

THE KNOWLEDGE HOUSE



AFGHANISTAN COUNTRY REPORT

THE STATE OF THE HUMANITARIAN SYSTEM 2026



Afghans receive rations distributed by the National Disaster Preparedness Office in Kabul, Afghanistan.

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3. FINDINGS

The findings of the research are structured around key thematic areas that shaped humanitarian action in Afghanistan over 2022–2025. These include gender in humanitarian action; the impact of international sanctions on humanitarian operations; the application of humanitarian principles and associated operational compromises by aid organisations; the implications of 2025 funding cuts on humanitarian operation; systemic and bureaucratic barriers to humanitarian response; and the localisation of humanitarian aid delivery in Afghanistan.

3.1. Gender in humanitarian action

Women and men were affected differently by the crisis in Afghanistan, and the extent to which humanitarian action was gender-responsive, fair and inclusive of women, men, girls and boys varied across programmes and provinces.

3.1.1. Women's and girls' access to humanitarian assistance

Access to humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan was shaped significantly by social gender norms, community-level power relations and the operational context within which aid organisations operated. This resulted in uneven and a gender-skewed reach. Evidence from female FGD participants, community leaders and humanitarian staff consistently indicates that these dynamics influenced who was identified, prioritised and ultimately reached for humanitarian organisations, often limiting women's access to humanitarian assistance that was responsive to their needs.



Access to humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan was shaped significantly by social gender norms, community-level power relations and the operational context within which aid organisations functioned.

'... ours is a women-headed household and I, being a woman, cannot interact with non-Mahram male aid worker. Our family does not allow and also if I interact with non-Mahram male aid worker or have our house surveyed by only male aid worker the community people will talk about my character – they might say that this lady brought male aid workers to her house while there was no adult male at home.'

Female FGD participant

Humanitarian interventions addressing gender, protection (including gender-based violence), rights-based advocacy and women's empowerment often underwent additional review processes during project registration with the Ministry of Economy (MoEc) and during the subsequent signing of memoranda of understanding (MoUs) with line ministries. In some cases, approvals were delayed and required additional clarifications. Such procedural requirements affected the delivery of timely, principled, needs-based and gender responsive humanitarian assistance.

'... Processing MoUs with line ministries took about two months for us. This also depends on the nature of the project; any project focused on women takes more time and there are a lot of queries about planned interventions and beneficiaries.'

Representative of a women-led organisation

These procedural requirements along with the funding constraints, has contributed to limiting the availability and scope of protection, gender-equality and women's empowerment services for women and girls, even though their humanitarian needs increased. According to the Afghanistan Protection Cluster (2024), the demand for protection services continued to rise, with the number of individuals requiring such support increasing from 13.3 million in 2024 to 14.2 million in 2025. Several national organisations reported deprioritising or scaling back their gender and protection-focused programming due to anticipated delays and uncertainties in the approval process, along with the implementation challenges. On the other hand, livelihood and economic empowerment activities remain feasible to implement, and the approval processes remained less complicated.

'... we previously used to have a lot of women empowerment and protection projects and initiatives in rural areas. Which, we had to drop because of the restrictions and difficulties of getting the required approval obtained.'

National NGO representative

These procedural requirements narrowed the scope of assistance to reach women and girls and weakened the humanitarian system's capacity to provide gender-responsive humanitarian support, especially protection services. Key informants also noted a significant decline in the overall number of organisations specialised in delivering protection and women's empowerment services since 2021. Many organisations, often women-led, were not able to adapt to the evolving procedural requirements, operational challenges, and the difficulties in securing funding after 2021, leading to suspension of their activities. Those still active had to significantly reduce the scope of their work.

'We are the only organisation implementing protection programme in this province, have struggled to keep it going ... difficult to secure funding and it's very, very difficult to operate.'

Representative of a women-led organisation

Key informants believed that protection programmes, particularly those focused on violence against women, were among the most severely affected by the funding cuts made in 2025 by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). These cuts diminished the already limited availability of protection and women's empowerment services, meaning survivors of violence had even less access to safe spaces, psychosocial support and case management.

