

The World Lives on Hope

Crisis and survival in rural Afghanistan



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Executive Summary



This report collates evidence from DRC rapid assessments and other qualitative primary data collection exercises and secondary research to build an evidence-based narrative on the humanitarian crisis facing rural, remote Afghan communities, with a focus on analysing the underlying drivers of need. It argues that **the underlying driver of the crisis is the interaction between the effects of climate change, and the impacts of decades of conflict and failure of governance, which has left rural Afghan communities unable to adapt sustainably.**

This report's title is taken from a common Afghan proverb, 'the world lives in hope'. The findings of the report evidence that emergency humanitarian aid is not an appropriate tool to meaningfully address crisis in rural Afghanistan, because needs are not primarily driven by immediate shocks which communities can be expected to recover from themselves. Moreover, long-established mechanisms and processes for aid delivery require urgent re-examination given the failure of much humanitarian assistance to reach the most vulnerable.

The survival for so long of many of the communities assessed by DRC is testament to the extraordinary resilience and capacity for hope of the Afghan people. Humanitarians must learn to match this hope by supplying Afghan communities with the means through which they can ensure their own survival through crisis.

Key findings

- As outlined in Chapter I of this report, **livelihoods, social structures, and community leadership in rural Afghanistan are complex and diverse.** Rural Afghan communities have been engaged in **processes of adaption, survival, and mutual care across a near half-century of fracture and conflict in Afghanistan.** Humanitarian interventions can interact with these processes in complex and sometimes adverse ways, and because social relationships structure rural economies much more than markets, traditional development approaches have not been effective in Afghanistan.
- As outlined in Chapter II of this report, there is an **acute and ongoing water crisis** affecting many rural Afghan communities. The crisis is driven by **climate change**, yet the impacts of decades of conflict and failure of governance has left communities unable to respond to the changes engendered by climate change, compounding its effects. The report also highlights how communities in many of the worst-hit areas have responded through **construction of solar-powered boreholes**, which have ultimately exacerbated the crisis by draining groundwater and dispossessing poorer households of productive land. Overall, and mainly due to the water crisis, **traditional rural livelihoods in the worst-affected areas a part-way into a process of collapse.**

- To cope with escalating rural poverty engendered by the water crisis, poorer households with less or no access to productive land are **increasingly reliant on dangerous and risky survival strategies**, including forced migration to third countries to generate income, and enlistment in armed groups. This in turn is generating profound protection threats, including on extremely dangerous cross-border journeys; increased risk of drug addiction; and increased incidence of extremely early and forced marriage.
- The impact of decades of conflict and the inadvertent effects of aid actors' and national government engagement with community leadership over the past twenty years have **directly undermined accountable community leadership**. This has greatly limited the effectiveness of humanitarian assistance provided with the participation of community leadership and means too often aid fails to reach the most vulnerable, as outlined in Chapters II and III of this report.
- As outlined in Chapter III, **shocks in 2021**, including waves of intense conflict and displacement, drought, and political and economic rupture following the take-over of Afghanistan by IEA, sharply intensified the humanitarian crisis, but **should not be seen as a crisis trigger**, which had in fact already been ongoing for years in most of the communities assessed.
- Because the **current crisis is not driven by the impact of a particular shock or convergence of shocks**, humanitarian assistance can effectively mitigate suffering for a limited time period, but after people assisted have consumed the assistance, they will not be able to recover on their own; instead facing the same deepening challenges that drive needs. **Increased and effective resilience-focused support**, including localized watershed management through irrigation infrastructure construction and complementary activities, is urgently needed.
- Meanwhile, the ability of humanitarian and development actors to effectively interface and navigate the complex social and political contexts of rural Afghanistan – including mitigating attempts from both community leadership and de-facto authorities to divert aid – is threatened by a **profound lack of engagement and understanding of complex rural communities**, as well as an **increasingly high-risk environment for aid delivery**. It is important that the humanitarian community re-thinks what comprises meaningful accountability to affected populations in Afghanistan.
- Without urgent re-thinking of the nature of humanitarian support to Afghanistan, **profound deterioration in the humanitarian situation is highly likely in the medium to long-term**, as food security further deteriorates. This will likely lead to increased deaths and human suffering, as well as surging forced migration.

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Methodology

Between December 2021 and May 2022, DRC produced 30 rapid assessment snapshots based on interviews with 426 key informants and direct observations on assessments across remote and rural areas of Western, Southern, Central, and Eastern Afghanistan.

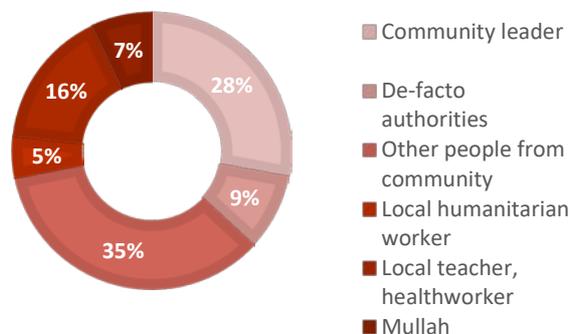
Like many other humanitarian partners in Afghanistan, following take-over of Afghanistan by the Taliban (hereafter referred to as Islamic Emirates of Afghanistan (IEA) in August 2021, DRC was able to access remote, rural areas previously hard-to-reach due to insecurity, often as the first or among the first humanitarian responders in the area for a number of years. In the course of conducting emergency assessments and responses, DRC used key informant interviews and the direct observations of staff to try to engage and better understand remote, rural Afghan communities, and provide an initial granular situation overview to support other humanitarian actors to respond through rapid assessment snapshot reports.

The aim of this report is to build a qualitative picture of the nature and effects of the crisis faced by remote, rural communities in Afghanistan, and make recommendations for how humanitarian responders - including DRC - can better serve them. This report analyses the information from the 30 rapid assessment snapshots and complementary exercises conducted by DRC in the past year, including interlocutor mapping, a separate Nuristan rapid assessment, community consultations in Maidan Wardak, Kandahar, Nangahar, and Herat provinces, and key informant interviews of staff. Findings from data gained through primary research was verified through review of academic literature and secondary research sources, with an emphasis on research conducted by Afghan analysts and academics.

Process and limitations

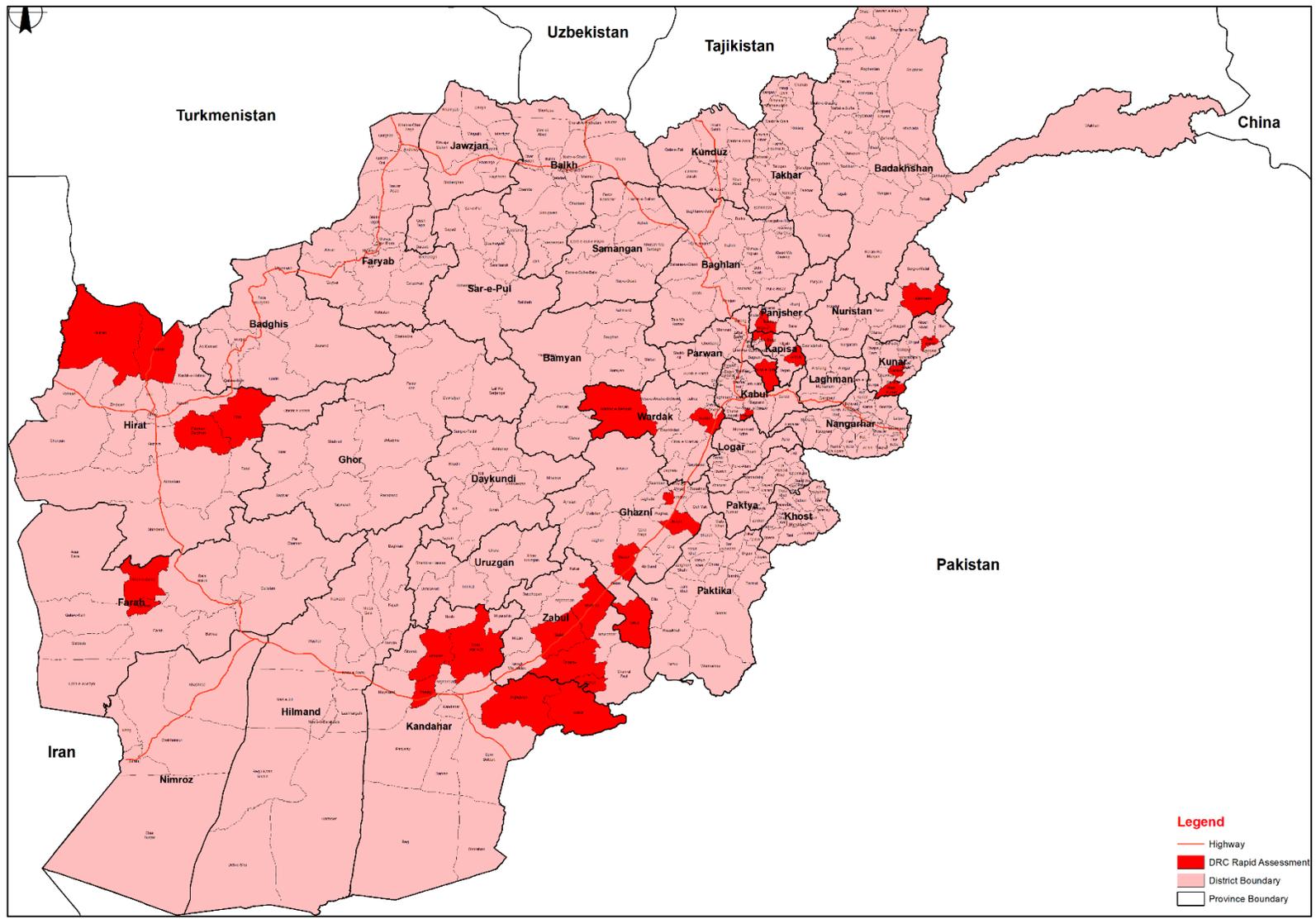
DRC rapid emergency assessments comprise of community mapping before deployment in the location, introductions, and negotiation with interlocutors in the assessment location, conversations with different members of the community to identify most vulnerable households, screening of identified households, then application of household emergency assessment tool (HEAT). During this process, DRC staff also engage in semi-structured interviews with different people from the community, using a key informant interview guide developed for this purpose (see Annex 2). This includes both interlocutors and affected people interviewed for the purposes of providing assistance, and other individuals such as local clinic staff, small business-owners, community leaders, and local humanitarian workers specifically interviewed to gain information on the local context.

KEY INFORMANT TYPE



Following team debriefing and triangulation, findings are written up and circulated to key donors, clusters, and partners at national and regional level. Data collected in this manner is meant to provide a situation snapshot of the district being assessed. In total, information analyzed here is drawn from 426 key informant interviews. Rapid assessment locations are displayed in Map 1, below. Additional information supporting analysis was drawn from the rapid assessment snapshot reports and notes from field teams. It should be noted that there is a selection bias in the communities assessed, as DRC deliberately targeted locations for rapid assessment and emergency response which had been worst affected by conflict and drought, and which has been most underserved by humanitarian actors. This means that the report generates a picture of the challenges facing communities worst-affected by water crisis, and the impacts of insecurity and conflict. Locations are all in the Southern, Western, Central, and Eastern regions of Afghanistan where DRC has strong presence, excluding the North and North-East. The large majority of key informants were men, as male staff were less able to interview women due to cultural restrictions.

Map of locations assessed



I. Introduction to communities assessed

Rural Afghanistan is an intricate web of villages and communities which are vibrant, culturally rich, and diverse, with complex social and governance structures.

