Fit for Purpose: Getting Humanitarian Aid Right in Afghanistan One Year after the Taliban Takeover

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Introduction

This week marks the one-year anniversary of the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan. For most Afghans, it has been a year of hunger. Donors responded to the Taliban’s violent seizure of power and subsequent repression by freezing development aid and cutting off Afghanistan from the global financial system. While the actions of the Taliban, including egregious human rights abuses, deserve consequences, such measures triggered the collapse of the country’s already anemic economy. As famine loomed, international aid agencies and their Afghan partners launched the largest relief operation in the country’s history. These efforts helped keep catastrophe at bay.

But the overall humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan remains one of the worst in the world. Acute malnutrition has taken hold in many parts of the country. People are turning to desperate measures to feed their families. A mix of internal and external factors is to blame. The Afghan economy shows no signs of recovery, and this year’s harvest will likely underdeliver. Donors are falling short, and the war in Ukraine is making it harder to get food and other forms of aid into the country.

The Taliban’s oppression of women and girls is also taking a significant humanitarian toll. Afghan female aid workers are finding it more difficult to do their jobs, and women and girls in need are becoming harder to reach. To date, Western policy has not led to meaningful improvements in conditions for Afghan women and girls. But there are opportunities to better serve women and girls in need of assistance. Donors need to be pragmatic and flexible and exploit whatever openings can be found.

Another challenge to the relief effort lies at the thorny intersection of the Taliban and aid delivery. Donors are understandably concerned that the de facto authorities are benefiting from humanitarian assistance. The United Nations has documented Taliban interference in relief operations. But aid officials in Kabul favorably compare the levels of actual aid diversion to well-known trouble spots like Syria and Yemen. Aid agencies have developed systems for managing Taliban interference. But these systems depend on regular engagement with the Taliban de facto authorities across the country—an anathema to some donors and Western publics.

In addition, the aid architecture in Afghanistan is not yet fit for purpose. Challenges are emerging as part of the UN’s “humanitarian plus” programs designed to deliver basic services and build resilience and early recovery. The sheer magnitude of the international relief effort is also raising concerns over the emergence of parallel systems and a loss of Afghan ownership. Further, aid agencies are taking different approaches to coordination with the Taliban authorities, and the sanctions regime and the lack of a central bank continue to take a toll on aid operations.

More broadly, the people of Afghanistan are paying the price for the yawning gap between donor demands and Taliban behavior. Over the last year, Western countries have called on the Taliban to form an inclusive government, respect human rights—particularly those of women and girls—and make good on commitments that Afghanistan will not once again become a center of international terrorism. These are worthy objectives. But the Taliban have done little to comply—a fact underscored by the ban on girls’ secondary education and the recent drone strike against Al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahri in Kabul.

Indeed, it is far from clear that donors have the tools to change Taliban governance. On a recent research trip to Afghanistan, no one with whom Refugees International spoke thought the sanctions or suspension of development aid were having a meaningful impact on Taliban policy and practices. Indeed, the de facto authorities have shown little sign of being affected by the delink-
ing of Afghanistan from the international economy. However, the same cannot not be said for the wider Afghan population.

None of this suggests that the international community should now reward the Taliban with vast sums of cash and legitimacy. But donors should be more precise and more realistic about what they are trying to achieve in Afghanistan. At the heart of the policy and strategy should be a pathway towards a sustainable improvement in overall humanitarian indicators and community resilience, and a realistic measure of economic security. In addition, Afghans will a need meaningful say in a process that safeguards their intuitions and capacity where they exist. All this will require greater donor engagement in Afghanistan.

**Recommendations**

**Donors need to recommit to Afghanistan.** The UN Humanitarian Response Plan for Afghanistan calls for $4.4 billion in 2022. As of mid-August, the UN have received $1.86 billion for the year. Donors need to close the gap quickly. Of particular concern is the food assistance sector. The World Food Program (WFP) estimates that 22.1 million people will require assistance through to the end of the year. To reach 20 million beneficiaries over the coming winter, WFP will need $1.43 billion. To date, donor pledges have fallen far short of this mark and WFP has yet to receive funding to preposition food aid for the winter – an essential component of preventing acute food insecurity.

**Donors should clarify and coordinate their near-term priorities in Afghanistan.** Donors have rightly demanded improvements by the Taliban on governance, political inclusion, human rights, and the rights of women and girls. These objectives increasingly appear to be long-term in nature. In the interim, donors should articulate pragmatic, clear, and shared near-term policy objectives charting a way out of the worst of the country’s economic and humanitarian crisis. The goal should be to align humanitarian aid, “humanitarian plus” programs, and other forms of assistance to achieve a modest baseline of economic recovery and sustainability, and reduce aid dependence.

**Donors and the United Nations should update the Transitional Engagement Framework (TEF) with sharper strategic objectives and an implementation plan.** If the TEF is to serve as the guiding framework for international aid in Afghanistan, the UN should update the framework document with more precise goals aligned with the near-term donor priorities discussed above. A revised TEF should include a clear and detailed implementation plan that aligns with the Humanitarian Response Plan. That implementation plan should be multi-year in its timeframe. The World Bank and other donors should support the development of a revised TEF and accompanying implementation plan as they will be key stakeholders in its success.