Access to aid for women and girls was further constrained by community power structures. For example, male community leaders (*Arbab*, *Malik* and *Wakil-e-Guzar*)¹ dominated the targeting process, acting as gatekeepers for humanitarian aid to determine who was seen and heard, and ultimately who received aid.

'... aid organisations are completely dependent on community leaders in order to reach women and girls in community. They are either collecting details of eligible women and girls from community leaders or asking community leader to gather all eligible women and girls in Wakil-e-Guzar's house or Masjid ... I didn't see any independent initiative by aid organisations to reach vulnerable women and girls in community.'

Female FGD participant

FGD respondents, especially women, repeatedly described how initial lists of eligible households for humanitarian aid were compiled by community leaders, often behind closed doors and without any consultation. Women who felt shy, restricted by cultural norms or fearful of being misunderstood by community members were often less likely to approach these leaders. As a result they become invisible within the humanitarian response system. Even the inclusion of women known to be vulnerable – such as widows, women-headed households or those with absent or ill husbands – predominantly depended on whether community leaders chose to prioritise them for humanitarian aid.



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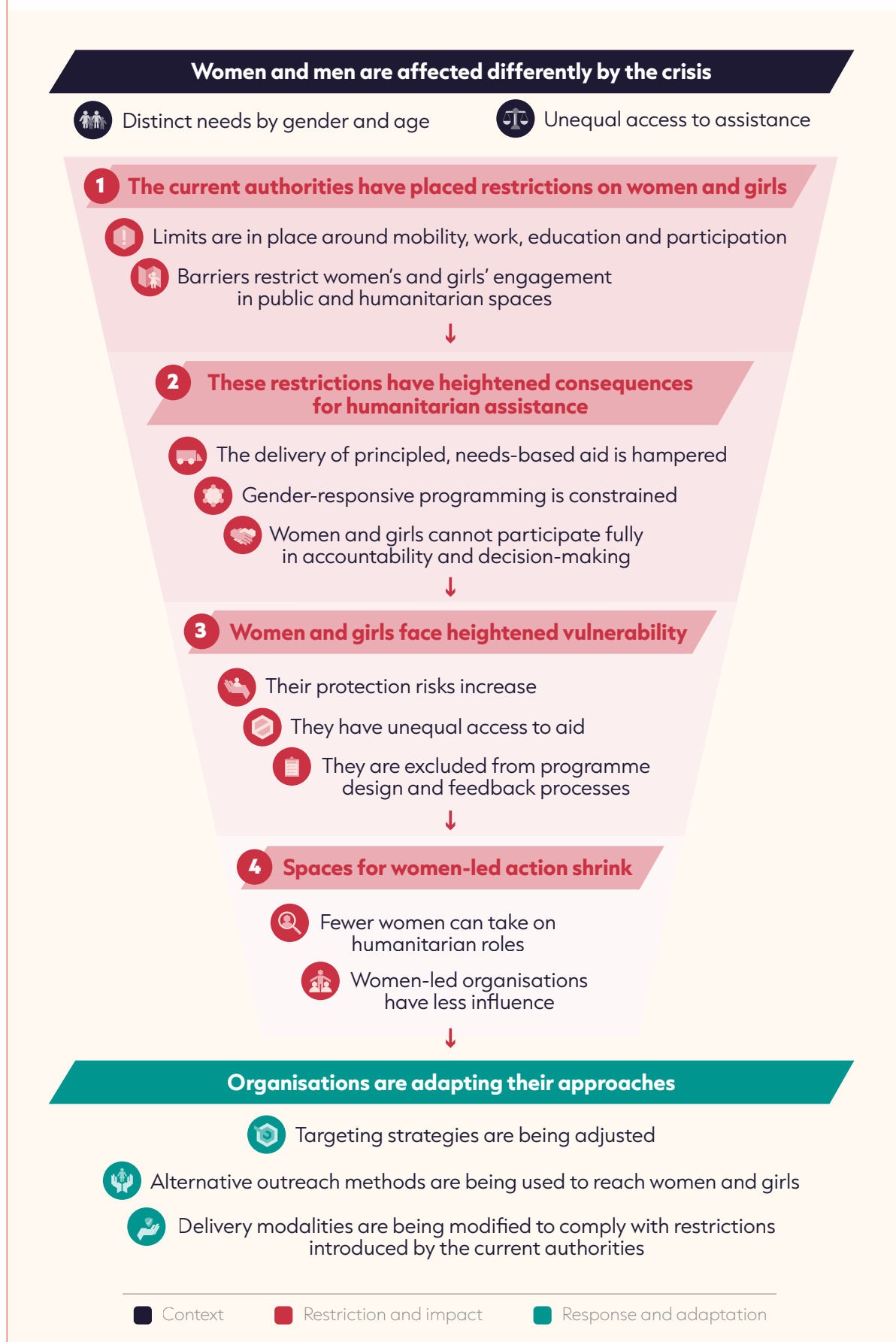
'There is a lot of aid, but Wakil-e-Guzar is only considering his relatives for the available humanitarian aid. The aid organisations are coming to our community, but the community leader is only listing his close relatives as eligible vulnerable households. The aid organisations are not doing household survey by themselves to assess and identify eligible households for humanitarian aid.'