Livelihoods and social structure

Communities assessed by DRC lived everywhere from arid, sandy deserts to forested mountains covered in snow for half the year. Traditional livelihoods in all communities assessed are based around agriculture, and to a lesser extent rearing of livestock, especially in greener highland areas where there is better availability of fodder. Afghanistan has two main harvest periods in autumn and spring, with harvests starting earlier in lowland areas and later in highlands. Many communities may only be able to harvest once, depending on the availability of water. Informants in DRC rapid assessments provided evidence that in most areas assessed, poorer households usually take on debts from family, relatives, neighbours, shopkeepers, and other local businessmen to see them through the lean season and repay after the harvest. With agriculture normally non-mechanized, village livelihoods and survival is threatened by natural hazards such as sandstorms, flash floods, and droughts, which make risk and uncertainty a key feature of village life. The harvest of those farming rainfed (non-irrigated) lands is at the mercy of unpredictable yearly rainfall; complex village-level arbitration controls access to water through traditional irrigation infrastructure including canals and *Karez*, while in recent years modern drilling technology has provided wealthier households with continuous access to water in some areas.¹

In all communities assessed by DRC, the wealthiest families with the largest stake in village affairs own larger quantities of irrigated land, while less wealthy families with smaller amounts of land cannot harvest sufficient product to sustain themselves fully, relying on supplementary income, for example gained through daily wage labour in the lands of larger landowners, wage labour in cities or neighboring countries, or by enlisting a male member of the family in the army of the former Government or a non-state armed group.² A very small group of men act as village professionals, for example as a carpenter, wholesaler, and mullah. Others may farm on the lands of others, including large landowners and people who have permanently migrated to cities, keeping a varying proportion of the harvest yield for themselves. Consistently, among the most vulnerable households are those who lacked land and did not farm the lands of others, including those whose lands were no longer largely productive due to lack of water.³ Finally, households who lack an economically active male adult – for example widows and their children, or families in

which the male adult has a disability – are usually the most vulnerable, and generally reliant on the support of the community to survive.⁴ Overall, it is important to recognize that access to land is not determined by market relationships, but by social relationships; in a high-risk environment where livelihoods are threatened by unpredictable climactic and conflict-related hazards, poorer households generally act to enter into patron-client relationships such as sharecropping and various forms of waged and unwaged labour for wealthier households who can better provide for their security in times of crisis.⁵



Men and children in village outside Herat city. DRC, May 2022

All communities in which DRC conducted assessments were hardy and resourceful, using means ways to attempt to navigate through the present crisis. As the Afghan proverb from which this report's title is taken goes, "the world lives on hope"; remote and vulnerable to climactic extremes, rural Afghan communities have engaged in processes of adaption and survival for centuries. The current crisis is no exception. For example, the DRC rapid assessments found that in Wali Muhammad (Ghazni), people who had been sent cash from relatives in Iran were seen to be starting businesses, including mobile chicken delivery in which the business-owners cycle or motorbike between villages selling live chickens from a coop stored on the back of their bike.⁶ In Alasay (Kapisa), villages engage in collective harvest and sale of natural resources such as pine-nuts growing wild and used profits to fund construction of local infrastructure.⁷ In Asmar (Kunar), men formerly enlisted in the former army and now without income roam far across mountains to collect dry wood to feed their families.⁸ In Obe (Herat), people defy IEA edicts to collect a type of wild plant that is sold on for manufacture of amphetamines (narcotics) in Iran,⁹ while in Nawa (Ghazni), small landowners have formed cooperatives to cultivate and sell various crops.¹⁰

Local governance

In the absence of the state, traditional governance in rural Afghan communities has been based on interplay between different traditional leadership structures centred around local councils of elders (*shura/jirga*), and leadership of the village chief (*arbab/malek*) in consultation with the village's religious leader (*mullah*). The *shura/jirga* is a local council composed of older men from the most locally powerful families, generally those who own the most land and are thus wealthiest. *Shuras* may meet at village level, or convene to discuss issues affecting multiple villages. The *jirga/shura* meets ad-hoc to address a particular issue, and takes decisions based on consensus. Because *shuras* are comprised of men from the most locally powerful, wealthy families, DRC found that members of displaced households are less likely to participate in the local councils (*shura/jirga*) due to being on average poorer, and lacking social capital in the community. Conversely, those who have left or been displaced from the community do not participate in the councils, although people displaced from the same community together into the same displacement location may hold their own councils in their displacement locations.

One head of household acts as a village leader – known by different names including *Arbab* and *Malek*, with responsibility to present the affairs of the village to the outside world; his legitimacy often rests in part on the largest and most powerful landowners in the village, who often play a key role in appointing him. Women do not regularly participate in traditional community leadership structures, but have roles on an ad-hoc and exceptional basis, for example a women being called before a *shura* to account for matters related to her deceased husband's affairs.¹¹ Finally, the village *mullah* is the community's religious leader and may play a role in local conflict resolution, especially when it involves family, religious, or moral issues. As highlighted in academic research, the system's traditional success lies in the interplay between the entities of village council (including representatives from largest land-owning families), village leader, and *mullah*, which strengthens accountability.¹² DRC rapid assessments demonstrated that key professionals such as a health-worker or teacher also play a role in village affairs, for example by nominating or helping find particularly vulnerable families for humanitarian actors to assist.¹³

Culture

Rural Afghanistan is breathtakingly diverse. Different people and communities have inter-connected and overlapping identities – including regional, ethnic, and sometimes tribal and political, such as alignment to a particular political party.¹⁴ Yet instantly recognizable core cultural values were evident everywhere. Of particular note to humanitarians,

this included a very strong emphasis on caring for the most vulnerable and burden-sharing during times of crisis was also evident everywhere, in line with traditional Afghan culture and Islam.¹⁵ Widows are frequently given lactating cows or goats to bring some sustainable food and income to their families,¹⁶ and wealthier families lend poorer families their female animals to look after when not lactating, with the poorer family keeping one of the offspring when it gives birth.¹⁷ To cope with periods of acute hunger, families in turn to sell or slaughter animals and feed their neighbours on the meat.¹⁸ Even when the entire community has little food, bread and tea was still routinely shared with poorer households in all communities assessed.

A small village in Sawki valley, Kunar. May 2022.



While culture is understood and framed through Islam, different communities' interpretation of what is culturally and religiously acceptable varies widely,¹⁹ and may also be influenced by local cultural norms and underlying cultural codes such as *Pashtunwali*.²⁰ For example, in Nawa (Ghazni), a heavily conservative area and an IEA stronghold for many years, women only leave the home when accessing health services, accompanied by a *maharam*; while in Alasay (Kapisa), also an IEA stronghold, women and girls move far from the home to rear animals and farm. There was also a strong desire to educate girls in some communities seen as highly conservative and hostile to women's participation in public life, such as Andar in Ghazni, while others remained highly against this, such as Sueri in Zabul.²¹ This chimes with research demonstrating rural Afghan women do want to enjoy greater freedoms in line with their rights under Islam, including greater freedom of movement and education for their girls, and a greater role in decision-making.²²

Overall, humanitarian actors working with rural communities should understand that these communities are already engaged in processes of adaption, survival, and mutual care, including across a near half-century of fracture and conflict in Afghanistan.²³ As will be explored in Chapters II and III – humanitarian interventions can interact with these processes in complex and sometimes adverse ways.

II. Underlying Crisis Drivers

Climate change is at the heart of the current humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, which will accelerate in coming years; yet the ability of communities to overcome this challenge is profoundly constrained by the socio-economic impact of decades of recurrent warfare.

Water crisis

The single most striking finding of the DRC rapid assessments was the intensity of the water crisis, which is seriously threatening the survival of many communities assessed. While the officially declared drought in 2021 often features in humanitarian discourse as a one-off shock, more than three-quarters of communities assessed described being affected by years of water crisis, in which the 2021 drought featured as one particularly bad year among many.



Village in Zinda Jan, Herat. DRC, May 2022

The roots of the water crisis are complex. For hundreds of years, Afghanistan's vast highlands have fed water to lowland areas, with water from large glaciers as well as heavy winter rain and snowfall replenishing groundwater in the deserts and feeding major rivers such as the Amu Darya. To irrigate farmlands in arid areas without rivers that flow year-round (as opposed to flood-rivers) or natural springs, Afghans constructed extensive networks of Karez, an ancient system of channels bringing water from the mountains to lowland farms which comprise the sole traditional irrigation infrastructure in the south and south-west of Afghanistan, in addition to hand-dug wells which generally supply water for domestic consumption.²⁴ Harvests on rainfed (non-irrigated) lands have always been more precarious, dependent on sufficient water during the October-March wet season, which could be disrupted due to normal climactic phenomenon such as La Nina. However, dryer years used to be adequately spaced in between more plentiful years, allowing people and communities with less access to irrigation infrastructure time to recover.²⁵

For more than forty years, water supply in Afghanistan has been diminishing. The first and most obvious reason is lack of rain. Over the past twenty years, volumes of rain and snowfall have experienced increasingly extreme fluctuations due to climate change;²⁶ while Afghanistan used to experience dryer water years once in every five or ten years, meteorological drought has now occurred three times in the past five years (2018, 2021, and now again in 2022).²⁷ Climate change has also caused temperature rises above the global average, which diminishes agricultural output in an already relatively hot and arid country.²⁸ This warming is causing Afghanistan's glaciers to shrink at an alarming rate, reducing volume of surface and groundwater,²⁹ and thus water availability through traditional irrigation infrastructure such as *Karez*, which were found to be drying in 73% of communities assessed by DRC. Research demonstrates that 83% of Karez have dried up since 1998, leaving only 8% of Afghanistan's agricultural lands irrigated by Karez.³⁰ Changing precipitation patterns are also affecting patterns of river flow, with negative consequences to irrigation of agricultural land.³¹ In addition, the vital *Karez* network sustained extensive damage during the Soviet wars and has largely not been rebuilt.³²

Yet in addition to the straightforward impacts of climate change, Afghanistan is facing additional challenges related to decades of conflict and failure of governance, which compound the severity of climate change impacts and present enduring obstacles to Afghan communities attempting to survive them. Afghanistan's population has tripled since the 1930s with no corresponding increase in the overall size of agricultural land, in part because there is not sufficient groundwater, surface water, or precipitation to support an increase.³³ This means that majority of rural households now lacking sufficient land to generate enough income for their families. Population growth combined with poverty and lack of regulation controlling tree-cutting has led to extensive deforestation, with Afghanistan losing more than half of its forests by 2013.³⁴ This has reduced water retention and led to desertification, while simultaneously increasing the occurrence of flash floods that destroy agricultural lands.³⁵ Despite far more access to technical resources and funding than the current de-facto administration of the IEA, the former government failed to

implement measures to address the growing water crisis effectively; no specific budget was allocated to addressing climate change, nor was the drought risk management strategy developed with FAO actually implemented by national authorities.³⁶ And while large scale infrastructure such as dams are theoretically possible,³⁷ any government of Afghanistan also faces concerted and violent resistance against construction of large dams by Iran and Pakistan, where water supply draws on rivers originating within the Afghan highlands.³⁸



Dry flood river in Taghtapol, Kandahar. DRC March 2022

Adaption of irrigation methods

In the absence of the state, DRC rapid assessments overwhelmingly corroborate that Afghanistan's rural farming communities have increasingly turned to modern drilling technologies, particularly solar-powered boreholes, to respond to the water crisis. While solar-powered boreholes have brought short-term relief for those able to utilize them, these have ultimately greatly exacerbated the water crisis. In every single community assessed where widespread construction of solar-powered boreholes occurred, there was strong concern from respondents and statements that the construction of solar powered boreholes was partly or fully to blame for the receding water table. Despite this, there is relatively limited research or publicity about the effects of solar-powered boreholes on groundwater levels, indicating that the issue is critically underfunded, and further research is needed. A study completed in 2003, already found evidence for drying-up of shallow wells and Karez in Hilmand and the Kabul river basin, due to deepening of the water table due to deeper tube well construction,³⁹ while the Asia Development Bank in 2015 found that ground-water levels had been acutely depleted due to the use of modern drilling technologies.⁴⁰

Rural Afghan communities have complex and effective traditional means of regulating access to water through traditional, communal infrastructure such as canals and

Karez,⁴¹ but lack local mechanisms to regulate use of modern drilling technologies including solar-powered boreholes, which based on DRC findings are usually constructed by single individuals or families able to afford up-front construction costs. Solar-powered boreholes and other types of deep wells constructed with modern technologies take water directly from groundwater, and if appropriate consideration is not given to replenish capacity, can rapidly drain groundwater and cause groundwater water tables to reduce.⁴²

“Solar-powered boreholes are now the only reliable means to irrigate lands and therefore harvest... even many of these are now running dry.”