**Donors and the United Nations should improve coordination and coherence of “Humanitarian plus” programming.** “Humanitarian plus” programming is designed to provide basic services and build resilience to complement relief aid. However, donors are funding some aid agencies to deliver what looks a lot like humanitarian assistance under the rubric of “humanitarian plus.” Further, donor commitments and agency programming appear to be happening without sufficient coordination. The UN needs to strengthen the mechanisms for coordinating “humanitarian plus” and traditional humanitarian programming. Plans for TEF strategic thematic working groups should be accelerated, and their operational counterparts strengthened. These structures should include mechanisms for coordinating with the humanitarian cluster system.
The World Bank should deepen its engagement and coordination across the aid sector in Afghanistan. The World Bank is poised to serve as the main funder for the central pillars of the TEF. As such, it has a significant responsibility to promote coherence across the full spectrum of activities envisaged in the TEF. The Bank will need to engage and align its activities with other donors and aid agencies in Afghanistan. The Bank should also invest in aid coordination structures inside Afghanistan and consider establishing a presence in Kabul to facilitate that coordination.

Donors should consider reestablishing a limited presence inside Afghanistan. Significant disconnects are emerging between donors and aid agencies over questions of strategy, policy, and coordination. Part of the problem stems from limited direct access on the part of many donors to the situation and key stakeholders on the ground. Therefore, donors should consider reestablishing a presence in Kabul. They could begin by deploying teams to Kabul on a regular basis to deepen their understanding of the needs and the operational environment. Indeed, some smaller donors are already doing this, but the practice remains the exception and not the rule.

Donors and aid agencies should work together to standardize the approach to Taliban engagement. Aid agencies in Afghanistan clearly need to engage with the de facto authorities to better serve communities in need and to limit impediments to operations. Aid agencies have taken a variety of approaches to engage with the de facto authorities – in part because of different guidance from different donors. For example, many aid agencies have signed memoranda of understanding (MOUs) with the Taliban. But these MOUs are not standardized and some key UN agencies have refrained altogether from signing such MOUs. Donors and aid agencies need a unified approach to arrangements with the de facto authorities.

Aid agencies should strengthen support for Taliban engagement at the provincial and district level. UN agencies and NGOs have developed sophisticated tools for engaging the Taliban to facilitate humanitarian aid delivery. The UN has developed a new humanitarian engagement strategy to provide a common framework for these efforts. That strategy rightly devolves responsibility for access negotiations to staff in the provinces and districts. These staff are mostly Afghan and may be exposed to higher levels of risk and pressure in these negotiations. Additional international staff with language skills and seniority should be funded and deployed to help provide political cover with the de facto authorities where necessary.

Aid agencies should push more aid out into the districts. Over the winter, aid agencies expanded their footprint across the country, gaining access to most of Afghanistan’s 400 plus districts. However, a great deal of international aid is being distributed to the provincial capitals. Urban areas are turning into aid magnets and may be contributing to some recent trends in displacement. A renewed commitment to push out humanitarian aid to the districts will respond to vulnerability and need at the community level.

Donors and aid agencies should provide flexible and localized interventions in support of women and girls in crisis or in need of protection. There is no question that the international community can and should push back against the Taliban’s record on and approach to the rights of women and girls. At the same time, almost every woman leader with whom Refugees International spoke highlighted opportunities for making positive change in their communities. Donors and aid agencies should develop assistance strategies to channel resources directly into the hands of these women and their organizations to make tangible improvements in their lives. This will require nimble and flexible funding tools akin to quick impact grants or emergency grant mechanisms used to support women in crisis.
Aid agencies need to double down on employing and partnering with Afghan women. Aid agencies can serve as an important vehicle for employing Afghan women. Even before the Taliban takeover, relatively few Afghan women were employed by international aid agencies, particularly in key provinces and rural areas. Donors need to resource aid agencies to go the extra mile in recruiting and equipping women in these areas. This will involve active outreach through current female staff or women-led networks to aggressively recruit women. Aid agencies can also grow the number of female-led partner organizations. They can provide capacity building for these partners – particularly for those transitioning to the provision of humanitarian assistance.

Donors need to adopt more realistic and shared standards on aid interference in Afghanistan. Aid agencies are deeply sensitive to donor concerns over Taliban aid interference, with some donors instituting a “zero tolerance” policy. Such standards can slow down relief operations. They are also more exacting than donor expectations in crises like Somalia, Syria, and Yemen, where aid diversion is a recognized challenge. In addition, donors should consistently differentiate between aid diversion and the payment of standard taxes and fees on aid operations to the extent the latter is permitted under existing exemptions to Taliban sanctions regimes.

Donors and aid agencies should redouble efforts to address Afghanistan’s liquidity crisis. The United States should continue negotiations with the Taliban to ringfence and then reconnect the Afghan central bank to the international banking system and restore access to $3.5 billion of Afghan reserves. The United Nations should also continue to push for a Humanitarian Exchange Facility to get currency into the country. However, these options are dependent on Taliban acquiescence. In the interim, the U.S. Treasury Department, donors, and even aid agencies should undertake additional targeted outreach to the correspondent banks to explain the nature and scope of existing sanctions relief to make it easier for aid agencies and others to get cash into the county.

