghanistan are too many and complex for any one actor to tackle on their own. The NGO community deserves more support from the IASC in effectively addressing such impediments through collective action, strategic advocacy, and donor-driven humanitarian diplomacy.

Recommendations

- Donors—be they institutional or informal—need to ensure their regulations and compliance requirements do not impede principled humanitarian action. This includes:
    - Ensuring appropriate safeguards for humanitarian action are instituted with regards to working in and around areas controlled by NSAG.
    - Not pressuring NGOs to provide information that would compromise their safety and security.
- Working with the HCT and the NGO community, donors should leverage humanitarian diplomatic tools to alleviate the attempts by NSAG to tax humanitarian actors for fulfilling their lifesaving mandate.
- Sufficient resources allocated to OCHA in a manner that allows them to expand CMCoord capacity so access into and within NSAG areas can be improved as well as engagement with the Coalition and Afghan military forces as it relates to the protection of civilians, aid workers and civilian infrastructure.
- With increased resourcing from OCHA CMCoord, humanitarian implementing organizations should expand their reach into NSAG areas.
- OCHA should facilitate the development of a known collective strategy on addressing access impediments at the field level, with a clear articulation of who is responsible for what, when.
- Donors should increase their humanitarian support for Afghanistan and ensure it covers not just lifesaving needs, but also includes early recovery and resilience activities, as outlined in the 2020 HRP.
- The World Bank and other IFIs should examine opportunities in Afghanistan to employ a do no harm, community-based approach to bridging the gap between life-saving humanitarian action and large-scale development projects. Special attention needs to be paid to host community locations, inclusive of propositions for durable solutions for internally displaced.
- Shift from a risk transfer approach to risk sharing vis a vis stronger partnerships with L/NNGOs:
    - Humanitarian organizations and their donors (U.N., INGO, NNGO) review their risk management policies and practices and make necessary adjustments to ensure that they are mitigating or sharing risk, not transferring it.
    - INGOs and U.N. agencies undertake joint security risk assessments with NNGO/LNGO partners, write additional security resources into partners' budgets and ensure that partner proposal guidelines include safety and security categories in project narrative and budget templates.

- Donors cover the additional costs of risk management and compliance requirements, including security management, in high-risk settings by including additional risk-related direct and/or field-based indirect cost recovery lines in project budgets;
- NNGO/LNGOs advocate strongly for the logistical and other resources needed to operate securely.

▶ The IASC Principals should discuss Afghanistan, specifically looking at humanitarian access and principled humanitarian operational space across the country with an aim of providing concrete recommendations for all actors to take and work to collectively mobilize humanitarian diplomatic and resource capacities to support implementation;

▶ All conflict parties must adhere to their obligations under International Humanitarian, Human Rights and Refugee Law to ensure civilians and civilian objects are protected during the conduct of hostilities.

An informal displacement site in Herat, West Afghanistan, where a significant amount of displaced people live. Many have been displaced multiple times by conflict or climate related shocks. The infrastructure is not conducive to living in dignity. Without sustained humanitarian support and complementary development programming, the residents of these informal sites will remain in limbo for the foreseeable future.

Photo by Kathryn Striffolino for InterAction, 2019

3. Develop a tangible arc from humanitarian emergency response to early recovery, resilience, rehabilitation and development solutions.

An interesting observation from the mission was that regardless of with whom we spoke, successes in programming were tied to organizations' connections within the communities—while those who talked about failures or challenges spoke of a disconnect with communities.

Too often, humanitarian action is required when there have been development failures, and Afghanistan is no exception. Afghanistan's development has been complicated through multiple decades of conflict, coupled with climate-induced shocks and related displacements. To gain a holistic picture of the complementarities of assistance, the InterAction team sought information on the state of development programming throughout the country, specifically exploring its linkages to humanitarian action. Interviewed actors stated that if development programming ran side by side with humanitarian programs, the Afghan people would be better served. However, no humanitarian actor was able to point to a successful development program that connected to their work, with the notable exception being mixed-mandated NGOs running community-based programming focusing in part on education and livelihoods. Several spoke of the large-scale infrastructure projects and the Basic Package of Health Services (BPHS), however, they were not able to offer clarity on how this linked to the needs of the displaced populations they were serving.

Beyond informal meetings cited by the RC/HC and donors, NGOs were unaware of an existing dialogue between humanitarian, peacebuilding, and development actors, further exacerbating challenges related to a complementary and collaborative approach in Afghanistan.

> **"Humanitarians are having to plug gaps that are chronic needs."**
>
> *-INGO staff*

Humanitarian and development actors are not constructively engaging with one another on who is doing what where and who has capacities to support linkages and develop solutions, leaving displaced people without information on durable solutions—be it options for livelihoods at their place of displacement or sufficient information about conditions in their place of origin.