Khakriz rapid assessment snapshot, May 2022

Informants described how the boreholes had directly contributed to traditional irrigation infrastructure running dry, meaning that over time, only the wealthier households with access to modern drilled wells are able to irrigate and thus harvest.⁴³ While neighboring households usually can take drinking water from the boreholes, access to the water for irrigation is the sole right of the owner or the borehole, which gush water whenever there is sun, lacking an “off” switch. It is hard to overstate the level of concern people in communities affected by water crisis expressed to DRC about solar-powered boreholes; there are even currently social media campaigns on Facebook by Afghans petitioning the IEA to stop the use of solar powered boreholes.⁴⁴

Socio-economic impacts of the water crisis

Evidence of irrigation inequity driving increased impoverishment of poorer households was also present in the DRC snapshots; due to traditional infrastructure running dry, and a general trend for reduced rain and snowfall reducing the viability of harvesting from rainfed lands, the income that poorer households have been unable to gain from farming of their own lands has steadily reduced or been nullified. This trend noted in the DRC rapid assessments is borne out in recent academic research which demonstrates that the average size of irrigated farm areas has greatly declined, with only 38% of rural households now owning irrigated land; while the proportion of rural households without access to land has risen, especially in well-irrigated areas.⁴⁵ In Kandahar, it was also found that some households lacking access to irrigated land make arrangements with wealthier individuals who will construct solar-powered boreholes on their lands, and then take the majority of the harvest yield.⁴⁶

As outlined in Chapter I, it has been normal for many rural households lacking access to productive land, or with insufficient irrigated and productive land to sustain their basic needs, to rely on different forms of waged and unwaged labour, finding employment with locally prominent landowners and by travelling far across the country and abroad to find daily wage labour. It is important to note that despite the sizable amount of aid channeled into Afghanistan's rural economy since 2001, rural poverty has continually increased since 2011.⁴⁷ There is evidence that market-oriented approaches taken by development actors, have failed to acknowledge that lack of access to sufficient land is a key driver of poverty in Afghanistan, and that rural households are more likely to retain small farms and dependency on different forms of patron-client relationships and other forms of supplementary income than establish larger farms to increase their own production. This means that the heavy focus on market supply and production has failed to secure dividends, or prevent rural poverty from increasing.⁴⁸



Abandoned houses in village outside Qalat. The owners have left the area due to drought. December 2021.

Instead, water crisis has acted to increase the number of households lacking access to productive land at all; to decreasing the yield and thus income small landowners and sharecroppers can make from land; and further reduced the availability of various forms of waged and unwaged labour that men and women from rural areas may engage in for wealthier landowners, as even wealthier households have been affected by the water crisis, and years of successive droughts. This has contributed to a growing surplus in the rural labor force and lack of needed income-generating opportunities in rural areas – simply not enough jobs to go around⁴⁹ – thus forcing an increased reliance on insecure income sources such as daily wage labour, including practice of internal and external migration to find daily wage labour.⁵⁰ This was corroborated by DRC rapid assessments found that dispossessed of profitable, irrigated land, families in remote, rural areas have become increasingly reliant on daily wage labour as a survival strategy. An

unprecedented number of boys and younger men from rural communities are working as labourers on the lands of others, and increasingly, travelling far across the country and to neighboring countries to find work, a trend that was noted in almost all (90%) of DRC rapid assessments.

“Of course we are scared to go, we know better by now we have no other options. What does it say about the situation here, when risking our lives is the best way to survive?”

Man, 38 (deportee), interviewed in Kazkunar district

Daily wage labour is a highly insecure livelihood where labourers and their families often struggle to scrape together survival income;⁵¹ recent research indicates that those engaging in daily wage labour are twice as likely to be poor in Afghanistan,⁵² making the transition from more sustainable livelihoods based around farming of irrigated land, to daily wage labour that is ongoing in many communities assessed by DRC particularly worrying.⁵³ As women and girls cannot usually participate in the waged labour-force, this reduces the number of economically active household members, increasing the burden of income-generation falling to men and boys. The profound psychological impacts of the gradual collapse of rural livelihoods affecting poorer households was strikingly evident throughout the DRC rapid assessments, with male respondents often stating they felt a sense of despair and hopelessness about their situation and inability to provide secure income for their families. Widespread drug addiction of some men in particular communities, particularly in Ghazni province, was directly stated by respondents to be a result of this situation, while men and boys were frequently said to have also become addicted to opium and heroin while laboring in Iran. While hashish consumption is generally tolerated, consumption of opium or heroin is normally not tolerated, meaning men and boys are forced out of the communities to become itinerant homeless people, and wives left behind effectively become women heads of households.⁵⁴ Distress was also deeply felt amongst women and girls, who have even less power than male counterparts to address the challenges engendered by collapse of their livelihoods. As one girl stated during a focus group discussion with DRC in Kandahar: “the girls are just suffering as we cannot do anything”.⁵⁵

DRC rapid assessments revealed many protection vulnerabilities driven by the movement of older men and boys far from the home, across Afghanistan and to neighboring countries, which drive protection vulnerabilities. These movements are a means of survival, not economic advancement. The journeys themselves are often a precarious and dangerous undertaking, with men

and boys facing risk of arbitrary detention, robbery, kidnapping, being shot at and beaten, and even risk of death due to natural hazards such as avalanches in perilous irregular crossings.⁵⁶ Deportees are often beaten and have cash and valuable items such as phones stolen, deposited at “zero-point” border crossings with almost nothing,⁵⁷ while men and boys have been tortured and held at ransom to extract cash from their families, particularly in Iran.⁵⁸ This leaves families who have taken out huge debts to support movement to Iran even more heavily indebted.⁵⁹ It is very important to understand that this movement is, for most, an extremely dangerous effort of survival rather than attempt at economic betterment, especially as the risks involved are extreme, with many boys and men left dead, traumatized, and with permanent disabilities as a result of this movement.⁶⁰

“It is important for the world to understand that this is not a choice – we do this to stay alive; to keep our families alive. We know the nightmares of trying to cross the border but there are no other options. We love our country, but we cannot survive here. So, we take the risks.”

Man, 26, recently deported, Nangarhar province

Extreme economic hardship driven by the water crisis has far-reaching effects, and engenders protection threats facing all age and gender groups. Because many younger men and older boys in communities worst affected by water crisis have left the communities to earn income through daily wage labour, and increased impoverishment means they cannot afford dowry, the incidence of extremely young girls married to much older men is also increasing.⁶¹ For example, in Muqur, one 14-year-old girl described to the assessment team how she was married to a very old man when she was 13. She subsequently gave birth to a baby, has become the sole caregiver to both her baby and frail elderly husband.

Increased indebtedness of poorer to wealthier households also increases extreme early marriage of girls, who may often be married as a second or third wife to the debtor household in exchange for debt relief. Infant girls as young as one year old were observed by DRC teams to already be engaged in several districts of Ghazni and Kandahar. Engaged very early, a girl may be taken from her family as young as eight years old to the family of her betrothed, and risks physical and sexual abuse. Even where a man is seeking to take a first wife to establish a family, where poverty means that he is unable to afford high bride prices that can go up to 800,000 AFN (\$9000), he may not be able to marry until he is middle-aged or older, reducing his ability to generate enough income to support his family.⁶²

Finally, some rural communities have been forced to displace due to the water crisis. In 2018, over 170,000 people were displaced in Afghanistan’s western region alone due to drought. Most have not returned due to lack of water in their areas of origin, living in dire conditions in informal settlements in Herat and Baghdis, surviving off daily wage labour of men and boys in major Afghanistan cities and Iran.⁶³ Recently, the IEA has signaled intent to force evictions and return of these communities to their areas of origin, which have been rendered inhabitable by the water crisis.⁶⁴ DRC rapid assessments also evidence an ongoing process of depopulation of rural areas most affected by the water crisis, as whole families and villages are compelled to leave due to lack of water. This was observed in more than half of communities assessed, particularly in Kandahar, Zabul, Ghazni, Herat, and Farah provinces in Afghanistan’s arid south, south-east, and west regions.



Village in Herat. DRC, May 2022

Conflict and insecurity

More than 86% of communities assessed by DRC had been subject to conflict between IEA and the forces of the former government within the past five years. It should be noted that decades of conflict in the period after 2001 also came after decades of conflict in the 1990s and devastating period of the Soviet-Afghan wars, in which up to two million Afghans, mostly civilians, are estimated to have died.⁶⁵ This also left a legacy of massive contamination with unexploded ordnance still visible in some communities assessed; for example, in Gulran, Herat, assessment teams came across women grinding food with Soviet-era shells, while in Wali Muhammad district of Ghazni, a tractor drove over an old Soviet mine during the assessment period, resulting in fatalities.⁶⁶

In recent years, territorial control patterns in areas assessed had often been complex; as a general trend, IEA had often gradually encircled the forces of the former government until their control was effectively limited to the district administrative centre and military bases along main roads.

In almost one-third of the districts assessed (29%), the area had been subject to conflict involving additional non-state armed groups, including Islamic State of Khorasan (IS-K) in Kunar, pro-former Government local militias (Parwan), local Hazara militias armed against Kuchi seasonal nomads (Wardak), armed groups aligned with different political parties and tribes (Kapisa), and armed groups fighting internecine tribal conflicts (Nuristan).⁶⁷

This fragmented and high-risk security environment complicated or blocked the delivery of humanitarian and development assistance, as well as essential services such as health and education, provision of which are both correlated in Afghanistan with reduced poverty.⁶⁸ Overall, those areas in which control had been contested for a long period between the former government, IEA, and/or other non-state armed groups such as Islamic State of Khorasan (IS-K) – or had been under IEA control for a long period of time prior to the collapse of the former Government in 2021 – were particularly affected by this trend. Health services in communities assessed were usually limited to a district centre clinic offering limited primary healthcare services, sometimes with between two and three sub-clinics in major villages or valleys of the district. In terms of education, less than half of districts had high schools for boys; high schools for girls were even rarer, and one in three districts lacked schools at all, although sometimes boys and girls attended classes in madrasas (religious schools) instead. The DRC rapid assessments found that humanitarian aid received prior to August 2021 was usually limited to in-kind food distributions by WFP with some projects such as construction of hand-pumps, schools, roads, and Mosques funded under the NSP/Citizen’s Charter.

The effects of decades of conflict spanning generations have created cross-generational impacts and vulnerabilities in most of the areas assessed by DRC were evident in the rapid assessments, in which high numbers of families whose male head of household had perished over decades of conflict were found in nearly half (45%) of the communities assessed. Due to cultural norms, rapid assessments underlined that the ability of widowed girls and women to generate income to support themselves and families is extremely reduced in most areas, which then left a high number of families in already impoverished and struggling communities reliant on sharing by relatives and others in the community - to survive. The burden of generating income to feed the family also falls on children, with girls married extremely young to provide income for the family, and boys engaged in economically productive activities. For communities hosting influxes of displaced families coming from neighboring districts, such as Pashto Rod and Khaki Safid in Farah, and Seuri in Zabul, including influxes of displaced people coming from other provinces and districts,

this dynamic was also evident, with host community families who were themselves food insecure struggling to feed neighbours and family members also staying with them. However, some DRC rapid assessments found that IDPs, particularly protracted IDPs face greater risk of exclusion from humanitarian assistance when decisions about who should receive humanitarian assistance are made by community leadership, as protracted IDPs lack sufficiently strong ties to community leadership.⁶⁹

Lack of accountable local governance

Tragically for a country in which corruption is deeply inimical to traditional culture, Afghanistan has long been recognized as one of the most corrupt countries in the world.⁷⁰ Evidence from DRC rapid assessments demonstrates how corruption has permeated deep into village governance, with adverse consequences for rural communities; in 90% of communities assessed, multiple respondents stated that community leadership usually try to introduce themselves and relatives to receive humanitarian assistance, a statement borne out by the DRC team’s experience in the field.⁷¹



DRC team meet with community leadership in Obe, Herat. DRC, December 2021

During the DRC rapid assessments, in which DRC directly outreached to vulnerable households to select beneficiaries independently, DRC far more often than not faced pushback from local interlocutors, including village chiefs, local councils, and tribal elders, who sought to ensure that themselves and their relatives received assistance, and tended to exclude households without good standing or kinship networks in the community, such as protracted displaced households.⁷² In interlocutor mapping with DRC field staff who had conducted five months of rapid assessments, village-level chiefs, community elders and leadership structures, were consistently judged as unreliable in referring the most vulnerable households in their village for assistance; in general, only mullahs, and

ordinary individuals who did not hold any leadership position in their community, were usually put as reliably able to work with DRC to select the most vulnerable households for assistance.⁷³

This has concerning implications for humanitarian actors; in the communities assessed by DRC, the majority or all of – often highly limited – humanitarian and development assistance previously provided had been done in close cooperation with community councils and mechanisms, including traditional leadership structures and externally-established groups. This cooperation usually took the form of providing beneficiary lists to humanitarian organizations. Even for organizations conducting independent assessments to select people for assistance, some degree of cooperation with community leadership is still necessary to access the community, and receive referrals of vulnerable people in the absence of alternate informants.