Research Overview

This report focuses on the humanitarian crisis inside Afghanistan. The analysis is based on dozens of interviews with local actors, UN officials, senior donor officials, and representatives from international and local NGOs. These interviews were conducted in-person and virtually by Refugees International. Many of these interviews took place over the course of June 2022, when a Refugees International team traveled to Afghanistan and visited Badakhshan, Herat, Kabul, and Kunduz.

The Humanitarian Crisis: Snapshot of the Last Year

The humanitarian situation in Afghanistan has changed dramatically since the Taliban’s takeover in August 2021. Prior to August 2021, humanitarian agencies in Afghanistan mounted individual responses to specific crises. After August 2021, a series of simultaneous and compounding shocks collapsed the country’s economy. This descent of the Afghan population into greater penury and misery has been documented and analyzed extensively elsewhere.

However, the explosion of humanitarian needs was driven by a series of factors. Key among these were the suspension of development assistance and salary payments for Afghanistan’s civil service, the delinking of the Afghan central bank and commercial banks from the global financial system, the freeze on Afghanistan’s foreign reserves, the subsequent devaluation of the Afghan
currency, and the mismanagement of the economy by the Taliban de facto authorities. These moves compounded the impact of years of conflict, the COVID-19 pandemic, and drought.

In January 2022, the United Nations launched a Humanitarian Response Plan requesting $4.4 billion, one of the largest UN appeals ever. At the time, a staggering 22.8 million people, or 55 percent of the population, were expected to be in crisis or emergency levels of food insecurity. More than half of all children under five years of age are expected to be acutely malnourished in 2022, a 21 percent increase since the start of 2021.

Answering the call, humanitarian partners reached 20 million Afghans with at least one form of humanitarian assistance between January and the end of April 2022. This represented one of the largest relief operations in the world. Afghan aid workers, operating against tremendous odds and at great personal risk, shouldered most of the task. Almost five million people received health care. Three million children under five years old and pregnant women were treated for acute malnutrition. Some 3.3 million people received water, sanitation, and hygiene assistance. More than 1.2 million people received shelter and household items.

However, the largest component of the relief effort was food aid. All told, the World Food Program (WFP) scaled up its food and cash assistance operations tenfold over what it had been in 2020. By its own count, WFP reached some 19 million people in almost 400 districts and 41,000 communities. While it is difficult to prove the counterfactual, there is strong anecdotal evidence that the international aid effort managed to head off the worst. Of the hundreds of districts targeted for food assistance, WFP failed to reach only two remote districts in Ghor province. According to the latest survey, the 20,000 Afghans in these two districts are now in IPC 5 – famine-like conditions. This is a testament to the success of the food security program in the rest of the country and suggests that a humanitarian firewall held.

Expansion of food aid coverage across Afghanistan, March 2021 to March 2022. Credit: WFP.

**Current Humanitarian Trends**

Despite this heroic effort, the overall situation remains quite fragile. Refugees International met no one who believed that Afghanistan was on a path out of the humanitarian crisis. Indeed, humanitarian needs continued to rise over the course of 2022. Some 24.4 million people, or 59 percent of the estimated population, are now projected to need humanitarian assistance in 2022. Some remote communities are now experiencing famine conditions for the first time in Afghan-
istan’s recent history. To make matters worse, the price of wheat has increased by almost 50 percent compared to the same time last year.

UN agencies, Afghan NGOs, and communities – both in the capital and in the provinces which Refugees International visited – report that the level of household vulnerability is on the rise. In Herat, aid agencies observed that communities were even more vulnerable now than during the height of the winter crisis. A good example of this increased vulnerability shows up in malnutrition. In June 2022, doctors at the main hospital for children in Kabul told Refugees International that the number of cases of malnutrition in both children and new mothers was increasing. The same was true in clinics Refugees International visited in Herat and Badakhshan. The United Nations reports that “tens of thousands of children are being admitted for emergency medical treatment for acute malnutrition monthly.”

Many of the structural drivers of food insecurity are heading in the wrong direction. Usually, there is a window between drought seasons or another shock for communities and families to recover. Ideally, aid should buy families some space and time to generate wealth to rebuild some resilience in the face of future shocks. However, with few job opportunities, there are very few chances to generate income. As a result, families cannot strengthen their resilience during the limited reprieve provided by the massive food security program.

Many rural districts remain underserved. Some aid officials were adamant that there should be a renewed effort to push aid out into the districts. By targeting urban areas, relief aid is creating a pull factor for populations to leave the districts (see below). For example, one large UN agency acknowledged that it was distributing $250 in cash assistance to individuals in provincial capitals but not in the districts, inadvertently drawing beneficiaries to urban areas. Some aid officials agreed that they should prioritize rural areas. “We need to hold agencies to account for pushing out into the districts and utilizing the access we have. Our goal must be to meet needs in underserved areas.”