Female FGD participant

With aid organisations often relying on community leaders for targeting, eligibility was shaped by men's prevailing perceptions, not women's lived experiences. This was particularly true for those in need of protection services. Women's needs were often filtered through male gatekeepers, and therefore women who lacked strong social connections, especially with community leaders, were potentially excluded.

¹ Community leaders are called *Arbab* in northern, central and western parts of the country; *Malik* in southern and southeastern regions; and *Wakil-e-Guzar* in urban areas.

Figure 1: The gendered impact of the crisis in Afghanistan



The humanitarian response became less equitable and accountable as a result.

'... many women do not feel comfortable to go to Arbab's house and ask him to include their household for humanitarian aid. They feel shy or are afraid of being misunderstood by the community, so they don't go and are not benefiting from humanitarian aid.'

Female FGD participant

3.1.2. Adaptive measures by aid organisations to reach women and girls

From August 2021, humanitarian organisations adopted a range of adaptive measures to continue reaching women and girls. However, aid workers perceived these adaptations as uneven (i.e. varying from one province to another) and often insufficient to meet the scale of need.

To allow female staff to continue operating, all aid organisations recruited female field aid workers as husband-and-wife teams or they ensured the presence of paid *Mahrams*² to accompany female aid workers. They also arranged separate transportation and seating for female staff. These measures allowed female staff to remain present in the field, albeit with reduced mobility and with higher logistical burdens and operating costs.

'In line with local cultural and religious considerations, for reaching women and girls through female aid workers, the aid organisations need to recruit women who are experienced in delivering aid delivery and are educated in that field. However, they should be accompanied by their Mahrams. They should have Sharee (Islamic) Hijab and should only travel to field when they are accompanied by their Mahrams.'

Senior provincial authority

Where direct contact with women was restricted, even by female aid workers, male household members were trained to transfer knowledge to women and girls. But this led to uncertainty as to whether the information conveyed through male family members reached the intended women in the household and concern over the effectiveness of outreach.

'... female aid workers were not able to gather women in one place to conduct some trainings and orientations required for some projects such as orientation on backyard poultry, kitchen garden and others. In such cases, trained the Mahrams of female beneficiaries anticipating that they will transfer the gained knowledge and skills to the women in their household. Since we cannot train women directly it can have impact on the quality of the project.'

Regional Food Security and Agriculture Cluster (FSAC) representative

In some cases, smaller-scale and home-based activities were organised in safe places instead, such as the houses of *Maliks*, *Arbabs* and *Wakil-e-Guzars*. But this too relied on male gatekeepers (community leaders) to facilitate the gathering of women.