Key informants and (in a separate round of interviews conducted for this report)⁷⁴ DRC field staff offered two main explanations for this. Firstly, it was stated that many years ago, community leaders had been more accountable, making decisions for the benefit of the wider community and caring for the most vulnerable. However, during decades of conflict, these people had been disproportionately targeted, marginalized, and/or killed by different parties to the conflict, because they represented an obstacle to their authority. It was also stated that younger people who had the potential to become community leaders were also targeted. These statements are corroborated by independent academic research and journalism, which has documented targeting and killing of community leaders and other prominent voices within society, under the initial purges of the Saur government in the 1970s,⁷⁵ by the IEA⁷⁶ and by the former Government of Afghanistan, often with the support of international coalition forces.⁷⁷

“Being a community leader used to be a noble responsibility. These people were killed or died. Now, to be a community leader you just need to be rich. They don’t take care about the people.”

Man, mid-30s, Andar district

Secondly, informants emphasized the negative impacts of the way in which humanitarian and development aid actors interfaced with community leadership. Following 2001, there was a proliferation in community councils and mechanisms such as the Community Development Committees (CDCs) created by the Government of Afghanistan, development, and humanitarian actors, which managed an injection of considerable capital for service

delivery, development projects, and humanitarian assistance. These new structures layered over already complex traditional mechanisms for local governance, with often adverse effects,⁷⁸ especially where the responsibilities of newly created groups were ill-defined against those of traditional community leadership.⁷⁹ Instead, there is considerable evidence that the injection of capital – including through poorly defined, externally-created, and questionably legitimate leadership structures – decreased effectiveness of customary governance and rule of law,⁸⁰ while increasing corruption and graft.⁸¹ This has acted to disincentivize accountable leadership, as leaders compete to access and control resources that do not come from communities themselves, but foreign aid.⁸²



DRC staff meeting with community elders in Kamdesh, Nuristan. DRC, March 2022

With the stated aim of reducing corruption, IEA has now abolished CDCs in some locations,⁸³ and other councils drawing membership from multiple villages, and villages most often use a single representative to interface with the IEA district governor. However, this does not seem to have had any impact on the accountability of local governance, including because – as explored in Chapter III – IEA de-facto officials are themselves increasingly corrupt.⁸⁴

In conclusion, a near half-century of conflict and failed state-building has had profound negative impacts on the transparency and accountability of community leadership. Parties to the conflict have heavily discouraged accountable leadership by disproportionately targeting independent voices in communities seen as an obstacle to their authority, while aid has created an incentive to join community leadership structures purely for the purpose of extracting economic benefit for oneself or one’s kin. This decline in accountable customary governance limits the effectiveness of humanitarian assistance provided, given that community leadership have a role to play within beneficiary selection for a very large proportion of assistance provided in Afghanistan, including in rural areas where assessment

teams covering a wide geographic reach must identify households to assess through interface with community members, or directly ask community members to draw up lists of eligible households for inclusion, with or without conducting verification. This leaves the most vulnerable households at community level under-served, in already under-served rural communities in the midst of protracted, and escalating, humanitarian crisis.

Crisis drivers: Summary

Underlying crisis drivers

- Climate change
- Natural resource degradation and mismanagement
- Population growth

Factors compounding needs

- Lack of service provision (health and education)
- Failure of national governance to act to address the impacts of climate change
- Decline in accountable local/customary governance
- Prolonged insecurity and conflict
- Explosive ordnance contamination

II. Recent shock impacts (2021-2022)

Shocks in 2021, including waves of intense conflict and displacement, drought, and economic recession triggered following the take-over of Afghanistan by IEA, sharply intensified the humanitarian crisis facing communities who were already struggling to survive.

2021 has been described as a time of rupture for many rural Afghan communities, the latest in a long series of upheavals and profound uncertainty that has marked the lives of older Afghans living through five decades of conflict.⁸⁵ As noted in Chapter II, most of the rural Afghan communities assessed by DRC were already confronting crisis before they were forced to confront intensifying conflict, drought, and political and economic upheaval brought by regime change in the space of a few months. The following chapter outlines the key shocks affecting rural Afghan communities since 2021 and examines how new shock impacts layered and inter-played with the effects of underlying crisis drivers.



Makeshift IDP camp in Dand, outside Kandahar city. November 2020.

Conflict and displacement

In 2021, many rural communities across Afghanistan were affected by intensifying conflict as the IEA launched a renewed offensive to capitalize on the international troop withdrawal. Two-thirds of districts assessed by DRC had sustained damage to houses and other critical infrastructure such as bazaars, roads, schools, and clinics during this period, with homes often comprehensively looted, with between two-thirds and one-half of the population displaced, usually to the nearest city. One in three communities where people who had displaced, had experienced displacement multiple times prior.

Of those displaced, communities reported between just less than half, to most of those displaced, returning before the

winter of 2021. Those who remained in their displacement location were usually said to have done so because lack of water meant they believed their livelihoods in areas of origin were unsustainable, with a smaller number stated to remain in their displacement location because their shelters had been destroyed.

It was also frequently stated that those who had returned had been pushed to do so by lack of income to afford rent and inability to establish livelihoods in urban displacement locations, suggesting that many of those who returned may have preferred to re-settle in their displacement location if this had been possible. This finding also tallies with evidence from community consultations conducted by DRC in Nangahar, Herat, and Kandahar cities with recently displaced people in June and July 2021, who frequently stated that they were trying to re-settle in cities due to lack of water and inability to harvest in their rural villages.⁸⁶

“We are struggling [trying] to settle in the city rather than to work on our crops because of lack of water”

Man, displaced in Kandahar city, July 2021

Findings speak to a broader trend of families in rural areas worst affected by water crisis to seek resettlement in a new location, discussed in Chapter II. They also motion to the limited capacity of Afghanistan’s urban centres to absorb additional families, with available opportunities in daily-wage labour thinly spread and insecure,⁸⁷ and indicate that, if livelihoods opportunities were more readily available in cities, Afghanistan’s rural to urban population movement would be even higher than present. Instead, many of those displaced in the conflict of 2021 were faced with the extraordinarily difficult choice between settling in their displacement, where access to even baseline income needed to ensure survival was perilous, yet their ability to survive in their areas of origin continued to be imperiled by water crisis.

The majority of districts assessed experienced ground clashes and exchange of artillery fire in 2021, with conflict tending to be centred around the district administrative centre (DAC) and main roads. Shelters located in these locations along with civilian infrastructure (schools, roads,

and clinics) were often partially or completely destroyed and extensively looted. Some locations where intense fighting had occurred in 2021 were heavily contaminated, with recent incidents (injuries and deaths) registered in 23% of districts assessed, all but one of which were linked to contamination due to conflict in 2021.⁸⁸



Rocket stuck in a tree village of Qarabagh, Ghazni. DRC, March 2022

As people returned to heavily conflict-affected and contaminated areas, communities had no choice but to engage in harvesting and planting during the summer and autumn of 2021, which increased exposure to explosive ordnance. Risk behaviors encouraged by the crisis, including collecting scrap metal from conflict sites to earn income, also increased risks of incidents such as that in Obe in February 2022, in which two children collecting scrap metal died.⁸⁹ Without humanitarian support, men collected and buried explosive ordnance themselves, risking being blown up in the process. For example, one man interviewed by DRC in Qarabagh, Ghazni, described how he and his neighbor had found unexploded ordnance in their fields; out of fear for safety of their children, they had picked up and buried the items themselves, with his neighbor injured in the process. They were unable to remove one rocket lodged in a tree less than ten meters from his house themselves and were planning to start a fire to explode it.⁹⁰ No districts assessed had received any humanitarian mine action support in recent years, although DRC was able to conduct explosive ordnance and disposal after the emergency assessment or refer to partners to conduct this following the assessments.

Drought

Conflict in 2021 played out against a backdrop of one of Afghanistan's most severe agricultural droughts for a decade.⁹¹ With a dry winter and spring, rainfed (*lalmi*) agricultural lands were not sufficiently watered and water from the various irrigation systems of different communities (Including canal, *karez*, irrigation channels from steams) was further reduced or extinguished. Some households saw their harvests fail entirely, while others saw their total yield

reduced. This meant that – following a volatile period in which many were displaced and returned home without receiving assistance – the rural communities assessed had little income or food stocks to see them through the winter and lean season, while at the same time coping with conflict impacts, including damaged and looted shelters. Yet as the rapid assessments highlighted, the drought in 2021 came after years of water shortages already affecting communities, including in the two relatively 'good' water years – in terms of total rain and snowfall – prior to 2021.⁹² Because farming households, especially the poorer households, typically take debts to sustain them through the lean season and repay these with the harvest, respondents in all but one community assessed raised concerns that they were already in debt from previous years to due poor harvest linked with water shortages, and did not know how they would re-pay.

Overall, the drought in 2021 was particularly devastating because even when rain and snowfall is relatively good, rural Afghan communities are struggling to make traditional agricultural livelihoods viable: because groundwater levels had already reduced due to climate change and introduction of solar-powered boreholes, meaning that water supply issues reduce the ability of poorer households to farm even in relatively good water years; while the population has dramatically grown without increase in the availability of agricultural land needed to feed the population. This then further increases the vulnerability of communities – and especially the most struggling households – to the impact of new climactic shocks, particularly years of reduced rain and snowfall, which as discussed in Chapter II, are increasing in frequency and severity due to climate change. Ultimately, these complexities mean that the established humanitarian discourse around 'drought' and 'drought risks' is questionably meaningful, as it implies a one-off climactic shock. Instead, rural communities in Afghanistan have been struggling with escalating water shortages for years, with those years in which a drought has been officially declared simply marking particularly challenging periods. Indeed, research demonstrates that 'drought' conditions are likely to become the norm in many parts of Afghanistan by 2030.⁹³

By the time DRC started rapid assessments in December 2021, in worst-affected villages almost all food stocks had run out, and people had no income to purchase food. While specialized nutrition survey was not within the scope of the rapid assessments, field teams noted extremely thin and visibly malnourished children and elderly people in more than half of locations assessed. Drought did not affect all districts the same: in general, districts which had better access to irrigation structures (such as Upper Shahwalikot),

were less affected than districts reliant on traditional irrigation structures, and impact was less in areas less heavily dependent on purely agricultural livelihoods (such as Alasay, Tagab, Najrab, and Kohband). Drought also affected the availability of fodder for livestock, with communities forced to slaughter and consume their animals or sell at low prices (mentioned in all locations assessed), meaning that communities with mixed agricultural and pastoral livelihoods were also heavily affected. To cope with the situation, respondents in 93% of locations assessed confirmed that their communities had increased practice of harmful coping mechanisms outlined in Chapter II, including very early marriage of girl children, practice of child labour, and sending of boys and young men to find income-generating opportunities across the country and in neighboring countries.

“I can’t remember when my family last had a proper meal or a full stomach. My wife and I can bear the situation, but what about our children? How can they cope with their hunger?”

Nabiullah, Nawa (December 2021)

Impact of assistance on food insecurity

During December 2021, DRC was the first responder in the remote, rural communities assessed, however large-scale in-kind food assessments and distributions started in early 2022 in the majority of districts assessed. Key informants stressed how vital this food assistance was, providing a lifeline to extremely struggling communities. On a national level, assistance almost certainly did significantly ameliorate the worst levels of food insecurity by supporting a very large proportion of communities with food aid.⁹⁴ However, there were a number of issues in the in-kind food distributions emphasized by respondents, which reduced positive impacts of the food assistance on the most food-insecure households. Firstly, throughout the course of DRC rapid assessments, respondents repeatedly stated in almost all districts that the most vulnerable had not always been selected for assistance. In one in three communities assessed, respondents also stated that assistance had been diverted to community leaders and/or members of de-facto authorities/IEA. Instances of direct aid diversion in which humanitarian partners had aided officials from de-facto authorities, likely to secure access, were also uncovered.⁹⁵ These issues had negatively affected the perceptions of communities and de-facto authorities about the transparency of humanitarian organizations.