When Refugees International visited Afghanistan this summer, nearly 60 percent of households were resorting to crisis coping strategies. This is an improvement from the winter but is still six times higher than in August 2021. There are credible reports of people selling body parts and their children and, in the worst case, taking their own lives. Child marriage has always been a practice in many rural communities. But now aid agencies report that girls as young as five or six are being sold off as brides. The families of the husbands need to pay for each of these girls, and those payments are spread out over the years providing income to the family of the girl.

Others are on the move. Since the Taliban seized power, roughly 140,000 Afghans have been forcibly displaced. Most of the Afghans have fled to the western city of Herat, to Kunduz and Taloqan in the northeast of the country, or to Kabul. This comes on top of some 5.5 million Afghans already in protracted displacement. In addition, continuing economic collapse and the humanitarian crisis could force a large number of Afghans to seek refuge outside of the country. Some aid workers reported that an as yet unknown number of displaced people appear to be moving around urban areas of the country in search of work to feed their families. One agency referred to this trend as “starvation displacement” found in the extremely harsh conditions of informal settlements. However, it is very hard to capture and quantify the numbers of these internally displaced people (IDPs) compared to those displaced by conflict or natural disasters. Aid agencies only encounter these individuals during assessments of or during service delivery. The de facto authorities want IDPs to go home, and aid agencies struggle to find and assist those in informal settlements.
Domestic and External Shocks

Unfortunately, a series of internal and external factors suggest that the humanitarian situation may continue to deteriorate. This year’s harvest will underdeliver. Intense summer heat and irregular spring rains “have effectively spelled doom for a meaningful harvest in the country.” The impact is felt in the harvest, which is yielding lower levels than expected. The most recent IPC seasonal update shifted some areas of Afghanistan from IPC 4 to IPC 3. But these results appear to have been based on optimistic assumptions about the harvest and not on household vulnerability.

Furthermore, the Afghan economy has contracted an estimated 30 to 40 percent since August 2021. Incomes fell by 20 to 30 percent, and the number of households receiving remittances has been cut in half. The drop in remittances, upon which millions of Afghans relied, is particularly damaging to household economies. The UN estimates that unemployment could rise to 40 percent, and the poverty rate could reach 97 percent by the end of 2022. Four out of five households are now in debt.

However, there are some signs that the Afghan economy may no longer be in free fall. One recent report found that wages have stopped falling, and job loss and business closures may be slowing. However, with reduced volumes of international aid, sanctions, and restricted access to international payment systems, there is very little hope for an economic recovery in the near to medium term. Indeed, a World Bank survey recently found that up to 70 percent of the Afghan population cannot afford food and other basic essentials, creating a situation “where many people would starve in the absence of humanitarian help.”

Unfortunately, donors have so far provided only 41 percent of the needs outlined in the 2022 humanitarian appeal – forcing reductions in aid. As of August 12, 2022, only $1.86 billion of the $4.4 billion requested has been received or committed. The risks of increased food insecurity and humanitarian suffering, especially among women and youth, are likely to rise given the reduction of donor funding. According to the IPC, food assistance is expected to decrease from 38 percent of the population to 8 percent in the June to November projection due to a lack of funding.

The knock-on effects of the war in Ukraine further complicate the crisis. Afghanistan acquires relatively little of its food supply directly from Russia and Ukraine. In 2020, Afghanistan imported most of its wheat and flour from Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. But wheat production in Kazakhstan will be lower than average this year, and Russia has temporarily banned the export of wheat to Kazakhstan. Aid agencies expect the reduction in supply from Kazakhstan and other neighboring countries to further increase prices in Afghanistan. The United Nations also purchases much of its food aid in the region, and the Ukraine crisis has increased costs significantly for the UN relief effort. WFP alone anticipates its costs to increase 22 percent or $265 million this year due to the rise in food prices and transport costs.

Taliban Restrictions on Women and Girls and the Impact on Humanitarian Aid

The Taliban has issued over twenty edicts restricting rights and opportunities for women and girls. The international community has rightly challenged the de facto authorities over this violation of human rights. The impact of these policies on the humanitarian situation has also been significant. It is essential that donors and aid agencies consult as closely as possible with Afghan women – both aid workers and beneficiaries – to understand the nature of this challenge, particularly at the community level.
Restrictions on Female Aid Workers

One of the most pressing issues for aid agencies is the ability of their female staff to do their work free of restrictions and other obstacles. This is essential if humanitarian assistance is to reach Afghan women and girls who make up the majority of those in need. Reports in the months following the Taliban takeover painted a stark picture. According to Human Rights Watch, Taliban officials in only three of Afghanistan’s 34 provinces had provided “written agreements to aid agencies unconditionally permitting women aid workers to do their jobs” as of November 2021. In over half the country, women aid workers confronted “severe restrictions.”

During Refugees International’s visit to Afghanistan, senior international officials in Kabul acknowledged that their female staff – particularly Afghan women – face challenges. At the same time, these officials felt that female staff were largely able to do their work and deliver assistance across the country. However, a more nuanced picture emerged in interviews with Afghan women leading or working with aid agencies and especially local NGOs. In the provincial capitals Refugees International was able to reach, Afghan female NGO workers reported significant restrictions on their movement, particularly outside of urban areas. Some women NGO leaders had reduced their presence in the office to avoid attracting attention. Other female staff traveled only with a male escort or limited their movements outside of the provincial capitals.