Further, one of the consequences of lack of coordination by humanitarian, peacebuilding and development practitioners is the narrative that humanitarian aid is comprised of "truck and chuck" services. The "truck and chuck" narrative describes humanitarian aid as a one-off, one size fits all material good that can be dropped into any given situation. This approach has long been disproven as neither the most effective nor efficient, and does not uphold the dignity of the people receiving aid.[19] This approach also tends to rely on centrally determined timelines for completion of activities which effectively dismisses the humanitarian community from its broader responsibilities to affected people. This approach is especially visible in regards to protection concerns but also relates to standards of care, and how the humanitarian community defines who is in need. It further cultivates an apathy, specifically visible amongst the multi-mandated agencies. This feeling of indifference enables the narrative of 'government has this taken care of' or waiting for someone else to step in. The awful truth too often though is that no one steps in, and people in need go without any long-term support.

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[19] See Mosel, Irina, & Holloway, Kerrie. (2019). Dignity and humanitarian action in displacement [PDF file]. Retrieved from **https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/12627.pdf**

A young female resident of an informal displacement site in Herat introduces her art work to the InterAction delegation and her peers. She created this art work in an NRC supported child friendly space in west Afghanistan.

Photo by Patricia McIlreavy for InterAction, 2019

"Community -based change [is critical in Afghanistan] .... We are one organization. We gave 20 cattle to a community, and after two years, one lady had more than 300 cattle. She was selling milk and meat. Others from the community started to copy what she did to generate income. Once mothers are healthy and supported, children are able to go back to school. If communities receive support, they won't move, immigrate because their lives are passing where they are at. This is sustainability."