These issues stemmed from a number of factors. Firstly, and as discussed in Chapter II, community leaders are often unreliable sources of information about the most vulnerable households and have a tendency to refer friends and relatives for assistance. As there is not enough food assistance to feed the whole community, where beneficiary lists are drawn up directly by customary community leadership with limited or no monitoring or verification processes, the chances of vulnerable households being passed over for less vulnerable, but more socially connected and powerful families is very high.⁹⁶



Dry riverbed in Kunar, Marawara district. DRC, May 2022

Secondly, respondents in communities where selection for food assistance took place based on house-to-house visits of households referred by customary leadership, reported that households targeted often came from the same tribe or villages as members of locally hired assessment teams, which meant that vulnerable households were excluded compared to less vulnerable households who received assistance. This had been a pattern for a long time but has been perpetuated by new officials from de-facto authorities who DRC observed to frequently attempt to influence targeting towards villages and districts who were seen as supportive of the IEA or who had contributed large numbers of fighters to IEA. This affected both household-level selection and geographic targeting of villages, with inclusion of villages in assessments and subsequent responses influenced by the background of assessment teams or the preferences of de-facto authorities and other powerful people in the community to prioritize villages where their own tribe or kin lives, and/or which had had more men join the IEA as fighters in the past. This was repeatedly reported to exacerbate tensions within communities, often alongside pre-existing ethnic, tribal, and/or political fissures. Finally, redistribution of assistance including food assistance was reported to have taken place in nearly one-third of communities assessed. Motivated primarily by the desire to avoid tensions and conflicts between assisted and non-assisted households and in line

with deeply rooted traditions of solidarity, customary leadership re-collected assistance after distribution and shared it equally between all households in their village. This greatly reduces the positive impact of humanitarian assistance provided to the most vulnerable households.

“After the food was distributed, the food given for one family was shared with six others. Of the food I first received...I got only 7kg of wheat and 1kg of oil”

Man, Narang district, Kunar (May 2022)

Security

Experience of the collapse of the former Government of Afghanistan and take-over of the country of IEA varied widely between communities assessed; for many, this initially marked a dramatic improvement in the security situation and provided an opportunity for the country to stabilize and develop with an improved government.⁹⁷ The change brought increased aid to communities which had been underserved for a long time, mostly because they were controlled - or rendered insecure - by IEA activities. The experience of families and communities with a perceived alignment to the former government was different. Fears of revenge killings were evident; for example, in Kohi Safi, Parwan, customary community leaders aligned with the former government and involved in community leadership were initially too afraid to leave their homes when approached by DRC’s assessment team. Despite the IEA’s announcement of amnesty, it was frequently reported that specific individuals and their families linked to the former government often felt under threat of retaliation from individuals linked to IEA, causing them to either remain in their displacement location and not to return to the area of origin, or leave their area of origin after the IEA took control in August.⁹⁸ The degree in which different individuals are under threat appears to vary depending on their personal situations, with inter-personal or familial disputes playing a role in whether people felt under threat.

Economic upheaval and access to services

Finally, rapid assessment findings indicate that the impacts of the collapse of the former government and related economic recession heavily impacted the rural communities assessed. Because funding for services were heavily reliant on international aid funded channeled through the previous government, the withdrawal of these funds greatly diminished the capacity of Afghanistan’s essential services, including health and education.⁹⁹ Pre-collapse of the former government, remote rural areas already had reduced access to basic services including

health and education and faced increased access barriers, including long journey times to service delivery points. The impact of reduced service provision in remote, rural areas was therefore especially severe, effectively cutting off access to most forms of basic medical care for entire communities.



Tent family is living in following destruction of their shelter in conflict in Narang, Kunar. DRC, May 2022.

Between December and February, health-worker salaries had gone unpaid in almost all districts assessed, with the exception of Kushk, while several clinics have been closed due to lack of funds for salaries and medicine. By May, the salaries of medical personnel were largely being paid by NGOs and UN agencies, yet clinics and hospitals all had extremely limited supplies of medicine; public medical workers must write patients prescriptions to take and purchase medicine from private medicine stores or clinics, which are not affordable for many. These dynamics drive increased health needs, and likely corresponding increase in morbidity and mortality across communities and are especially concerning in a context of increased outbreak of acute watery diarrhea and measles in Afghanistan, as well as escalating rates of malnutrition.¹⁰⁰ The impacts of reduced service delivery following the events of August 2021 were also evident on provision of education in many of the communities assessed, particularly the closure of girls’ schools above Grade 6 in most provinces, excluding Kunar and Zabul.¹⁰¹ Some schools for boys had also been closed due to lack of funds; for example in Shahwalikot, the two schools – both for boys – were closed because one building had been taken over by IEA de-facto authorities as their administrative centre, and the de-facto authorities had converted the other into a madrasa (religious school).¹⁰²

As discussed in Chapter II, households in rural areas who lack land in which they are able to cultivate have become increasingly reliant on income from daily wage labour of men and boys in urban areas. The greatly reducing availability of these income sources due to economic

recession, directly linked to the impact of sanctions imposed by the US and other governments,¹⁰³ further impacted the livelihoods of already struggling households, and increased attempts to make dangerous journeys to Iran and Pakistan to try and earn income. Secondly, and especially in areas where the availability of agricultural land is very little, many boys and men enlisted in the former army, which was found to have been a key income source in one in four of communities assessed. Often, an entire family was supported by the adult male's military salary. When the former government collapsed, this had a profoundly damaging impact on food security, including in highland provinces such as Kunar which were comparatively less drought affected, but faced similar levels of food insecurity in part for this reason.¹⁰⁴



Village in Herat depopulated due to water crisis. DRC, May 2022

Finally, take-over of Afghanistan by IEA has also led to cessation of donor funding for projects that could contribute to mitigating the impact of climate change, which, as explored in Chapter II, is ultimately driving the urgent and escalating needs amongst rural Afghan communities. This includes a \$222.5 million World Bank project to develop early warning and response systems, the Asian Development Bank Arghandab Integrated Water Resources Development project, and a Karez rehabilitation

project funded by International Fund for Agriculture Development and implemented by UNDP and MRRD. Also, Afghanistan's National Environmental Protection Agency will be unable to engage with the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, undermining efforts to understand the effects of climate change in Afghanistan.¹⁰⁵ Yet as will be discussed in this report's final Chapter, these efforts are essential to ensuring the survival of rural Afghanistan.

Shocks in 2021/2

Drought

- Harvests failed or harvest yield dramatically reduced in most communities, leading to intense food insecurity

Conflict

- Widespread displacement due to intensifying conflict through the first half of 2021
- Extreme levels of explosive ordnance contamination in Afghanistan further heightened
- Widespread destruction of shelters and physical infrastructure

Economic and political upheaval

- Afghanistan's economy severely contracts due to withdrawal of international support
- Reduced access to essential services, including health
- IEA members perpetrate revenge killings for personal or political motivations

IV. The Future

Rural communities in Afghanistan have survived through decades of conflict and rupture, yet climate change may be one challenge that decades of conflict and failure of governance has rendered impossible for many to overcome on their own.

Crisis escalation and impacts

As evidenced in this report, dire needs across underserved rural communities in Afghanistan are acutely compounded by recent shocks, but do not stem from them. Instead, a humanitarian emergency was already building for years, primarily due to a water crisis – driven by climate change; compounded by the impacts of decades of conflict; and intensified by the events of 2021. As a result, the surge of emergency humanitarian assistance provided in Afghanistan after the collapse of the former Government will not meaningfully reduce needs in the longer-term; nor can humanitarian partners expect this current level of funding for humanitarian response in Afghanistan, unprecedented in the last decade, to continue for long.¹⁰⁶ Also imperiling the survival of rural communities is the possibility of renewed conflict, which at the time of writing has already broken out in one of the locations assessed in Panjshir, albeit remaining quite localized and limited to sporadic attacks of armed opposition groups on IEA positions.¹⁰⁷ Other key informants in Parwan, Maidan Wardak, and Kapisa mentioned similar fears.¹⁰⁸



Displaced girl in Herat. DRC, May 2022.

The outlook for the coming year in Afghanistan is profoundly discouraging, and longer-term is bleak. Afghanistan had another dry year during the 2021/2 wet season, with even more extensive spread of drought conditions. Despite this, drought has not been officially declared by de-facto authorities, likely contributing to under-reporting of this unfolding catastrophe in media and humanitarian discourse. Afghan communities and families reliant on rainfed lands and/or lacking access to functioning irrigation infrastructure will likely see their harvests completely fail. In

DRC rapid assessments, initial optimism of communities as there was above-average rainfall in the winter turned to acute anxiety as spring rains failed. Having contended with water crisis for years and unable to even begin recovery from the events of 2021, communities simply did not know what they would do next.

“There were eighty families in this village, and this year thirty left due to drought. This year we will have zero harvest again...the people are too poor to afford the cost of leaving. We do not know where we will be in one month from now.”

Arbab (village leader), Ghoryan in Herat, June 2022

Looking further into the future offers little solace: drought conditions look set to become the norm in Afghanistan by 2030, with risk of floods also increasing. Together, this is predicted to drive even further intensifying food insecurity, with famine conditions a credible risk.¹⁰⁹ As rural livelihoods in water crisis-affected areas continue down an increasingly rapid process of collapse, Afghans will continue to be compelled to practice dangerous strategies and coping mechanisms to survive, including movement of men and boys to neighboring countries to attempt to earn income for their families. While solar-powered boreholes and other modern drilling technologies offer some hope for those wealthier households able to construct them, climate change will continue to reduce Afghanistan’s water tables, as highland glaciers melt, and precipitation (rain and snowfall) reduces.¹¹⁰ This is likely to lead to eventual drying of the solar-powered boreholes, as already detected in DRC rapid assessments in Kandahar.¹¹¹ As climate change renders lands incapable of sufficient agricultural activity to support communities, significant depopulation of large swathes of Afghanistan is highly likely. Indeed, as evidenced in the DRC rapid assessments, it has already begun, and is likely to continue to escalate, as households, and sometimes entire communities, affected by two successive years of extremely dry conditions exhaust available coping strategies. In rapid assessments, DRC found credible risk of widespread further displacement due to lack of water and inability to cultivate in almost 30% of communities assessed, particularly in Kandahar, Zabul, and Farah

provinces. Without urgent interventions supporting rural communities – including the poorest and most vulnerable households – to sustainably access water for irrigation, this trend is likely to increase as survival in the most affected regions becomes increasingly difficult.

Yet Afghanistan’s economy does not have capacity to absorb an additional mass of unskilled labourers in urban centres, and is likely to continue to face economic recession, as the country remains cut off from development funding which once sustained it, and internationally isolated under the control of IEA.¹¹² This leaves rural communities, having exhausted all mechanisms to make life livable in their areas, with no-where to go. A future in which Afghans become among the hundreds of millions displaced due to climate change is possible; the overwhelming majority of whom may have few options left aside from seeking refuge in the less-affected countries including in Europe, Australasia, and the Americas.¹¹³ Equally, continued increases in morbidity and mortality in rural areas hit hardest by climate changes and rendered most vulnerable by the complex impacts of conflict is a concerning possibility, with the poorest households who cannot afford even cost of transportation out of the area simply left behind to suffer. During key informant interviews in Arghistan (Kandahar) and Ghoryan (Herat), it was said that often the households left behind when the others had left due to water crisis, were those living virtually hand-to-mouth and could not afford the cost of leaving the area and finding somewhere else to stay.¹¹⁴

Confronting the water crisis

The key challenge facing rural Afghan communities concerns how to adapt to climate change by using responsible watershed management to use existing water resources responsibly, without draining the underground water table (as has happened, repeatedly, with solar-powered boreholes and other infrastructures created through deep drilling technology), thus exacerbating the crisis. As this report has explored, communities are too deep into a struggle for survival to allocate sufficient resources to do this without external support, and technical expertise is needed to combine traditional and innovative techniques to achieve sustainable watershed management.

There is a wealth of academic research offering potential solutions, centering around local, smaller-scale adaption methods which could be directly implemented by aid agencies in close coordination with community leadership.

These include rehabilitation and revitalization of the Karez system,¹¹⁵ and construction of check-dams and water-reservoirs on Afghanistan’s flood rivers. Reforestation, cross-drainage channels, and the introduction of drip/sprinkler irrigation, could also help.¹¹⁶ DRC rapid assessments corroborated these findings on the ground, identifying numerous opportunities for irrigation infrastructure construction which could provide sustainable access to water for crisis-stricken communities in the medium to long term, as long as a conflict-sensitive approach was followed to ensure that different communities in the watershed can benefit equitably from improved water resources. To do this, humanitarian leadership, agencies, and donors must recognize the need to innovate from past practices, reducing focus on emergency response to immediate needs while scaling-up investment in localized watershed management interventions at village and community level.