In districts and villages in the north of the country, some local NGOs indicated that female staff members were able to work openly for weeks at a time, only to have the de facto authorities crack down on their participation suddenly and seemingly out of nowhere. These crackdowns were not always consistent across geography, with the imposition of restrictions shifting unpredictably from one district to the next. Nor did they always appear tied to specific Taliban leaders or commanders at the local level.

Gender experts at aid agencies observed that female aid workers had long faced challenges in Afghanistan – a history that predated the collapse of the internationally recognized government. Most female national staff and international staff have, historically, been based in Kabul. Hiring Afghan women to work in the provinces had always been hard, particularly in the south and east of the country. More progress has been made in urban areas, but most beneficiaries are in rural areas. As one UN official observed, “the United Nations and the rest of the international community have been very slow to recognize this problem.”

Donor Funding for Women-led NGOs

Afghan women-led NGOs expressed serious fears that donors were moving funds away from women-led organizations. Some Afghan women leaders indicated that this trend contributed to the dwindling number of NGOs and other local civil society groups in their space. Although donors insist that this was not the case, the perception illustrates heightened sensitivities and concerns amidst Afghan women civil society leaders, particularly in the face of development funding cuts since August 2021.

Afghan NGOs also expressed concern that new additional costs associated with female staff members might not be met by donors. These costs result from new requirements imposed by the de facto authorities, including separate office space and the presence of a male family member or “mahram” to accompany the female staff members during travel to and from and for work. Sustained dialogues between donors and Afghan aid groups and implementing partners will be important to ensure that these issues are properly addressed in decisions on funding and budgets.
Deliberate and equitable partnerships with women-led organizations and support for women’s initiatives are critical, especially as many of them can no longer access development funding.

The Chilling Effect of Repression on Female Aid Beneficiaries

A growing challenge in the coming months will be the chilling effect of Taliban oppression and restrictions on women and girls as aid beneficiaries. As the security situation has improved in Afghanistan, relief groups have enjoyed a significant increase in physical access to rural areas and communities that were previously challenging or dangerous to reach. However, a more permissive security situation has not necessarily created an environment in which women and girls feel comfortable or safe receiving humanitarian assistance. This is particularly problematic for aid designed to prevent or mitigate gender-based violence (GBV). Such assistance must be delivered by trained female aid workers, as some 90 percent of Afghan women experience GBV. Yet only nine percent of those targeted for GBV prevention and mitigation had been reached in the first five months of the year, and the UN funding appeal for GBV remained almost entirely unfunded.

International aid officials indicate that they have the systems and tools to overcome access challenges in these communities through their engagement with the Taliban authorities (see below). Refugees International was able to visit multiple aid distribution sites where female aid workers and beneficiaries were present. However, some experts point to recent surveys suggesting that new restrictions on the movement of women were preventing them from reaching aid distribution points in rural areas. If women no longer feel confident in engaging with relief agencies, the humanitarian impact could be significant.

In the face of these challenges, Afghan female aid workers inside Afghanistan with whom Refugees International spoke pushed for robust engagement with the Taliban to improve humanitarian access. Afghan women must be part of this engagement. Donors and aid agencies must take their cues from Afghan women leaders, especially those who remain inside the country. The recent launch of the U.S.-Afghan Consultative Mechanism (USACM) is an important step in the right direction. Led by U.S. Special Envoy for Afghan Women and Girls and Human Rights Rina Amiri, USACM will bring together “Afghan women’s coalitions, as well as civil society leaders, journalists, academics, and religious scholars from inside and outside Afghanistan” to inform U.S. policy. This new platform should be used to consult Afghan women leaders and aid workers who remain on the front lines of the country’s humanitarian crises.

The Taliban and Aid Delivery

Relations between aid agencies and the de facto authorities remain a sensitive issue for Western donors whose publics are wary of greater engagement with the Taliban. Inside Afghanistan, aid agencies are taking different approaches to that engagement. Analysts are also raising concerns that the Taliban are diverting aid or otherwise interfering with the delivery of assistance. However, this interference by the Taliban does not appear to be a central challenge to delivering aid to communities in need. Ironically, engagement with the de facto authorities appears to be one of the more effective tools for managing aid interference.
Aid Interference

In early 2022, the Taliban authorities released a plan to monitor and control the activities of humanitarian NGOs. In May, the de facto ministry of economy established a committee to monitor aid delivery. The UN Secretary-General reported on these events in his most recent report to the UN Security Council. On the ground, there is no question that the Taliban are interfering in the distribution of humanitarian assistance. Such interference involves attempts to influence beneficiary lists and hiring practices, and disputes over types of assistance and which communities are to receive aid, and in what order of priority. The UN recorded 185 incidents of interference in the first five months of 2022. That is up from 138 incidents during the same period last year. Humanitarians also see more demands by the Taliban authorities for data and information regarding budgets and staffing contracts.