-National staff member working for an INGO

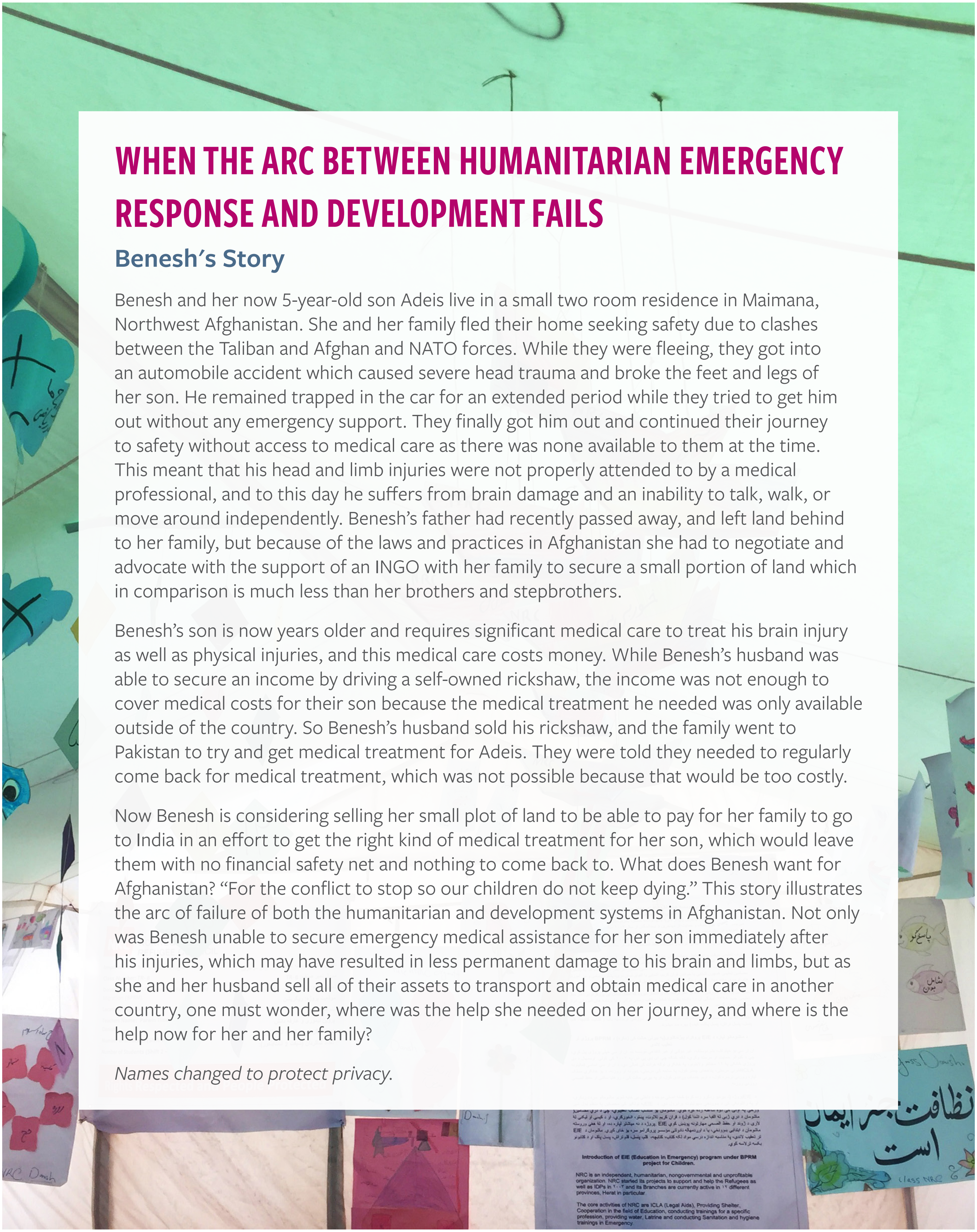
Recommendations

- The HCT transparently advocates with donors and development actors about gaps in humanitarian services and resources especially considering the expanded definition of need will require expanded programming and additional resources providing an opportunity to start to bridge the humanitarian-development divide in Afghanistan.
- The RC/HC, aided by OCHA, is best placed and encouraged to lead development actors, including the World Bank, in a mapping exercise, similar to the humanitarian 4W[20] process that would effectively identify which development actor is doing what, where and by when.
- Once a mapping of development activities and actors has been done, that data should be shared with the HCT who should then overlay humanitarian 4W information over the development data and facilitate a meeting across all stakeholders convened by the RC/HC to look more holistically at service and support gaps across sector and geography.
- While such mapping efforts are underway, humanitarian and development actors are advised to immediately identify common areas for problem-solving— for example identifying a problem set around girls' recovery (education, MHPSS/medical, protection, HLP, livelihoods) and consider piloting a collaboration on a small scale in one geography.
- Any future development / humanitarian conferences intended to fundraise for Afghanistan must ensure meaningful participation from humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding communities and both civil society and affected populations' perspectives are front and center.

"Without development, humanitarian assistance will be lost. It's better to start development in parallel now with humanitarian assistance. This will allow us to reduce humanitarian assistance over time."

-NNGO staff

[20] The "4W" process is a mapping exercise the humanitarian community regularly undertakes to determine who is doing what, where, and when.



WHEN THE ARC BETWEEN HUMANITARIAN EMERGENCY RESPONSE AND DEVELOPMENT FAILS

Benesh's Story

Benesh and her now 5-year-old son Adeis live in a small two room residence in Maimana, Northwest Afghanistan. She and her family fled their home seeking safety due to clashes between the Taliban and Afghan and NATO forces. While they were fleeing, they got into an automobile accident which caused severe head trauma and broke the feet and legs of her son. He remained trapped in the car for an extended period while they tried to get him out without any emergency support. They finally got him out and continued their journey to safety without access to medical care as there was none available to them at the time. This meant that his head and limb injuries were not properly attended to by a medical professional, and to this day he suffers from brain damage and an inability to talk, walk, or move around independently. Benesh's father had recently passed away, and left land behind to her family, but because of the laws and practices in Afghanistan she had to negotiate and advocate with the support of an INGO with her family to secure a small portion of land which in comparison is much less than her brothers and stepbrothers.

Benesh's son is now years older and requires significant medical care to treat his brain injury as well as physical injuries, and this medical care costs money. While Benesh's husband was able to secure an income by driving a self-owned rickshaw, the income was not enough to cover medical costs for their son because the medical treatment he needed was only available outside of the country. So Benesh's husband sold his rickshaw, and the family went to Pakistan to try and get medical treatment for Adeis. They were told they needed to regularly come back for medical treatment, which was not possible because that would be too costly.

Now Benesh is considering selling her small plot of land to be able to pay for her family to go to India in an effort to get the right kind of medical treatment for her son, which would leave them with no financial safety net and nothing to come back to. What does Benesh want for Afghanistan? "For the conflict to stop so our children do not keep dying." This story illustrates the arc of failure of both the humanitarian and development systems in Afghanistan. Not only was Benesh unable to secure emergency medical assistance for her son immediately after his injuries, which may have resulted in less permanent damage to his brain and limbs, but as she and her husband sell all of their assets to transport and obtain medical care in another country, one must wonder, where was the help she needed on her journey, and where is the help now for her and her family?

Names changed to protect privacy.

CONCLUSION

The people of Afghanistan deserve and are entitled to more support, as are the humanitarian responders working under challenging and ever-evolving circumstances. The key to unlocking this support will be to effectively implement the shift away from the current short-term mentality that is trapped in the past and upgrade the humanitarian approach in the country to align with the real needs of the Afghan people in a sustainable manner.

The development of a better understanding of the needs across the country, coupled with community-based development programming that is complementary to humanitarian action, and the protection and preservation of the principled space in which humanitarian actors work, are crucial first steps. Just as critical are collective advocacy efforts inside the country and across donors to amplify the stories and wishes of the Afghan people to effectively mobilize the right kind of support for a crisis that has been forgotten for far too long. Considering the risks and marked deterioration in humanitarian conditions we are witnessing, the humanitarian community and our partners must redouble collective efforts to best support the Afghan people at this critical juncture in time.

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Finally, the team wishes to thank all of the Afghan people who graciously shared their stories and perspectives and to whom we wish a peaceful and safe year ahead.

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