Women in village in Herat. DRC, October 2022

Principled delivery in rural Afghanistan

Over time, Afghanistan’s fraught environment for aid delivery is likely to become even more complex and challenging, presenting serious obstacles to humanitarian actors wishing to assist remote, rural Afghan communities in an effective manner. Yet it is important to recognize that the architecture of humanitarian response has not greatly altered following the take-over of Afghanistan by IEA; only now, there is no representation from Afghanistan’s national government on design of aid strategies. Humanitarian activities continued to be carried out with the approval of officials – now IEA members – from different line departments, such as DoRR, ANDA, DoE, after project registration was approved by ministry counterparts in Kabul. Often, de-facto officials expected to part of assessment teams in remote, rural communities, drawing

on precedents established under the previous government where officials were usually listed as ‘members’ of inter-agency joint assessment teams. This has some positive, but mostly negative consequences.

As mentioned in Chapter II, IEA has essentially dissolved CDCs and other committees established by humanitarian and development actors, such as the transitional development committees, in some areas.¹¹⁷ Interaction between customary leadership and district government is now largely conducted via a single focal point selected by village elders to interface with the district governor or other de-facto officials at district level, often the village mullah, who is generally preferred by IEA.¹¹⁸ At times, this reduced pressure on DRC assessment teams from village leaders and other influential elders to register non-eligible people, as people involved in customary leadership feared retribution from IEA should they be discovered to be encouraging or attempting to force humanitarian staff to register people who are not vulnerable. Where customary leadership did attempt to interfere with beneficiary selection, for example by demanding certain people were registered for assistance, this was also solved via coordination with de-facto authorities at district level.

However, overall staff conducting the emergency assessments (and responses) which fed into this report faced concerted and alarming pressures from different sides to register people who were not eligible, or less eligible, for humanitarian assistance. These attempts increased in frequency and severity between September and May, and were largely perpetrated by people from IEA. As IEA military and civilian personnel continue to not pay salaries to their military personnel employees, it became increasingly difficult to leverage access agreements made at provincial level to ensure principled access to communities by de-facto authorities at district level. Instead, some increasingly began to make demands to register their own people (often fighters) for assistance, or to provide cash due to absent beneficiaries at a distribution point directly to others selected by de-facto officials. In several cases, agreements reached with district de-facto officials were then challenged on the ground by security personnel, such as police chiefs. In June, DRC had to cancel one assessment in Kandahar entirely due to demands made by district de-facto

authorities to cancel independent assessment and provide assistance only to their nominated people. Finally, demands by de-facto officials at provincial level to include their own nominated people on beneficiary lists have also been made, and reported by DRC to OCHA. Lack of access of women staff to remote, rural communities also complicates the delivery of assistance by limiting direct engagement with vulnerable women and girls.



Houses in village in Arghistan which has been depopulated due to drought. DRC, May 2022.

Delivery of humanitarian assistance in rural and sometimes remote areas will also be threatened should widespread conflict break out again, which may prevent deployment of staff in insecure areas due to safety threats. Finally, restrictions on the deployment of women staff to conduct assessment and response activities directly with communities – partly as a result of restrictions imposed by IEA, and partly because this is not accepted by people in culturally conservative and more remote communities not used to women travelling without *maharam* and occupying positions of authorities – further complicates the inclusion of women in humanitarian assistance, for example restricting the ability of a male staff member to cross-check with a women headed household whether there are other women, like her, who need assistance. This situation is a concerning sign, and if current trends continue, will further complicate delivery of effective humanitarian assistance providing support to the most vulnerable people in crisis-stricken communities.

Conclusions and recommendations

At this critical point for Afghanistan, humanitarian actors must re-consider how humanitarian assistance programs should be designed and implemented.



Recognize that humanitarian assistance is not the solution

The current crisis is not driven by the impact of a particular shock or convergence of shocks; it is ultimately rooted in the interaction of climate change with the accumulated impacts of decades of warfare in Afghanistan. Humanitarian assistance can effectively mitigate suffering for a limited time period, but after people assisted have consumed the assistance, they will not be able to recover on their own; instead facing the same deepening challenges that drive needs.

To DRC and humanitarian partners:

- **Be clear-sighted about the challenges facing rural Afghan communities.** Analyze and engage with communities and field staff to identify the drivers of humanitarian need, and design interventions to durably reduce these needs.
- Given the systemic and long-running nature of the crisis, **balance between immediate response to urgent needs and resilience-focused interventions** which durably reduce vulnerability, including through integration of emergency humanitarian response and early recovery/resilience support to the same communities. This supports partners to **do more with less**; durably addressing humanitarian need will cost less in the long run than repeatedly providing temporary support.
- **Language matters.** Reaching for familiar humanitarian vocabulary to describe complex challenges in Afghanistan obfuscates more than it brings to light, and ultimately contradicts our ability to respond to these challenges.
 - The widespread movement of Afghan boys and men to neighboring countries to find work is not an attempt to advance economically or build new livelihoods; it is an exceedingly dangerous work of survival.
 - Afghanistan is not simply facing drought, but long running and escalating water crisis ultimately rooted in climate change.
 - Afghanistan is not just urgently in need of emergency assistance; emergency and durable forms of support to overcome the water crisis and manage existing water sources sustainably is needed to prevent deaths and human suffering in Afghanistan.

To donors:

- Recognize that the current lack of development framework and will to partner with de-facto authorities amongst the donor community and donor governments does **not** preclude the **resilience-focused support** which is so vitally needed in rural Afghanistan. For example, localized irrigation infrastructure construction and holistic watershed management approaches can be conducted directly by humanitarian partners, in close coordination and agreement with customary leadership.
- **Encourage partners to state what problems and challenges their proposed interventions are intended to address**, and to balance between interventions providing lifesaving and sustaining temporary relief, and interventions addressing the actual drivers of the needs, including and particularly the water crisis.
- In line with the above, provide funding for both immediate response to urgent needs and resilience-focused support, particularly related to watershed management.
- In the absence of national government representation, **include partners and Afghan civil society members** with more presence and connection to realities on the ground to higher-level dialogue sessions and conferences, such as Afghan Red Crescent, international and national NGOs, and Afghan civil society organizations. This reduces the risks associated with important decisions being taken behind closed doors by actors and individuals with limited presence on the ground.



Practice meaningful accountability

Leadership of the Afghanistan humanitarian response has been largely “bunkerized” over the last decade, with even local field staff usually unable to travel outside of larger cities.¹¹⁹ While access has now increased, due to the collapse of the former government high-level decisions surrounding the future of humanitarian and development assistance are taken outside the country, during conferences where Afghans have little or no representation.¹²⁰ Lack of meaningful engagement with rural Afghanistan risks flattening complex, diverse, and inherently dignified communities into a shapeless mass of unmet need. It also renders principled delivery almost impossible, with humanitarian actors failing to navigate complex local dynamics, including questionably accountable or straightforwardly corrupt customary community leadership and aid diversion attempts of de-facto authorities, meaning that aid fails to reach the most vulnerable.

To DRC and humanitarian partners:

- **Recognize that accountability to affected populations is ultimately about power.** Addressing the power imbalance between the vulnerable people we are supposed to serve and the comparatively powerful humanitarian organizations attempting to serve them. This means that essential to upholding accountability are an organization’s accountability culture and values, even more so than specific processes or project components.
 - Ensure that senior staff with decision-making ability – both Afghan and non-Afghan – visit and talk with target communities.
 - Ensure feedback loops between field staff and more senior staff with less field access are in place and regularly used.
 - Clearly define organizational red lines. Educate staff – at all levels – on humanitarian principles, and the rationale for upholding them.
- **Privilege direct selection of beneficiaries by partner staff**, rather than by community leadership, given extensively documented risks of aid diversion when beneficiary selection is done indirectly.
- **Empower and protect field staff** to uphold humanitarian principles and organizational red lines in environments where they will be subject to intense pressure to permit aid to be diverted.
- The challenges facing rural communities are complex and deeply rooted. Ensure that assessments and related data collection exercises includes **analysis of the drivers of the crisis**, beyond simply listing current needs, in order to support more impactful humanitarian assistance.
- **Continuously share evidence and information** through internal and external fora, to advocate on behalf of under-served and poorly understood rural Afghan communities.
- **Undertake more research and analysis** of how deeply rooted solidarity networks and traditions interact with provision of humanitarian aid in Afghanistan, for example by encouraging redistribution of food assistance. Equally, **research and analyze how community leadership structures may interact with humanitarian aid in ways that prevent the most vulnerable from receiving assistance**. There is a need to challenge the primarily Western concepts of good governance that have underpinned the work of humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding actors in relation to community leadership structures in Afghanistan, to understand what works best for the communities we intend to serve. The following reports are recommended:
 - [The Cost of Support to Afghanistan](#) (2020)
 - [Governance in Afghanistan: an Introduction](#) (2014)
 - [Many Shuras Do Not a Government Make](#) (2010)
 - [Do Elected Councils Improve Governance?](#) (2018)
 - [Food Aid in a Collapsed Economy: Relief, tensions, and allegations](#) (2022)

To donors:

- **Hold partners accountable to actively engage with and analyze the contexts in which they are working in rural Afghanistan.** This includes how partners interact with both community leadership and de-facto officials and armed personnel in the field to target and select people for assistance.
- Given that the water crisis is driving needs, **privilege funding for the most affected communities**, often in remote, rural locations with least irrigation infrastructure and diversified livelihoods.



Resilience-focused watershed management must be an integral component of the Afghanistan humanitarian response.

The impact of climate change – compounded by the impacts of decades of conflict - is generating a water crisis in Afghanistan. If unaddressed, this will both drive continuing food insecurity across Afghanistan, and will drive continued population flight from rural areas without access to enough water for irrigation and drinking. It may even lead to depopulation of the country. Construction and rehabilitation of irrigation infrastructure transcends the humanitarian/development provide; because it is essential to prevent humanitarian needs from escalating.

To DRC and humanitarian partners:

- **Actively fundraise for and implement watershed management interventions, including:**
 - Construction of check-dams, gabion walls, and water reservoirs on flood rivers, providing access to irrigation water while reducing risk of floods.
 - To improve waterflow through existing canals, conduct canal headworks, canal lining, and weir and gate rehabilitation; construction or repair of aqueduct, syphon, and other cross-draining structures.
 - Karez rehabilitation, repair, and cleaning; including through construction of small ponds and water barriers using local materials, improving water volume through Karez.
 - Reforestation, trenching, and riverbank protection. Reforestation can also reduce the risk of flooding and landslides.
- Explore options for improving the sustainability and recharge capacity of already-constructed solar-powered boreholes, for example by providing owners of solar powered boreholes with technology to time the release of water to a specific timeframe.
- Ensure that watershed management interventions follow a conflict-sensitive approach to ensure that all communities within the watershed can benefit from improved access to water, and that interventions do not increase tensions or trigger conflict.

To donors:

- **Consider how the impact of climate change is complicating the humanitarian/development divide in Afghanistan**, with communities on the frontline of a crisis generated in industrialized, wealthier countries. Furthermore, consider how the impacts of climate change in Afghanistan are deepened and intensified by years of destructive conflict and failure of governance in Afghanistan – in which many donor countries played a direct role.
- **Engage with, and fund partners directly implementing watershed management** and related interventions in a quality and conflict-sensitive way.

