

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**INTER-AGENCY
HUMANITARIAN EVALUATION
OF THE RESPONSE TO
THE CRISIS IN AFGHANISTAN**

22 April 2024

Management, funding and implementation of the evaluation

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1. This evaluation concerns the **collective humanitarian response to the crisis in Afghanistan since August 2021**. Specifically, it assesses the value of the coordinated response by members of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (UN and non-governmental agencies and consortia) and their in-country partners to one of the world's largest humanitarian crises. The evaluation assesses the adequacy, relevance, and effectiveness of that response against an analysis of the humanitarian crisis, its nature and causes, and the ways in which millions of Afghans have experienced it.
2. In making this assessment, the evaluation considers how well humanitarian actors and the coordinated humanitarian system navigated the complex and challenging political and operational landscape from 2021 to mid-2023 and the period preceding the Taliban takeover. It considers what lessons can be learned from this experience and their implications for future practice in Afghanistan and beyond, when funding and operational space are becoming increasingly restricted.
3. Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluations (IAHEs) were introduced to strengthen system-wide learning and promote accountability towards affected people, national governments, donors, and the public. They are intended to help the humanitarian community improve aid effectiveness and contribute to humanitarian reforms. However, they are not an in-depth evaluation of any one sector or organization's performance. As such, they do not replace agency- or sector-specific evaluations.
4. Using a mix of methods, this evaluation draws on four main sources of evidence: a review of relevant documentation and literature; key informant interviews and roundtable discussions; a community consultation exercise in ten provinces across Afghanistan; and a field mission by the evaluation team involving multiple site visits. The overall guiding question for the evaluation has been how well the collective humanitarian response by IASC members served the short- and longer-term interests of vulnerable Afghans, particularly relating to acute threats to people's well-being and security. This is a function not just of the collective efforts of humanitarian agencies, Afghan and international, but also of international donors' willingness to support those efforts and of the *de facto* authorities' willingness to allow them.

The nature and causes of the crisis

5. The **humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan pre-dates the Taliban takeover in August 2021**. The extent of that crisis was only fully exposed with the cessation of the main hostilities, allowing access to previously inaccessible areas. A combination of drought, displacement, and COVID-19, together with the cumulative effects of armed conflict, chronic poverty, and development shortfalls, left much of the population in need of humanitarian assistance – but the prevailing conflict meant that a large proportion of those needs went unaddressed, particularly in less accessible communities.
6. The **causes of the post-August 2021 humanitarian crisis have been largely political and policy-related**. Political and economic isolation in the wake of the Taliban takeover led to the short-term collapse of the Afghan economy. Highly aid-dependent government services were severely affected by the suspension of development assistance. For ordinary Afghans, the results were disastrous. Many earlier development gains were reversed, and short-term risks escalated dramatically. While the rural economy has suffered acute stress, the crisis has created a **major new urban**

humanitarian caseload related to the loss of former employment. More generally, loss of livelihood options, lack of security of income, and near-universal food insecurity characterized this 'new' crisis for the majority of Afghans. Families struggled to feed themselves, to secure adequate shelter and clean water, and to access health care and education. Many are highly indebted and resorting to harmful coping practices. **Almost three-quarters of the population needed humanitarian assistance** during the evaluation period.

7. In parallel with the humanitarian crisis of access to basic goods and services, there has been a **crisis of human rights**, specifically related to Taliban decrees affecting the rights and freedoms of women and girls. The denial of female students' access to secondary and tertiary education, in particular, has significant humanitarian and developmental implications. From a humanitarian perspective, protection concerns constitute a major part of the agenda, particularly where they derive from DfA policies. They are some of the most difficult to address – including those related to the delivery of aid. Despite exemptions in some sectors and locations, the working bans on female Afghan aid staff have undermined both the delivery and quality of the humanitarian response. Differences over the proper collective response to these issues – both the bans and the rights issues – have been a source of tension and division within the Humanitarian Country Team and beyond. Those differences have played out at the international political level on the question of whether and how to engage with the Taliban authorities. This issue fuelled the **mutually antagonistic political positions** of the international community and Taliban authorities, leaving almost no space for constructive high-level engagement – in contrast to the often more productive local level engagement.
8. The humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan is a **protracted crisis** with multiple structural features and must be treated as such. While many aspects of the crisis pre-date August 2021, its escalation was caused by a series of policy decisions and the reactions to them – both by the DfA and international actors – which simultaneously exacerbated the crisis and restricted attempts to alleviate it. Even allowing for chronic and acute effects of climate change and natural hazards, **this has been a man-made, policy-related crisis**. It follows that its solutions depend on politics and policy change, as well as on an aid response that extends well beyond the core humanitarian agenda. With the reduction in funding for humanitarian assistance during 2023, the case for **allowing greater technical cooperation** with ministries and departments in life-critical services (including Health, WASH, and Nutrition) is compelling, as is the case for support to the related delivery systems at provincial and district levels. A comparable case can be made for additional support to the agricultural sector in cooperation with the Ministry of Agriculture.