² An aid worker's husband or another adult male relative who could not be married to the woman, such as their father, brother, uncle or other family member.

'The aid organisation organised vocational training in Arbab's house. I think this was really good for all women, because we felt comfortable going to Arbab's house in our community instead of going to an official venue for training or a place outside the area where we live.'

A Woman FGD Participant

Organisations also avoided collecting personal details or photographs of women and girls, instead registering male household members and reaching women through their male relatives.

Most organisations adjusted their project designs to facilitate smoother approval (e.g. MoEc registration and MoUs). They reframed women's empowerment, gender and protection activities using general humanitarian terminology, and embedding women's needs within broader humanitarian interventions such as food security, livelihoods or mental health support. These adaptations allowed aid organisations to continue supporting women, but they narrowed the ambition of assistance – transformative gender programming was largely replaced by survival-oriented interventions. In practice, livelihood and economic empowerment activities for women generally remained more feasible to implement and are often readily accepted within the current context, with approval processes for such interventions tending to be relatively more straightforward.



Adaptations allowed aid organisations to continue supporting women, but they narrowed the ambition of assistance – transformative gender programming was largely replaced by survival-oriented interventions

3.2. Impact of international sanctions on humanitarian operations

The scale and scope of humanitarian assistance were significantly reduced due to international sanctions after the Taliban takeover. While sanctions were designed to restrict the flow of resources to the current authorities, their practical effects cascaded across the entire humanitarian system, constraining operations, shrinking budgets and limiting the capacity of organisations to deliver life-saving assistance.



Long-term projects focusing on livelihoods, food security, returnees and other areas were halted almost overnight

Key informants consistently described how long-term projects focusing on livelihoods, food security, returnees and other areas were halted almost overnight. Donors withdrew funding, and left organisations with partially implemented projects, unreimbursed costs and no pathway to continue services. This sudden change forced aid organisations to

lay-off their trained workforce, which affected their institutional capacity and potentially undermined service delivery.

'After 2021, sweeping changes occurred ... unfortunately we were forced to make difficult decisions ... [this] included workforce reductions and scaling down of projects.'

Representative of a women-led organisation



Donors shifted compliance responsibilities onto local actors without providing adequate support.

Sanctions introduced layers of vetting, compliance and oversight too. Donors required their implementing partners to screen staff, suppliers and contractors against sanctions lists. Aid organisations had to submit *Tazkiras* (national IDs), business registrations for their suppliers and detailed documentation for every individual involved in a project. Multiple UN agencies maintained their own vetting systems, which created duplication, delays and confusion. National NGOs, especially smaller and women-led groups, often lacked the administrative systems to meet these requirements. Respondents from national NGOs described the vetting burden as a form of risk transfer, where donors shifted compliance responsibilities onto local actors without providing adequate support.

'The impact is more on national NGOs, because now there is a higher level of check and scrutiny from all their donors, for example we have to vet all their staff and suppliers regularly, which is not a simple process. For this they will have to submit Tazkiras and business registration of all their suppliers – we are checking it against the black-listed individuals. We even check the list of beneficiaries periodically to ensure no aid is provided to those in the UN blacklists.'

Shelter and Non-food Item Cluster Representative

Restrictions on the banking sector introduced as part of the international sanctions compounded the operational challenges experienced by humanitarian actors. Limitations on international transactions meant that aid organisations had to comply with extensive due-diligence procedures in donor countries. These requirements were largely unworkable for national aid organisations unable to open foreign-currency accounts outside Afghanistan. Organisations also struggled to access or transfer funds in US dollars, while mandatory currency conversion to Afghani at unfavourable rates led to substantial exchange losses.³ Cash withdrawal ceilings and payment processing delays further disrupted procurement, staffing and contractor payments, which slowed implementation and reduced the volume and timeliness of humanitarian assistance reaching communities.

³ The difference often ranged from 3–6 Afghani per US\$ (e.g. comparing [DataViz - Afghanistan](#) with [SARAFI.AF | USD-AFN Rate](#)).