However, the numbers do not tell the full story. UN officials told Refugees International that they can mitigate most cases of interference relatively quickly. The UN reports that it takes three to seven days on average to resolve these incidents. This includes everything from unblocking aid delivery to recovering aid that may have been diverted. Crucially, no one with whom Refugees International spoke in Afghanistan characterized Taliban aid diversion as a strategic challenge.

Aid agencies are deeply sensitive to donor concern over corruption and aid diversion and what they perceive to be a “zero tolerance” policy in Afghanistan. However, humanitarian actors on the ground report that corruption and diversion simply are not on the scale of what existed before in Afghanistan nor on what they have experienced in other countries, like Somalia or Syria. One aid official who had worked in Houthi-controlled Yemen described Afghanistan as “heaven” by comparison when it comes to interference and diversion.

Nor do donor expectations account for the ambient environment for corruption prior to the collapse of the Afghan government in August 2021. According to Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), as much as 30 percent of U.S. funding went missing. Unequal sets of standards around the world only make donor states vulnerable to accusations of further politicizing aid to the detriment of the civilian population.

Taliban Memorandums of Understanding and Escorts

The UN and other aid agencies initially shied away from formal arrangements with the de facto authorities. But today, the majority of agencies and NGOs in Afghanistan have signed memorandum of understanding with the Taliban. Yet there is no standard MOU, and agencies are using different templates. The absence of unified engagement strategies, policies, or operational norms amongst humanitarian and development agencies has reportedly created concerning expectations on the part of the de facto authorities. For example, if one aid agency is willing to consult with the de facto authorities on questions of policy, programming, or communities to be targeted for aid delivery, these same authorities may pressure other agencies to do the same.

Following the collapse of the government and the Taliban takeover, the UN started to pay the Taliban to provide armed security escorts for UN road missions and aid convoys outside of Kabul and the provincial capitals. At the time, the uncertain political and security environment argued for such escorts. Indeed, there are no real alternatives to such escorts when and where the security environment necessitates these measures. However, Refugees International participated in a road mission with a Taliban escort, and it is not hard to see how local communities might associate UN aid delivery with the de facto authorities. Where the security situation permits, the UN should consider phasing out such escorts.
Humanitarian Diplomacy and Engagement

The Taliban are often described as a highly decentralized movement comprised of multiple power centers and networks of local affiliates spread across the country and focused on internal cohesion. Few to none of the current crop of 34 Taliban provincial governors have real experience dealing with humanitarian aid. To address this, the UN has recently launched a new engagement strategy, which decentralizes access negotiations from Kabul down to the heads of area offices at the provincial level. The strategy seeks to empower staff in provinces and districts to engage Taliban officials directly and educate them about how aid agencies operate.

Most UN and aid agency staff at the provincial and district level are Afghan nationals. This means that most of the day-to-day engagement with the Taliban falls to Afghan aid workers. This work is time and resource intensive. One Afghan head of office in a province observed that he spent as much as 40 percent of his time on access negotiations. He maintains a separate phone to maintain and track his engagement with the Taliban.

It goes without saying that the Afghan staff are more vulnerable to pressure and intimidation by the de facto authorities. This makes recourse to international staff in provinces and in Kabul important for both the efficacy and integrity of the system and the safety and security of the national staff.

Overview of the International Aid Architecture

Today, the United Nations is the only major presence of the international community in Afghanistan. The UN political mission – UNAMA – retains key responsibilities and duties, including political outreach, good offices, the monitoring of human rights and women’s rights, and overall system coordination. However, UN agencies, funds, and programs have shouldered the lion’s share of the burden for staving off disaster for the civilian population. This effort can roughly be divided into two parts: the humanitarian response and “humanitarian plus” programs. The blueprint for the humanitarian response was set out in the UN Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) for Afghanistan, which has been discussed at some length above.

The second part emerged as part of the UN Transitional Engagement Framework (TEF) for Afghanistan. Launched in January 2022, the TEF incorporated the previously released $4.44 billion HRP alongside two new pillars calling for $3.43 billion for addressing basic human needs and $208 million for preserving social investments and community-level systems. Together, these two new pillars have been dubbed “humanitarian plus.” The total price tag for the TEF is over $8 billion – or 40 percent more than the country’s entire budget for 2020. Ironically, the sum is roughly equivalent to the total amount of civilian and security assistance cut off by foreign donors after the Taliban seized power. Responsibility for coordination and oversight of the TEF falls to the UNAMA Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General.

The “humanitarian plus” pillars of the TEF are meant to provide aid and services adjacent to relief operations to cover basic needs and shore up community resilience and rural livelihoods. “Humanitarian plus” program areas include the provision of essential services – like health and education – along with livelihoods, community resilience, and social cohesion. Such programs are often considered part of a development framework. Unlike relief operations, these activities are usually carried out in close coordination with or even through national or local public sector institutions. However, in Afghanistan, “humanitarian plus” programs are to be implemented independently of the Taliban’s control and influence.
To pay for humanitarian assistance, donors are funding UN aid agencies and NGOs and making relatively modest contributions to pooled funds like the Afghanistan Humanitarian Fund. In the case of “humanitarian plus,” the emerging understanding is that financial support will flow from two multi-donor trust funds, including the World Bank’s Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF). The ARTF currently has $1.2 billion at its disposal, and the Bank has begun to release hundreds of millions of dollars for education and health sectors and for cash-for-work programs. The second is the UN Special Trust Fund for Afghanistan (STFA). The SFTA was created to serve as a financing mechanism for the TEF and has received $90 million in funding to date. In short, the World Bank is poised to emerge as the main source of funding for the non-humanitarian programs in Afghanistan.