Overall conclusions on the IASC response

9. Within the limits imposed by external factors (including funding and operational restrictions), the evaluation found the response by IASC agencies **largely fulfilled its primary humanitarian purpose**: it played a crucial role in protecting millions of vulnerable Afghans from many of the most severe threats they faced over the evaluation period. The response has also, as an important by-product, helped keep the Afghan economy afloat through the injection of cash over a critical period. Overall, **within its limits, the response effectively addressed the immediate needs of vulnerable Afghans**.
10. This conclusion must be qualified. Although it eventually scaled up to an impressive degree following the 2021 transition, the response only partially addressed the extraordinary scale and severity of needs. Benefits delivered have sometimes been overstated, and response gaps understated. Although relatively well funded through most of the evaluation period, that funding was quite narrowly focused and heavily conditioned – and was subsequently heavily cut back. Funding is

not the only issue: where the acute symptoms of crisis are the result of policy or structural factors (including many of the core Education and Protection issues), humanitarian approaches made relatively less impact. The overall conclusion remains: the ‘acute’ response was effective and essential to the short-term well-being of millions of Afghans.

11. The **medium and longer-term interests of Afghans have been much less well served**. The state-avoiding nature of the response and the policy and bureaucratic obstacles erected by the authorities severely limited the impact and sustainability of the aid efforts. The ‘bedrock’ problems of chronic poverty, underdevelopment, and social insecurity persist and are exacerbated by multiple compounding risk factors – including the extreme gender disparities resulting from the Taliban’s decrees. While over US\$6 billion was raised and spent through the internationally coordinated humanitarian system since August 2021, the actual costs of remedying the systemic and infrastructural deficits involved are far greater. This agenda lies well beyond the humanitarian system’s ability to deliver. The lack of linkage to any active development agenda is deeply problematic. Apart from the health sector, the ‘basic needs’ support agenda that was supposed to complement the humanitarian response materialized only in limited form over the evaluation period although it has since strengthened.
12. Overall, the response shows the **necessity of humanitarian action and the limits of what it can achieve alone**, particularly when heavily constrained by external factors. Within the limits imposed by external factors, the **performance of the humanitarian system was found to be relatively strong**, although the HCT was disunited at crucial points during the evaluation period over the bans and rights issues. The evaluation found that senior UN officials – including the Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) and deputy HC – provided strong leadership, along with key INGO directors. OCHA played a vital role, but sector leadership was variable.
13. Those responding to the crisis **struggled to reconcile the demands of the humanitarian and human rights agendas**. The result was confusion and sometimes a standstill when clarity and speed of decision-making were needed. Humanitarian aid has partly filled the vacuum of political and development engagement, but mutual mistrust, strict limits on aid engagement, and growing bureaucratic impediments made the **operating environment increasingly difficult to navigate** – something the ban on female Afghan aid staff exacerbated.
14. Regarding basic services, the **humanitarian system has been performing functions it was not designed to perform** in anything but the immediate short term (substituting for or maintaining basic state services), in the absence of substantive partnerships with government ministries. This parallel role provides no clear pathway to the recovery of state systems. Health is a primary example of this. Lack of investment in core systems and infrastructure means that basic services are increasingly fragile and limited in scope. Humanitarian support was stretched to breaking point in terms of resources over the evaluation period. The humanitarian response overall – while initially well-funded – saw a major decline in funding in 2023, though this was offset substantially by an increase in ‘basic needs’ funding.