'The banking issue is still there, when there is a USD transition the banks will not give you USD instead, they will give you equivalent Afghanis and the exchange rate is much lower than the market. So, there is an exchange loss in USD transactions.'

Shelter and Non-food Item Cluster representative

Cluster representatives also noted that compliance to sanction-related guidelines required that sensitive data⁴ must not be shared with the current authorities, which made it difficult for them to collaborate with them. Some respondents reported ambiguity regarding the level of engagement allowed, with some clusters facing donor pushback for involving the current authorities in technical processes such as Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) analysis, which required data input from the current authorities.

'There's no consensus on how to engage with authorities, to be very honest. Last year we were doing IPC analysis, trying to bring together data and were working with Public Nutrition Department. There were concerns expressed about their participation and the donor said, no, I cannot put my money if you have PND in the meeting.'

Nutrition Cluster representative

3.3. Humanitarian principles and operational compromises by aid organisations

The responses from KIs and FGDs show that core humanitarian principles particularly independence, impartiality and neutrality were frequently challenged within the humanitarian environment in Afghanistan. For aid organisations to maintain access and remain operational, engagement with relevant authorities and local actors was often necessary. Sustaining field presence sometimes required practical adjustments that could, in some cases, make it more difficult to fully uphold strict interpretations of principled humanitarian action.

Respondents reported that maintaining access while upholding independence was a major operational challenge and that this was a recurring concern for aid organisations. All humanitarian aid providers we spoke with described a pragmatic trade-off where, to remain operational, they had to engage and negotiate with district and provincial authorities. These interactions were not merely administrative; they could also influence where projects were implemented, who received aid and staffing arrangements, for example.



Sustaining field presence sometimes required practical adjustments that could, in some cases, make it more difficult to fully uphold strict interpretations of principled humanitarian action.

⁴ Sensitive data varied from one donor to another, but this broadly included survey data and information concerning target communities.

Concerns around the independence of the humanitarian response were increased by additional procedural requirements applied to projects involving or targeting women and girls. Key informants reported delayed MoUs or project registrations until certain requirements related to programming for women and girls were clarified. Some district authorities narrowly interpreted the exception for female aid workers as applying only to emergency or health-related activities, which limited the implementation of the rest of humanitarian projects other than health and emergency in some cases. Responding to situations as such, aid organisations sometimes adjusted their programme designs, replaced female aid recipients with male relatives or in certain instances opted not to operate in specific districts altogether. While pragmatic, these adaptations were sometimes seen as having implications for the independence of humanitarian decision-making.

'Last year we had a project in [...]. The local authorities did not allow our female aid workers to work in the community or travel to this district. We tried to negotiate this with the authorities and have also tried to solve it through other provincial departments, which did not work. In the end, we have switched to another district where the authorities allowed our female aid workers and have stopped working in this district.'

Representative of a women-led organisation

Key informants expressed their concerns about the challenges they faced in targeting decisions at the district levels, where certain concessions were reportedly made, mainly in target community selection, to facilitate smooth project implementation and reduce the risk of delays in project implementation. For example, district authorities were involved in identifying project locations within target districts. Three out of nine interviewees from aid organisations reported that lists of aid-recipient households were expanding, and two reported substituting female participants in training activities to ensure compliance with local authorities requirements. These measures were perceived as practical adaptations within a complex operational environment having affected the impartiality of aid delivery. Respondents felt that the humanitarian principle of providing assistance solely based on need was affected when target villages were changed or lists of aid recipients were expanded.



While pragmatic, these adaptations were sometimes seen as having implications for the independence of humanitarian decision-making.

'The districts are identified by us when we are preparing the project proposal or in some cases, probably in most of the cases, the districts are pre-identified by donors in their [request for proposals]. However, when we go for implementing the project in a target district the target villages are then introduced by district authorities and we or other aid agencies don't have any say in that.'