Aid Architecture and Planning

Some elements of the international aid architecture in Afghanistan are functioning well. However, some challenges are emerging in new aid arenas linked to the Transitional Engagement Framework. In addition, aid agencies are taking very different approaches to aid coordination with the de facto authorities, which is leading to tension in the system. The sanctions regime continues to take a toll on aid operations – despite the major relief provided by the carveouts in the December 2021 UN Security Council Resolution and the series of impressive U.S. Treasury Department general licensees.

When the TEF was launched in January 2022, it was described as the “overarching strategic planning” document for the UN in Afghanistan. Interestingly, the document is remarkably short on details. As one analyst put it, “the Transitional Engagement Framework lacks the kind of depth one would expect” from the capstone planning document for the United Nations. For the $4.4 billion humanitarian pillar of the TEF, the actual plan appears in the HRP – a version of which had been launched well before the promulgation of the TEF. However, no such accompanying plan has been publicly released for the $3.6 billion “humanitarian plus” pillars of the TEF.

Without a plan, there is a very real risk that aid disbursed under the TEF “humanitarian plus” pillars could fail to lay the groundwork for early recovery. This is not to say that the current aid effort is devoid of sustainability. But, as noted above, Afghan communities appear less resilient today than they did at the onset of the crisis. Of course, it may be unfair to saddle the TEF and the UN system with such expectations in light of the sanctions continuing to strangle the Afghan economy and the country’s liquidity and banking crisis. This would likely require major policy interventions designed to stabilize and rejuvenate the Afghan economy.

Nonetheless, the non-humanitarian pillars of the TEF are not yet located in a wider strategy and plan to build a pathway for Afghanistan out of the current level of crisis. Therefore, donors need to be clear-eyed that the $8 billion TEF price tag does not come with an exit strategy. Without a more detailed “humanitarian plus” plan to nest inside of that strategy, the TEF could become yet another chapter in Afghanistan’s long history of aid dependence. The risks inherent in this approach are coming into sharp relief as donors refocus on Ukraine or grow frustrated over a lack of progress in girls’ education. As U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Tom West recently put it, “How sustainable is this massive humanitarian response? Unfortunately, I think it is not sustainable.”
Aid Architecture and Coordination

Senior officials in some UN aid agencies are concerned that donors are funding programs under the TEF’s “humanitarian plus” pillars that look a lot like standard humanitarian assistance and are hard to differentiate from ongoing relief activities. One example is in-kind and cash-based food assistance and resilience programming. Agencies like WFP and the UN Food and Agriculture Organization have spent decades running large programs in these areas across Afghanistan. These programs are coordinated with other agencies through the humanitarian cluster system. Other UN agencies without this track record or expertise have received funding to do similar work under the rubric of “humanitarian plus.”

Such programming needs to be deconflicted and coordinated across the UN system to avoid duplication of effort and to ensure that beneficiaries do not fall through the cracks. “Humanitarian plus” activities do not fall under the purview of the humanitarian cluster system. UN development agencies in Kabul are setting up a series of thematic working groups to strengthen coordination at the operational level. Planning is also apparently underway to establish “strategic thematic working groups” to help donors and aid agencies to coordinate “humanitarian plus” activities related to economic stabilization, health, and gender, among other areas.

However, aid agencies report that neither the operational nor strategic thematic working groups are yet providing meaningful coordination for TEF programs akin to that of the humanitarian cluster system. In the words of one aid official, those agencies engaged in humanitarian plus programming run the risk of “doing their own thing and not coordinating as part of a wider plan.”

Parallel Systems

The nature and scope of the aid effort envisaged in the TEF are almost unprecedented. Donors understandably remain intent on avoiding interventions that might empower the Taliban. Together, these factors raise the very real concern that international assistance will create parallel systems that disempower Afghan institutions in the delivery of aid and basic services. As one analyst Refugees International interviewed put it, “we are at risk of creating a Gaza-style UN Relief and Works Agency for Afghanistan.” With an $8 billion budget channeled largely through UN agencies, the TEF could become a blueprint for a massive and enduring multilateral scale-up inside Afghanistan.

In some respects, a larger presence is both necessary and desirable. The United Nations is, after all, the only representation of the international community now inside the country. There is no way the world could have responded to Afghanistan’s urgent hunger crisis without the relevant UN agencies and NGOs scaling their operations. However, going forward, a more sustainable international footprint may need to be found – one that sustains Afghan capacity and agency. To get that footprint right, aid agencies will need to adopt a common approach to their work with Afghan institutions.