Inadequate preparedness

15. Despite ongoing responses to drought, displacement and COVID-19, the humanitarian system was not well prepared to scale up for a crisis of the magnitude that unfolded after August 2021. The evaluation found a number of **measures could have been taken to anticipate and prepare for** the collapse of the government and takeover by the Taliban in August of that year. This includes planning for the potential impact of withdrawing development assistance on critical services and the likely

need to reconfigure and scale up the humanitarian response, which were plannable scenarios. Highly aid-dependent services like health are the clearest example of this. Planning was only part of the requirement. **Organizational and strategic flexibility** was crucial to enable the fundamental shift in the aid engagement model. This proved to be highly variable across the response.

Challenges in scaling up and shifting strategy

16. The period following 15 August 2021 and the establishment of an interim Taliban authority was characterized by a high degree of uncertainty and fear, particularly for the individual Afghans and civil society organizations associated with the humanitarian system or the deposed government. The evaluation found more should have been done to support them. The decision by UN operational agencies, the HC and OCHA, to ‘stay and deliver’ was brave and fully justified by the circumstances. They were well supported in this by the ERC and major donors. All agencies faced severe operational challenges including loss of air transport and restricted access to cash and did well to overcome them. The UN scheme for large-scale cash importation to the country played a crucial role.
17. The strategic shift required after August 2021 was achieved partially and gradually throughout the evaluation period. **It took too long to recognize how the nature of the crisis had changed** – and, therefore, how the response needed not just to expand existing operations but to evolve and shift the programme response in terms of targeting and content. It was not until the 2023 HRP that this shift was articulated more fully in collective plans, particularly with regard to the new urban and peri-urban caseload.
18. **Scale-up of the collective response** to the crisis was achieved more quickly in some sectors than in others, reflecting different levels of sector preparedness and organizational flexibility. Scale-up protocols played a significant part in enabling the transition, notably in filling personnel gaps. The speed and extent of scale-up in the food security and livelihoods sector was particularly impressive. However, there was some trade-off between coverage (scale/speed) and the quality of response. This was humanitarianism at its most basic, aimed at achieving high numbers quickly, geared towards short-term results – and implemented (at least in its earlier stages) with relatively limited detailed assessment, monitoring, or community engagement.
19. Major donors responded quickly and generously to the initial Flash Appeal in September 2021 and subsequent HRP for 2022. The response relied heavily on this initial investment and funds subsequently carried forward. Humanitarian funding tailed off sharply in 2023, and with no apparent prospect for the resumption of development funding, **future funding to meet Afghanistan’s basic needs remains highly uncertain.**

Variable coverage, effectiveness, and impact

20. The **coverage against needs of the scaled-up humanitarian response** to the new crisis by IASC agencies was proportionate to need in some sectors but not in others. For food security, the five-fold scale-up of food assistance after August 2021 allowed the response to match the ‘people in need’ figures up until 2023, when funding cuts caused a growing discrepancy between needs and response. The scale-up of agricultural support was unprecedented, funded by a combination of humanitarian and other resources. However, in sectors like WASH, Education and Shelter, the response has not been proportionate to needs, mainly because of limits on funding and policy restrictions. Overall, the scale of relief and recovery needs dwarfs even the relatively large humanitarian response.

21. With regard to **effectiveness and impact**, the response was similarly variable across sectors. In the key sectors of food security and livelihood assistance, the scaled-up response was largely effective in its primary purpose of mitigating the most acute threats Afghans have faced. The largest single sector of intervention – **food and livelihood assistance** – was found to have played an essential role in ensuring access to food, relieving pressure on household budgets, and (across the country as a whole) halting the extremely adverse trends in food insecurity. Agricultural support at scale was crucial, and the health response has played a limited but essential role in maintaining basic primary health services. Emergency Health and Nutrition support has been crucial to protecting the health and well-being of millions of adults and children. In other sectors – including Protection, Education, WASH and Shelter – the response made **relatively less impact** on the scale and nature of the problems involved, most of which are structural or policy-related. However, as the report documents, the role played in each of these sectors was crucial in relieving short-term threats to well-being and security, including through (inter alia) de-mining efforts, support to community schools, emergency WASH provision and concerted inter-agency ‘winterization’ programming.