National NGO representative

National aid organisations were considered as operating from a vulnerable position. They often had less leverage, visibility and direct donor backing than international organisations, which limited their ability to negotiate certain demands. They highlighted that navigating current authorities expectations – such as recommendations on staffing, procurement or households selection – required careful management to avoid potential project delays and other complications. Despite these, many tended to prioritise constructive engagement with current authorities and explored practical ways to maintain momentum while protecting their operational independence as much as possible.

On the other hand, respondents noted that international organisations generally held a stronger position in access negotiations and engaging with the current authorities. This was rooted in stronger donor support, bigger organisational size, and greater political weight. Despite this perception, though, international organisations also struggled to maintain principled humanitarian operations and were required to constantly negotiate with authorities, display careful diplomacy and make strategic adjustments to their programmes.

3.4. Implications of the 2025 funding cuts on humanitarian operations



The abrupt reduction in financing forced aid organisations to rapidly scale back their humanitarian programmes, lay off staff and narrow the focus of their activities.

All key informants reported that the USAID budget cut in 2025 – and overall funding reductions of approximately 35% of total humanitarian funding – led to immediate, far-reaching and destabilising effects for both aid organisations and communities. The abrupt reduction forced aid organisations to rapidly contract their humanitarian interventions, which included scaling back programmes, laying off staff and narrowing their focus.

A wide range of programmes were halted mid-implementation, especially those aimed at livelihoods, women's vocational training, animal husbandry, nutrition and community health. Most respondents reported not having any phase-out period, leaving vulnerable people unsupported and eroding community trust in aid actors. Protection interventions suffered some of the worst setbacks, especially among services addressing violence against women and those focusing on women's economic empowerment.

'So basically, the protection or the ending violence against women programme was most affected because that was solely, or at least one of their biggest projects solely relying on USAID funding.'

Gender in Humanitarian Action Working Group Representative

National and international aid organisations and UN agencies reported losing large numbers of their skilled workforce. Female staff were perceived as having been disproportionately affected – restrictions on women's work had already limited their roles and the funding cuts accelerated their redundancy.

The funding cuts also triggered major structural changes in humanitarian coordination at both national and sub-national levels. With most of the national and regional cluster coordinators reported to have been laid off, the system transitioned from a network of 14 clusters and working groups to a new model of 7 area-based centres, intended to integrate humanitarian coordination with basic human needs functions. This shift, planned in 2024, was accelerated by the USAID budget cuts.

'So, we have basically overall, in architecture terms, humanitarian architecture has proved out a lot, streamlined the clusters from like 13, 14 working groups. We have six now. So really made it much smaller. And the big one we are trying to do is to really bring the humanitarian and the basic human needs together.'

Humanitarian Country Team representative



Emergency food distributions and cash transfers – previously lifelines for vulnerable families – were reportedly stopped.

At the community level, FGD participants described a dramatic decline in aid over the previous seven months, with many communities reporting a complete end to assistance except for limited support to returnees. Emergency food distributions and cash transfers – previously lifelines for vulnerable families – were reportedly stopped.

'In my case, after the aid was stopped, I am really in difficult situation to feed my children.'

Female FGD participant, Nangarhar

3.5. Systematic barriers to humanitarian operations

All aid providers we spoke to were of the opinion that humanitarian operations were significantly constrained by evolving administrative approvals and procedures prior to starting a project implementation, which undermined the timeliness and effectiveness of the humanitarian response. With the exception of immediate emergency responses, all other humanitarian projects were required to go through a complex sequence of administrative approvals prior to implementation.

'For immediate emergency response projects, we get a letter from MoEc in a short period of time and present it to a committee formed in the affected area and start our work. Except for this, all other projects require going through the standard process of MoEc project registration and MoUs.'

National NGO representative

Only after completing MoEc project registrations and signing MoUs could aid organisations process provincial-level authorisations to begin implementation. According to respondents, this created significant procedural barriers, with approval processes often taking several months.

'... there is a lot of bureaucracy involved at the sectoral ministries in Kabul. A lot of ifs and buts and why this and why not that are asked by the officials at the ministries ... If the project is short-term, or targets girls and women then it may take up to 4 or 5 months.'