That common approach is not yet evident in practice. Humanitarian agencies continue largely to apply a principled approach to aid delivery. This means maintaining independence from the de facto authorities. However, aid agencies involved in “humanitarian plus” activities appear to have different philosophies and strategies for coordination and engagement on matters of policy and programming.
The UN Security Council has passed resolution 2615, and the U.S. Treasury Department has issued a series of general licenses that provide clarity and comfort regarding sanctions risk for aid agencies to engage in a broad spectrum of activities. These include the payment of salaries for teachers and health workers. These salary payments are important not only to facilitate basic services but also to maintain the capacity of the Afghan public sector to deliver for its people. However, donors and aid agencies have yet to standardize or properly resource this practice. Nor have they moved forward with similar salary payments to ministries in other sectors involved in basic services.

Furthermore, aid agencies observed to Refugees International that donors appear to have different interpretations of these carveouts. Some UN agencies are reluctant to take the risk of running afoul of donors with more conservative interpretations. These agencies seek to minimize the involvement of the de facto authorities in their planning. Others describe a system in which agencies pay small stipends to a handful of advisors in the line ministries to help coordinate efforts only when required. These stipends are separate from other forms of payment to the Afghan public sector. In addition, one internal UN survey found that almost 60 international and national NGOs were paying some form of tax, permit, or visa fee to line ministries – primarily the Ministry of Finance.

At the other end of the spectrum, one prominent aid agency pays the salaries of employees in Afghanistan’s 33 main hospitals and stipends to tens of technical staff in the health ministry. It also provides equipment and supplies to the public health system. To maintain Afghan capacity and institutions, the aid agency is working to establish transparent staff salary lists and procurement systems for the hospitals that are in line with how the health ministry does business. These different approaches are creating tension across the international aid architecture. They also raise questions about the long-term commitment of donors and aid agencies to maintaining Afghan capacity and avoiding the creation of parallel structures.

**Liquidity Challenges**

Afghanistan remains trapped in a liquidity crisis with its banking sector cut off from the global financial system. In August 2021, key western governments and the World Bank revoked “the Afghan Central Bank’s credentials.” And, despite the broad exceptions issued by the U.S. Treasury Department mentioned above, sanctions continue to have a so-called “chilling effect.” Correspondent banks are mostly choosing to “de-risk” and are steering clear of financial transactions into Afghanistan. Money transfers for much of Afghanistan’s commercial sector and the general population are often difficult, if not impossible, to execute.

In the aid sector, humanitarian currency exchanges and other systems, including hawala remittance networks, are getting cash into the economy. The UN recently surveyed international and Afghan aid groups following the adoption of the UN Security Council resolution and U.S. treasury licenses mentioned in the previous section. Forty percent of respondents found that it was now easier to transfer cash into Afghanistan. However, more than 80 percent of the respondents said that they were still experiencing significant delays in making such transfers.

The lack of liquidity is having other knock-on effects on payments and otherwise hampers the delivery assistance. A recent internal UN survey found that, due to difficulties getting cash into the country, 69 percent of aid agencies had not been able to pay suppliers, and 61 percent had been forced to suspend some program activities. The UN Emergency Relief Coordinator Martin Griffiths
recently said that “two-thirds of the aid groups cited a lack of available cash in Afghanistan as impeding their programs.”

The United Nations has established an airbridge to bring cash into Afghanistan to allow humanitarian operations to continue. Between December 2021 and May 2022, the United Nations flew over $825.6 million in cash into the country. These funds were directly distributed to over 30 UN and international NGO aid agencies. This cash delivery helped provide a modicum of stability to the Afghani relative to other currencies. But flying cash in on charter flights and then getting money from Kabul to the provinces is an expensive and time-consuming enterprise. Aid agencies must take great risks in the process – one that leaches resources away from beneficiaries.

As Refugees International has argued elsewhere, there is no shortage of ideas about how to address the liquidity challenge. Ideally, the United States and other donors could reach an agreement with the de facto authorities to ringfence and then reconnect the Afghan central Bank to the international banking system. As part of this effort, negotiations to release $3.5 billion in Afghan reserves are reportedly ongoing. In addition, donors and the Taliban could establish an alternate humanitarian financial corridor between Afghanistan and the rest of the world. Finally, efforts to create a temporary solution though a UN Humanitarian Exchange Facility have so far failed, mostly due to Taliban intransigence. All this leaves aid agencies struggling to find creative ways to get cash into the country to pay for their operations.

Conclusion

The one-year anniversary of the U.S. withdrawal from and subsequent Taliban takeover of Afghanistan should serve as a poignant reminder of the ways in which the international community has failed the people of Afghanistan. That failure brings with it greater responsibility to seek pragmatic solutions capable of bringing tangible relief to Afghan communities living through the trauma of the last year. Over the past winter, Afghans and their international counterparts mounted on of the largest relief efforts in history. While the humanitarian firewall largely held, donors and aid agencies should now seize the moment to make their efforts more sustainable and reflective of Afghan priorities. This is the very least that the international community owes Afghanistan.
About the Author

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About Refugees International

Refugees International advocates for lifesaving assistance, human rights, and protection for displaced people and promotes solutions to displacement crises around the world. We do not accept any government or UN funding, ensuring the independence and credibility of our work.