Slow progress on accountability and community feedback

22. Most existing accountability mechanisms (upwards and downwards) are concerned with individual agency and programme performance. The Humanitarian Country team and the Inter-Cluster Coordination Team are the obvious forums through which to pursue collective and mutual accountability, but they fulfil that role to a limited extent only. Ultimately, aid agency accountability to intended beneficiaries must be understood in a broader framework of accountability and responsibilities encompassing the responsibilities of the *de facto* authorities and donor governments.
23. The humanitarian system **took too long to establish robust collective mechanisms** of Accountability to Affected People (AAP), which was not strong over the evaluation period. The AAP Strategy for 2023-24 represents a step forward, planning to integrate qualitative feedback from community consultations, including more female voices, and holds the potential to enhance the quality and effectiveness of the collective response.
- 24. Feedback from community consultations** undertaken for this evaluation raised two general issues. First is the importance of understanding the whole context for households and the compound nature of the risks they face, indicating the need for more multi-sectoral, area-based approaches. Second is the problem of trust, particularly concerns about perceived bias in the role of beneficiary selection by community representatives. Apart from transparency and two-way communication, this suggests the need for closer community consultation and more consistent monitoring by implementing agencies. Local NGOs play a crucial role in this.

Principles and engagement with the *de facto* authorities

25. On the question of principles, the evaluation concluded the humanitarian community had been right to invoke the humanitarian imperative. However, this was sometimes overstated and treated as applying almost by definition to everything done by humanitarian actors. In particular, claims that interventions necessary to save lives often lacked evidence. The threats to lives, health, and security are real, and so are the related imperatives to intervene. IASC members worked hard to defend the principle of needs-based response embodied in the principle of impartiality while often falling short for reasons beyond its control. Apart from re-affirming its Joint Operating Principles, the HCT could not reach a consensus on more specific operational ground rules and ‘red lines’ in late 2021. This reflected divisions between UN operational agencies and NGOs and was the cause of considerable acrimony in the HCT.

Conflicting views on engagement and response to Taliban edicts

26. Tensions between UN agencies and NGOs resurfaced concerning the **bans on female Afghan aid staff**, first for NGOs in December 2022 and then for the UN in April 2023. The evaluation finds the second (UN) ban should have been anticipated and better prepared for. The response to both bans should have been more concerted – allowing that agency mandates, sector-specific factors and different local contexts meant that some diversity of approach was inevitable. Further, the evaluation concludes **that a general suspension of aid in response to the bans would have been wrong in principle and probably ineffectual in practice**. However, it remains essential to engage with the *de facto* authorities on the irreplaceable role female staff play, particularly in reaching women and girls.
27. The broader question of **how to engage with the *de facto* authorities** has been a fraught one for humanitarian agencies. In the absence of any actual political process between the authorities and the international community, humanitarian aid agencies are expected to bear the burden of engagement. After an initial period with relatively few restrictions on internationally-funded aid, the DfA have increasingly exerted control over the aid agenda, imposing ever more onerous policy and bureaucratic requirements – including an increasingly time-consuming process for NGOs to secure MoUs. This has had a detrimental effect on delivering timely and effective aid across most sectors. The lack of effective channels for high-level dialogue with central authorities left NGOs managing this issue case by case. The impact on local NGOs has been particularly severe.
28. The **response by aid agencies to the bans on female Afghan staff has mainly been pragmatic**, using a combination of accommodation to the terms of the DfA edicts (such as insistence on accompaniment of female staff by a male relative *mahram*) and the negotiation of exemptions from the bans. The evaluation concludes that such approaches are generally justified by circumstances and by the aid imperative but a lack of harmonization of approach created problems of inconsistent standards being applied across different agencies, sectors and locations.