To all:

- **Engage with existing scientific research around watershed management in Afghanistan** to better forge innovative, sustainable solutions. The following reports and research are highly recommended reading:
 - [Afghanistan: an overview of groundwater resources and challenges](#) (2003)
 - [Sustainable Irrigation: Karez system in Afghanistan](#) (2020)
 - [Afghanistan: Climate Change Science Perspectives](#) (2016)
 - [Climate Change and Afghanistan: Drought, Hunger, and Thirst expected to worsen](#) (2021)
 - [Climate Change Catastrophe in Afghanistan](#) (2022)



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- ¹ At least some construction of solar-powered boreholes was reported in more than 60% of communities assessed, with widespread construction of solar-powered boreholes in 32% of communities. In all communities in which there had been widespread construction of solar-powered boreholes, respondents emphasized that this had caused groundwater levels to fall.
- ² Adam Pain, [Growing out of Poverty? Questioning Agricultural Policy in Afghanistan](#) (2019). Afghanistan Analysts Network.
- ³ This group was described as among the most vulnerable (after households with no adult male capable of generating income) in 84% of DRC rapid assessment snapshots.
- ⁴ This was a key finding in all (100%) of DRC rapid assessment snapshots.
- ⁵ Adam Pain and Danielle Huot, [Challenges of Late Development in Afghanistan: The Transformation That Did Not Happen](#) (2018). *Asian Survey* 58 (6): 1111–1135.
- ⁶ DRC Rapid Assessment Snapshot for Wali Muhammad Shahid (May 2022)
- ⁷ DRC Rapid Assessment Snapshot for Alasay (January 2022)
- ⁸ DRC Rapid Assessment Snapshot for Bar Kunar/Asmar (February 2022)
- ⁹ DRC Rapid Assessment Snapshot for Obe (December 2021)
- ¹⁰ DRC Rapid Assessment Snapshot for Nawa (January 2022)
- ¹¹ See also Shukria Azadmanesh and Ihsanullah Ghafoori, [Women's Participation in the Afghan Peace Process](#) (2022), particularly Chapter 2. Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, Case Study.
- ¹² See also Aarya Nijat, [Governance in Afghanistan: an Introduction](#) (2014), particularly 4.7: Customary Governance. Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit.
- ¹³ Where teachers, healthworkers, and other professionals involved in delivery of basic services existed, all (100%) of DRC rapid assessments found them to be generally helpful interlocutors for the purposes of identifying vulnerable households for assistance.
- ¹⁴ Alignment to particular parties, often overlooked in foreign discourses around Afghan identity, is a reality in several communities assessed, including Kohband (Kapisa) and Rukha/Onaba (Panjshir). DRC Rapid Assessment Snapshots for Kohband (March 2022) and Rukha/Onaba (March 2022).
- ¹⁵ See also Nancy Dupree, [Cultural Heritage and National Identity in Afghanistan](#) (2002). *Third World Quarterly* Vol. 23, No. 5, Reconstructing War-Torn Societies: Afghanistan pp. 977-989; Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: a Cultural and Religious History* (2010).
- ¹⁶ See DRC Rapid Assessment Snapshots for Andar (January 2022), Alasay (January 2022), Zinda Jan (June 2022) and Kohband (February 2022).
- ¹⁷ See DRC Rapid Assessment Snapshots for Asmar/Bar Kunar (February 2022), Khas Kunar (January 2022), Narang (June 2022), for examples of this common practice.
- ¹⁸ See DRC Rapid Assessment Snapshots for Obe (December 2021), Pashton Zarghon (January 2022), Arghistan (December 2021), for examples of this common practice.
- ¹⁹ In one minor but illustrative example, DRC women officers in Taghta Pol (Kandahar), asked several women from the village they were conducting an assessment in to lend them prayer mats at about 1pm to pray, well within the religiously mandated afternoon prayer time in Afghanistan. The women villagers, shocked, stated that it was not religiously permissible to pray before 2pm. DRC later learned that the village's Mullah taught classes until 2pm; the Mullah had told villagers prayer time was from 2pm, so that others from the village would not pray before him.
- ²⁰ For more information on Pashtunwali and its complex relationship with Islam, see Ghulam Shams-ur-Rehman, [Pashtunwali and Islam: The Conflict of Authority in the Traditional Pashtun Society](#) (2015). *Pakistan Journal of Political Sciences*, Vol. 35. See also Lutz Rzehak, *Doing Pashto: Pashtunwali as the Ideal of Honorable Behavior and Tribal Life Among the Pashtuns* (2011). Afghanistan Analysts Network.
- ²¹ DRC Rapid Assessment Snapshot for Sueri (February 2022).
- ²² Martine Van Biljert, [Between Hope and Fear. Rural Afghan women talk about peace and war](#) (2021). Afghan Analyst Network Special Report.
- ²³ While the beginning of the Soviet war (1979) is commonly cited as the start of the present conflict period in Afghanistan, it should be noted that conflict affecting Afghanistan started even earlier, including the proxy wars with Pakistan in the 1960s and the coup of Mohammed Daoud Khan in 1973. See for example, Shaista Wahab and Barry Youngerman, *A Brief History of Afghanistan* (2007).
- ²⁴ Azami, Sadat, Hejran, and Sagintayev, [Sustainable Irrigation: Karez Sytem in Afghanistan](#) (2020). *Central Asian Journal of Water Research*, 6(2): 1-18.
- ²⁵ Mhd Assem Mayar, [Droughts on the Horizon: Can Afghanistan Manage the Risk?](#) (2021). Afghanistan Analysts Network.
- ²⁶ Specifically, this is largely driven by variations in temperature in the equatorial pacific ocean, creating the El Nino (colder than usual), and La Nina (warmer than usual), which drives less and more precipitation respectively. See Otto-Bliesner and Stevenson, [ENSO's Changing Influence on Temperature, Precipitation, and Wildfire in a Warming Climate](#) (2018), *Geophysical Research Letters*.
- ²⁷ Mhd Assem Mayar, [Drought on the Horizon: Can Afghanistan Manage the Risk?](#) (2021), Afghanistan Analysts Network.
- ²⁸ Afghanistan National Environmental Protection Agency (NEPA) and UN Environment, [Afghanistan: Climate Change Science Perspectives](#) (2016).

- ²⁹ Jelena Bijelica, [Shrinking, Thinning, Retreating: Afghan glaciers under threat from climate change](#) (2021). Afghanistan Analysts Network.
- ³⁰ Azami, Sadat, Hejran, and Sagintayev, [Sustainable Irrigation: Karez Sytem in Afghanistan](#) (2020). Central Asian Journal of Water Research, 6(2): 1-18.
- ³¹ Mohammad Assem Mayar, Hamidullah Asady, Jonathan Nelson, [River flow analyses for flood projection in the Kabul River Basin](#) (2020), Central Asian Journal of Water Research.
- ³² Azami, Sadat, Hejran, and Sagintayev (2020).
- ³³ Mhd Assem Mayar, [Drought on the Horizon: Can Afghanistan Manage the Risk?](#) (2021), Afghanistan Analysts Network.
- ³⁴ United Nations Development Program, [National Report to the Tenth Session of the United Nations Forum on Forests](#) (2013).
- ³⁵ See Stefanie Glinski for Thomas Reuters Foundation, [Made worse by tree loss, flooding forces migration in Afghanistan](#) (2020); see also United Nations Environment Program, [Post-Conflict Environmental Assessment: Afghanistan](#) (2003).
- ³⁶ Mhd Assem Mayar, [Drought on the Horizon: Can Afghanistan Manage this Risk?](#) (2021). Afghanistan Analysts Network.
- ³⁷ AK Stewart, [Dams in Afghanistan](#) (2016), in book Transboundary Water Resources in Afghanistan (pp.213-268).
- ³⁸ Out of numerous media reports and analysis documenting this issue, see for example Waleed Majidyar for the Diplomat, [Afghanistan and Pakistan's looming water conflict](#) (2018), and Climate Diplomacy, [Transboundary Water Disputes between Afghanistan and Iran](#) (accessed June 2022).
- ³⁹ Vincent W Uhl and Qasem Tahiri, [Afghanistan: an overview of Groundwater resources and challenges](#) (2003)
- ⁴⁰ Asian Development Bank, Preparation of the Afghanistan water resource sector development strategy. Vol. 2 annexes (2015). TA 7994 AFG; [project information available on website](#) (accessed June 2022).
- ⁴¹ Srinivas Chokkakula, [Interrogating Irrigation Inequalities: Canal Irrigation Systems in Injil District](#) (2009). Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit Case Study.
- ⁴² Hans Hurgung and Lucie Pluschke, [The benefits and risks of solar-powered Irrigation – a global overview](#) (2018). Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).
- ⁴³ See DRC Rapid Assessment Snapshots for Khaki Safid (January 2022), Pashto Rod (December 2021), Zhari (February 2022), Takhta Pul (March 2022), Arghistan (December 2021), Shah Wali Kot (January 2022), Khakriz (May 2022), Andar (December 2021), Muqur (March 2022), Nerkh (December 2021).
- ⁴⁴ Key Informant Interviews with two DRC field staff in June 2022; screenshots of social media campaigns on facebook also observed and documented.
- ⁴⁵ See Adam Pain, [Growing out of Poverty? Questioning Agricultural Policy in Afghanistan](#) (2019). Afghanistan Analysts Network. Specifically, the average size of irrigated farm areas has significantly declined, falling from 1.3 hectares to 1.0 hectares per household in the period between 2007/08 and 2016/17, with only 38 per cent of households owning any irrigated land and just over 41 per cent having access to it. Even fewer households either own or have access to rain-fed land. Yet between 2012 and 2014 the proportion of rural households that were landless rose from 32 per cent to 37 per cent. Village-specific data points to much higher levels of landlessness in certain areas, particularly in well irrigated areas.
- ⁴⁶ DRC Rapid Assessment Snapshot for Khakriz (May 2022)
- ⁴⁷ See Thomas Ruttig and Jelena Bjelica, [The State of Aid and Poverty in 2018: A New Look at Aid Effectiveness in Afghanistan](#) (2018). Afghanistan Analysts Network and Joya, Rougia, and Stone, [Understanding the Drivers of Poverty in Afghanistan](#) (2022). Biruni Institute/GIZ.
- ⁴⁸ See Adam Pain, [Growing Out of Poverty? Questioning Agricultural Policy in Afghanistan](#) (2019), Afghanistan Analysts Network; a summary is also available [online](#).
- ⁴⁹ Izabela Leo and Ahmed Mansur, [Jobs from Agriculture in Afghanistan](#) (2018). World Bank, International Development in Focus.
- ⁵⁰ Izabela Leo and Ahmed Mansur (2018). World Bank.
- ⁵¹ S Reza Kazemi, [Eat and Don't Die: Daily-wage labour as a window into Afghan Society](#) (2020). Afghanistan Analysts Network.
- ⁵² Joya, Rougia, and Stone, [Understanding the Drivers of Poverty in Afghanistan](#) (2022). Biruni Institute/GIZ.
- ⁵³ Increasing reliance on daily wage labour to gain income (still insufficient to fulfil all basic needs) was reported by multiple respondents and triangulated with DRC observations in all (100%) of communities assessed.
- ⁵⁴ See for example DRC Rapid Assessment Snapshots for Muqur (March 2022), Nawa (January 2022), Andar (December 2021), and Narang (June 2022). As per DRC's observations and out of the communities assessed by DRC, drug addiction is particularly prevalent in South-Eastern Ghazni, with smaller numbers of drug-addicted people observed in Kunar and Kandahar provinces.
- ⁵⁵ DRC, Kandahar Community Consultations (July 2021). 10 FGD with with internally displaced, returnee, and host community men, women, youth (boys), youth (girls), elderly men, and elderly women in Dand and Daman districts.
- ⁵⁶ Reported in DRC Rapid Assessment Snapshot for Bar Kunar/Asmar (January 2022)
- ⁵⁷ See IOM press release, [Record Cross-Border Migrant Returns Contribute to Bleak Humanitarian Outlook for Afghanistan in 2021](#). Theft of cash and valuable items was also corroborated by DRC staff with daily presence in Herat and Nimroz zero points crossings, where DRC delivers explosive ordnance risk education (EORE) to nearly all those returning.
- ⁵⁸ DRC, We Do This to Survive: Afghan Accounts of Cross-Border Migration (June 2022), piece pending publication. Series of interviews and focus group discussions with men and boys who had undertaken cross-border migration in Nangahar and Herat provinces in May 2022.
- ⁵⁹ See for example, DRC Rapid Assessment Snapshot for Kohi Safi (January 2022), in addition to DRC, We Do This to Survive: Afghan Accounts of Cross-Border Migration (June 2022)