Shelter and Non-food Item Cluster representative

Project size and budget were also perceived as influencing MoEc and MoU approvals. Projects with substantial administrative and operational budgets, often implemented by international aid organisations, were subject to closer review. Also, urban-based interventions were, in some cases, subject to additional clarification, with authorities at times encouraging a greater focus on rural areas. In contrast, infrastructure-focused projects were approved more rapidly.

'From my experience, if the project has a construction component or is an infrastructure project in nature such as building school, road, bridge, clinic or others it takes up to 2 months to have the MoUs with line ministries. But if the project is short-term, or target girls and women then it may take up to 4 or 5 months.'

Shelter and Non-food Item Cluster representative

Provincial-level authorisation was considered more straightforward. This focused on beneficiary targeting, the composition of project teams (especially the presence of female aid workers) and the selection of target districts.

3.6. Localisation

National aid organisations took on a greater role in Afghanistan's humanitarian ecosystem throughout the study period, which respondents viewed as a process of localisation driven by necessity. Key informants felt that localisation did not happen on equitable terms, leaving national aid organisations to carry operational risk while holding less influence.



Localisation did not happen on equitable terms.

National aid organisations were considered more flexible, familiar with local customs and better able to negotiate access with the current authorities compared to international organisations. However, they were subject to greater scrutiny from their donors regarding compliance and influence by the current authorities. Because of their limited negotiating power, national aid organisations were perceived as being more susceptible to entertaining recommendations made by current authorities.

'... national aid organisations had a significant growth in the past few years. National aid organisations adopted certain operational procedures which made them much more effective compared to international aid organisations. They have expanded their scope of work and geographical access and have adopted measures that are cost effective.'

Senior authority

UN agencies and large international NGOs relied heavily on national organisations as implementing partners. This created opportunities for Afghan organisations to access funding and expand their footprint, but partnerships were hierarchical – national aid organisations had to go through multiple and overlapping vetting systems, comply with strict donor requirements and bear heavy documentation burdens.

These requirements overwhelmed smaller organisations that lacked formal structures. Some respondents noted that only pre-vetted NGOs were eligible for partnerships, creating a closed ecosystem that disadvantaged newer or smaller Afghan organisations.

'... we partner with women-led organisations, mainly the ones who have certain years of experience. That's because of our policies. We're required to partner with NGOs that have been established for X amount of time, and have certain policies and systems already in place. But then we felt what else can we do to help the smaller organisations who don't have all these requirements in place.'

Gender in Humanitarian Action Working Group representative



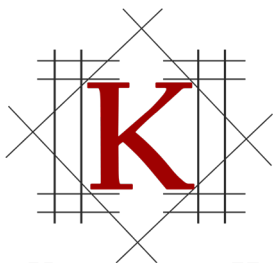
International agencies held decision-making power, while national aid organisations shouldered operational risks.

National aid organisations were present in various forums and meetings, contributing to priority-setting and bringing local perspectives into humanitarian planning, yet their influence remained limited. They (especially women-led organisations) were often excluded from high-level coordination with the current authorities, and they relied on international agencies to resolve disputes. National organisations saw localisation efforts as being operational in nature rather than strategic, as they were delivering more aid but without the opportunity or power to shape the system.

'We usually process the MoEc registration and MoUs by ourselves. In most of the cases the MoUs are signed without any major issue. However, MoUs with some ministries are getting complicated and take too long. In such cases we discuss the issue with our donors, mainly UN agencies, who then intervene and speed up the process.'

National NGO representative

Respondents reported that national aid organisations played a critical role in delivering humanitarian aid under unequal conditions and with limited autonomy. International agencies held decision-making power, while national aid organisations shouldered operational risks. Key informants from national organisations expressed their view that funding is needed alongside structural changes in coordination and engagement with local authorities in order to strengthen localisation and ensure Afghan organisations can operate safely, independently and effectively.



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