Navigating the operating environment

29. Overall, the **fragile and compromised** nature of the humanitarian response in Afghanistan – dependent on an uncertain patchwork of permissions, exemptions and locally negotiated access agreements – is one of its weaknesses. The increasingly restrictive operating space for humanitarian work has resulted in high levels of uncertainty over the continuity of aid provision. Even more concerning are attested instances of **aid diversion** or misuse, of which the cases in Ghor and Daikundi are the most serious examples. The suspension of aid in such cases is fully justified, but this seriously impacts the recipient populations, and the terms for the resumption of aid are uncertain. Humanitarian agencies and their donors need to be sufficiently confident they can satisfy humanitarian principles and that they can fulfil basic fiduciary responsibilities for the proper use of aid. The evaluation suggests **adequate processes are not yet in place** to justify such confidence, although it was unable to reach firm conclusions on this issue.

Recommendations

RECOMMENDATION 1: Ensure readiness Plans for high-risk countries		
Rationale	Recommendations	Resp.
<p>The Afghanistan experience in 2021 suggests the need for greater operational readiness in contexts of potential political or security transition. The response currently tends to be reactive and ad-hoc. This includes situations of potential regime change and/or descent into generalized armed conflict. Specifically, Afghanistan highlights the need to plan for the consequences of suspension or withdrawal of development cooperation and the role the humanitarian system may need to play in case of economic collapse, generalized insecurity, or potential system failure. Overall, the evaluation suggests there is a need for the IASC to take a more proactive approach to deteriorating situations.</p>	<p>1.1 Create a support framework in collaboration with development partners, at the global, regional and country levels for financing and implementing flexible readiness plans in countries at significant risk of fast-paced developmental failures and broad collapse of critical services.</p>	<p>IASC, EDG</p>
	<p>1.2 Systematically engage the bilateral and multilateral donors and IFIs to support readiness plans for high-risk countries.</p>	<p>IASC</p>

RECOMMENDATION 2: Resource And Harmonize The 'Basic Needs' Agenda		
Rationale	Recommendations	Resp.
<p>The evaluation concludes that Afghanistan's basic needs agenda (support to critical services) was under-resourced over the evaluation period and poorly harmonized with the humanitarian agenda. While reductions in humanitarian funding have been partly compensated by more recent increases in basic needs funding, there remains a disconnect between the two agendas. Humanitarian approaches have very limited sustainability, something of particular concern in an increasingly protracted crisis. Short-termism results in programme inefficiency, lack of local ownership, and an inability to address proximate risk factors, which results in needs being perpetuated. The global lessons concern adequate resourcing and harmonizing of support to critical services (basic needs) with a more short-term and reactive humanitarian agenda.</p>	<p>2.1 Continue to advocate with donors to ensure comprehensive planning and resourcing for a 'basic needs' agenda that complements the humanitarian response, recognizing the critical importance of sustainable support for essential services.</p>	<p>HCT, IASC</p>
	<p>2.2 Support for essential services, whether under a 'basic needs' rubric or otherwise, must be harmonized with the humanitarian response, ensuring the related roles and responsibilities of each are clear. Support for basic services should be planned on a multi-year basis as far as possible.</p>	<p>HCT</p>

RECOMMENDATION 3: Operationalize Humanitarian Principles and Protection Strategy

Rationale	Recommendations	Resp.
<p>While the Afghanistan situation is unique in many respects, the evaluation concludes that some more general lessons can be derived concerning the application of principles and the process by which this is collectively discussed and arbitrated. This includes the application of the humanitarian imperative, questions of programme suspension, and the relationship between the humanitarian and human rights agendas. Protection is generally perceived as a sectoral activity rather than as the collective responsibility of the entire system.</p> <p>The evaluation calls for clearer global guidance from the IASC concerning the above, and in Afghanistan, for clarity on the Protection strategy, application of the 'centrality of protection' principle, and stronger harmonization of approaches to policy edicts and access negotiation. When it comes to engagement, the evaluation suggests that lessons from the Afghanistan experience should contribute to a more global review of aid strategy in 'politically estranged' settings.</p>	<p>3.1 The IASC should agree on a more predic-table approach to operationalizing humanitarian principles within politically sensitive and complex environments, including criteria for when programme suspension is warranted and on interpreting the humanitarian imperative and the relationship between the humanitarian and human rights agendas.</p>	<p>IASC</p>
	<p>3.2 Establish an integrated protection strategy that clarifies the relationship between humanitarian and human rights agendas and the centrality of Protection, focusing on addressing policy edicts, including barriers to girls' education and restrictions on female aid workers. Promote stronger harmonization of approaches to policy edicts and access negotiation.</p>	<p>HCT, Protection Cluster</p>