- ⁶⁰ DRC, *We Do This to Survive: Afghan Accounts of Cross-Border Migration* (June 2022)
- ⁶¹ Early marriage was a growing phenomenon described in all but two (Alasay and Besud) DRC Rapid Assessment Snapshots. See also DRC, *Child Marriage in Afghanistan* (March 2022).
- ⁶² See for example, DRC Rapid Assessment Snapshot for Zagiran (March 2022). Also reported to DRC during KII in surrounding villages of Qalat city (May 2022).
- ⁶³ Asia Solutions to Displacement Platform (ADSP), [Re-imagining the Drought Response](#) (2020)
- ⁶⁴ Information reported by OCHA and NRC to CCCM Working Group in April and May 2022.
- ⁶⁵ Noor Ahmad Khalidi, [Afghanistan: Demographic Consequences of War, 1978-1987](#) (1991). Central Asian Survey, Vol 10, No. 3.
- ⁶⁶ DRC Rapid Assessment Snapshots for Gulran (March 2022) and Wali Muhammad Shahid (May 2022).
- ⁶⁷ DRC Nuristan Rapid Assessment (Kamdesh and Bargi Matal districts), March 2022. Semi-structured six key informant interviews (KII) and four focus group discussions (FGD), and direct observations on walks through the assessment area.
- ⁶⁸ Biruni institute, [Understanding the Drivers of Poverty in Afghanistan](#) (2022).
- ⁶⁹ DRC Rapid Assessment Snapshots for Pashto Rod (December 2021) and Wali Muhammad Shahid (May 2022)
- ⁷⁰ [Transparency International. Corruption Perceptions Index](#) (2021).
- ⁷¹ All DRC Rapid Assessment Snapshots found issues of community leadership failing to refer the most vulnerable, in an attempt to privilege family members and other more prominent family members within the community for assistance.
- ⁷² DRC Rapid Assessment Snapshots for Pashto Rod (December 2021) and Wali Muhammad Shahid (May 2022).
- ⁷³ The mapping exercise was done with 31 staff (Emergency Team Leaders and Emergency Officers) working in the following provinces: Kabul, Wardak, Kapisa, Panjshir, Parwan, Ghazni, Zabul, Kandahar, Herat, Farah, Nangahar, and Kunar. Findings summarized in DRC Emergency Workshop Report (June 2022).
- ⁷⁴ In May and June 2022, five KIIs to understand perceptions of transparency of community leadership were conducted with DRC team members responsible for conducting or overseeing emergency assessments and responses. All team members had more than five years' experience working in humanitarian response in their respective areas of Afghanistan.
- ⁷⁵ Kate Clark, [Death List Published: Families of disappeared end a 30 year wait for news](#) (2013). Afghanistan Analyst Network.
- ⁷⁶ IEA attacks against civil society, local activists, and community leaders is well documented. While assassinations of journalists and prominent public figures has attracted more publicity, attacks also targeted categories such as pro-former Government religious leaders, customary community leaders seen as non-aligned or anti-IEA, and local teachers. See Vasja Badalič, *Eliminating "Pernicious Individuals": Civilian Victims of the Afghan Taliban's Targeted Killing Program* (2019); See, for example, Human Rights Watch, *Afghanistan: Targeted Killings of Civilians Escalate* (2021); available at SSRN: [Afghanistan: Targeted Killings of Civilians Escalate | Human Rights Watch \(hrw.org\)](#)
- ⁷⁷ Sarah Chayes, *The Punishment of Virtue: Inside Afghanistan after the Taliban* (2006).
- ⁷⁸ Nemat, Orzala Ashraf, [Local governance in the age of liberal interventionism: governance relations in the post-2001 Afghanistan](#) (2015). PhD Thesis. SOAS, University of London
- ⁷⁹ Beath, Andrew and Christia, Fotini and Enikolopov, Ruben and Enikolopov, Ruben, [Do Elected Councils Improve Governance? Experimental Evidence on Local Institutions in Afghanistan](#) (June 19, 2018). MIT Political Science Department Research Paper No. 2013-24.
- ⁸⁰ Noah Coburn and Shahmahmood Miakhel, [Many Shuras Do Not a Government Make: International Community Engagement with Local Councils in Afghanistan](#) (2010), U.S. Institute of Peace.
- ⁸¹ World Bank, *District Governance in Afghanistan: DDAs and ASOPs—Policy Issues and Challenges* (2011), World Bank, World Bank Discussion Paper, March 29, 2011, 7.
- ⁸² For an insightful analysis of how these dynamics negatively impacted the accountability of governance at a national and sub-national scale, see Kate Clark, [The Cost of Support to Afghanistan: Considering Inequality, poverty, and lack of democracy through the 'rentier state' lens](#) (2020). For a more granular look at how these dynamics played out across communities, see Ashley Jackson, [Politics and Governance in Afghanistan: the Case of Kandahar](#) (2015), Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, Working Paper 34; Noah Coburn, [Merchant-Warlords: Changing Forms of Leadership in Afghanistan's Unstable Political Economy](#) (pp. 121-132) in M Nazif Shahrani, *Modern Afghanistan: The Impact of 40 years of War* (2018). Indiana University Press, and Sarah Chayes, *The Punishment of Virtue: Inside Afghanistan after the Taliban* (2006).
- ⁸³ KII with DRC South field staff. In May and June 2022, five KIIs to understand perceptions of transparency of community leadership were conducted with DRC team members responsible for conducting or overseeing emergency assessments and responses. All team members had more than five years' experience working in humanitarian response in their respective areas of Afghanistan.
- ⁸⁴ Ibid
- ⁸⁵ Adam Pain, [Living With Radical Uncertainty in Rural Afghanistan: The work of survival](#) (2022). Afghanistan Analysts Network.
- ⁸⁶ DRC, *Kandahar Community Consultations* (July 2021). DRC, *Herat Community Consultations* (July 2021) - 12 FGD and 6 KII with internally displaced, returnee, and host community men, women, youth (boys), youth (girls), elderly men, and elderly women, including people living with disabilities in Herat city, Karukh, and Injil districts; and DRC, *Nangahar Community Consultations* (July 2021) - 24 FGD with men and women from returnee, host community, and internally displaced population groups in Behsud, Sukhrod, and Kama districts.

⁸⁷ Peter Ellis and Mark Roberts, [Leveraging Urbanization in South Asia : Managing Spatial Transformation for Prosperity and Livability](#) (2016). World Bank.

⁸⁸ DRC Rapid Assessment Snapshots: Kushk-e-Rabat Sangi, Khaki Safid, Khakriz, Seuri, Bar Kunar, Wali Muhammad. Note, the incident in Wali Muhammad was linked to Soviet-era (legacy) contamination.

⁸⁹ Information from DMAC report, February 2022. DRC deployed a quick response team to Obe shortly after and also provided explosive ordnance risk education (EORE).

⁹⁰ This was directly discovered by DRC emergency staff during a monitoring visit during March 2022. The unexploded ordnance in the village was referred to partner HALO and removed.

⁹¹ A national drought was officially declared by the [Government of Afghanistan on 23 June 2021](#), with 80% of the country classified as either severe or serious drought status. See also IFRC 2021, [Press Release: Afghanistan – Worst Drought and Hunger Crisis in Decades](#).

⁹² International Research Institute for Climate and Society (Columbia University), [Afghanistan forecast and precipitation data](#), accessed Feb 2022

⁹³ WFP, UNEP and NEPA, [Climate Change in Afghanistan: What does it mean for rural livelihoods and food security](#) (2015)

⁹⁴ FEWSNET [Key Messages Update](#), May 2022

⁹⁵ These issues were reported by DRC to OCHA, and due to the sensitivity of the information, are not further elaborated here.

⁹⁶ For a detailed examination of these issues and related dynamics, see recent research by Martine van Bijlert, [Food Aid in a Collapsed Economy: Relief, tensions, and allegations](#) (2022). Afghanistan Analysts Network.

⁹⁷ In community consultations (focus group discussions) held in formerly highly insecure villages near to Maidan Shahr, capital of Maidan Wardak province, there was a striking mood of optimism expressed by respondents (all male). For example: “*People in this community think that by establishing the new government... the situation will stabilize and will get better as recently we see the conflict has been ended in Afghanistan*” [host community man, Ghunda Khail village]; “*Before [the collapse of the former government] there were many problems when carrying cash from village to the city or from the city to village, with... theft in the main ways, currently the situation is stabilized everyone feeling safe while carrying cash to every point of the village* [host community man, Dawood Khan village]. Source: DRC Community Consultations – Maidan Wardak (2021).

⁹⁸ Widely reported in DRC Rapid Assessment Snapshots, including Bar Kunar/Asmar (February 2022), Nerkh (December 2021), Kohi Safi (February 2022), Pashtun Zarghon (January 2022), Obe (December 2021), Kush-e-Rabat Sangi (February 2022), Shah Wali Kot (January 2022).

⁹⁹ See international media reporting, including BBC, [Afghanistan: World Bank halts aid after Taliban takeover](#) (published August 2021, accessed June 2022)

¹⁰⁰ UNICEF, [Humanitarian Situation Report for No.5 for 1-30 April 2022](#).

¹⁰¹ DRC Rapid Assessment Snapshots for Qalat (February 2022), and Khas Kunar (January 2022). Note, the information was accurate at time in which the reports were written and relates to localized agreements to keep schools for girls open, which in the case of Qalat, primarily related to the fact that girls attending the school were from families from other provinces of Afghanistan, while most of the resident community do not send their girls to school.

¹⁰² DRC Shah Wali Kot Rapid Assessment Snapshot (March 2022).

¹⁰³ See Human Rights Watch, [Afghanistan: Economic Roots of the Humanitarian Crisis](#) (2022).

¹⁰⁴ See DRC Rapid Assessment Snapshots for Zhari (February 2022), Zagiran (March 2022), Khas Kunar (January 2022), Asmar/Bar Kunar (February 2022), and Qalat (February 2022).

¹⁰⁵ Mhd Assem Mayar, [The Climate Change Crisis in Afghanistan: The catastrophe worsens – what hope for action](#) (2022). Afghanistan Analysts Network.

¹⁰⁶ The 2021 HRP of \$868.7 million was 77% funded, owing in part to a surge of funds delivered for humanitarian assistance following take-over of Afghanistan by IEA in August, while so far \$1.4 billion has been funded of the \$4.44 billion requested under the HRP 2022. The amount of funding provided already under the HRP for 2022 is more than three times higher what was funded between 2018 and 2022, and the funding requirements of the 2022 HRP exceed total funding provided under the HRPs of the last eight years. Source: [OCHA Financial Tracking Services, Afghanistan](#) (accessed June 2022).

¹⁰⁷ Information from debriefing of DRC staff conducting assessments and responses to households displaced from Panjshir into Bazarak (Panjshir provincial capital) and Parwan province.

¹⁰⁸ See DRC Rapid Assessment Snapshots for Rukha and Onaba (March 2022), Hisa Awal, Tagrab, and Najrab (January 2021), Behsud (December 2021).

¹⁰⁹ WFP, UNEP and NEPA, [Climate Change in Afghanistan: What does it mean for rural livelihoods and food security](#) (2015)

¹¹⁰ The climate science behind precipitation prediction is evolving, and different regions of Afghanistan will likely experience different changes over the next century. While overall decreases are forecasted, the North-East region is likely to experience increase in precipitation, while the Southern region will experience a marked decrease. Source: Arhat, Kashifi, Jamal, et al, [Spatiotemporal projections of precipitation and temperature over Afghanistan based on CMIP6 global climate models](#) (2022).

¹¹¹ DRC Rapid Assessment Snapshot – Khakriz, Kandahar (May 2022)

¹¹² For a detailed analysis of the dependency of Afghanistan’s economy and state under the former government and the devastating impact of its withdrawal post-collapse of the previous Government, see Kate Clark, [Killing the Goose that Laid the Golden Egg: Afghanistan’s economic distress post-15 August](#) (2021). Afghanistan Analyst Network, Reports.

¹¹³ Kanta Kumari Rigaud et al, [Groundswell : Preparing for Internal Climate Migration](#) (2018). World Bank.

¹¹⁴ Key informant interviews with three community members (two women, one man) in Ghoryan and three members (women) in Arghistan, done by Kabul-based staff during assessment monitoring activities.

¹¹⁵ Azami, Sadat, Hejran, and Sagintayev, [Sustainable Irrigation: Karez Sytem in Afghanistan](#) (2020). Central Asian Journal of Water Research, 6(2): 1-18.

¹¹⁶ Mhd Assem Mayar, [The Climate Change Crisis in Afghanistan: The catastrophe worsens – what hope for action](#) (2022). Afghanistan Analysts Network.

¹¹⁷ DRC KII with staff and community leaders in Herat and Kandahar (May/June 2022), suggests this has taken place in these provinces. However, this situation may vary across Afghanistan, and a [call for proposals](#) has recently been announced by UNOPS, the scope of work of which includes strengthening of the CDCs.

¹¹⁸ KII with DRC staff on community leadership and interaction with humanitarian actors, May 2022

¹¹⁹ See Sarah Collinson and Mark Duffield, [Paradoxes of Presence: Risk Management and Aid Culture in Challenging Environments](#) (2013), Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) and Overseas Development Institute (ODI).