RECOMMENDATION 4: Strengthen Accountability and Risk Management

Rationale	Recommendations	Resp.
<p>The evaluation found that Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP) had not been strong enough over the evaluation period and local ownership of and involvement in the response was limited. Feedback from community consultations suggested a lack of trust in the beneficiary selection process. Serious incidents of aid diversion in some Provinces highlighted problems of fiduciary risk management for aid providers in Afghanistan.</p>	<p>4.1 Establish a mechanism to monitor and review reported incidents of humanitarian aid diversion or other abuses and develop measures that might need collective action to reduce exposure to fiduciary risk.</p>	<p>HCT</p>
	<p>4.2 Establish a framework of collective performance indicators of the HCT to be reviewed and reported quarterly. This should include a combination of key programmatic progress indicators by Cluster together with crucial outcome indicators (e.g., food security, acute malnutrition levels, GBV levels) and process indicators (risk management, advocacy, etc.).</p>	<p>HCT</p>

RECOMMENDATION 5: Evolve Cash and Shelter Programs

Rationale	Recommendations	Resp.
<p>The evaluation findings suggest the need for robust multi-sector and area-based approaches to programming, including the expansion of the cash and voucher component of the FSAC response and a review of the potential for scaling up cross-sector use of multipurpose cash. The evaluation makes a case for a significantly scaled up and reconfigured WASH response and a greater investment in more sustainable shelter options (including transitional shelter). Both should be part-funded through a multi-year 'basic needs' stream.</p>	<p>5.1 Explore ways to expand the cash component of their responses to maximize programme efficiency and value transfer to beneficiaries. Harmonize this with the cash components of other sectors' responses.</p>	<p>FSAC, Cash Working Group</p>
	<p>5.2 Invest in more sustainable approaches to WASH and shelter responses. In the case of WASH, this will require advocacy with donors for a significantly scaled-up and reconfigured response, combining humanitarian and 'basic needs' (system-related) support. For Shelter, donors should establish a multi-year 'basic needs' funding stream to allow more sustained investment in transitional shelter.</p>	<p>Cluster Lead Agency, WASH and Shelter</p>

RECOMMENDATION 6: Improve Evidence, Outcome and Performance Indicators

Rationale	Recommendations	Resp.
<p>While the evidence base for the response strengthened considerably over the evaluation period, becoming more 'granular' and geographically specific, the evaluation found problems with how programme performance and outcomes are assessed and reported, reflecting more system-wide issues. Aid effects are too often assumed and too little is known about the role aid plays at household and community levels, or its wider impacts on markets and at population levels. The evaluation suggests that the 'diagnostic' component of the response must go beyond the standard needs assessment and monitoring approaches to answer deeper questions about relevance and impact. This may require new forms of impact analysis as well as the use of economic and behavioural research techniques.</p> <p>The evaluation makes several related findings concerning the use and interpretation of indicators, many of which are of system-wide relevance. These include the need for a clearer distinction between outputs and outcomes, the often-misleading use of indicators like 'reach' and 'target achievement', and the need to understand the consistency of benefit delivered over time.</p>	<p>6.1 Develop methods to gauge the delivery of aid benefits over time, including the consistency of aid delivery and its contribution to addressing vulnerabilities. This should include a harmonization of the use of 'reach' and coverage through shared metrics across clusters and an exploration of ways to focus on the outcomes of collective sector responses instead of aid delivered.</p>	<p>HPC Steering Group, GCCG, Cluster Lead Agencies</p>
	<p>6.2 Find better means of understanding the role actually played by aid within and between sectors, including exploring the use of alternative social and economic research techniques to understand the utility and impact of specific aid interventions at household level.</p>	<p>HPC Steering Group, GCCG, HCT, Afghanistan Clusters</p>