

World Food Programme – Written evidence (AFG0010)

Inquiry aimed at exploring the UK's diplomatic, military and aid strategy for Afghanistan

Summary and recommendations

1. This World Food Programme (WFP) submission offers inputs to the call for evidence by the House of Lords on Afghanistan. The submission addresses the inquiry's questions relating to the impact that COVID-19 is having on the Country, the type of ODA programs, especially humanitarian action required to meet the growing needs and it makes some suggestions for the UK and the international aid community.
2. This year marks a defining moment for Afghanistan as the prospect of the Intra-Afghan talks provides a new hope for peace. Peace is by far the most important step in breaking the cycle of humanitarian need, alleviating suffering and getting Afghanistan back on its feet. Without it, there can be no meaningful development. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated an already fragile situation causing an unprecedented humanitarian crisis.
3. The international community's engagement in Afghanistan is more critical than ever to ensure that the chance for peace in Afghanistan is not lost. Collectively, we must ensure that the response to COVID-19 – from the government, the UN and civil society – is substantial enough to mitigate the risk of widespread destabilisation, fuelled by desperation. It is alarming to see that acute humanitarian needs are rising sharply just as aid budgets are shrinking. Afghanistan will require significant humanitarian and longer-term development support from the international community in the years to come.
 - **As the UK deploys its considerable resources in support of the ceasefire and peace process in Afghanistan, WFP recommends that it expand its support to the poorest groups in this pivotal year:**

- **Address humanitarian needs to reach all areas and groups, especially those affected by COVID-19.**
 - **Invest in jobs for young women and men, and a social protection scheme for those on the margins, to bolster stability now.**
 - **Underwrite food security, health, and education, so that the prospects for longer-term peace and prosperity are consolidated.**
- **The UK has an opportunity to use its influential voice to ensure a strong collective commitment to peace and development at the 2020 Conference on Afghanistan.**

Impact of COVID-19

4. The prevalence of COVID-19 is much higher than the official numbers suggest. Official numbers place the caseload at just over 38,000, but the WHO reports that the real prevalence could be as high as 30% of the population – over 10 million people. Despite a massive health response being led by the Government, there are huge challenges. Health facilities are ill-equipped and already overwhelmed. According to the Afghan Ministry of Public Health, about one third of the population (mostly those living in hard-to-reach areas) does not have access to a functional health centre within two hours of their home. Poor living conditions are also fuelling the spread of the virus. Most experts suggest that the worst is yet to come from a public health perspective.
5. COVID-19 has hit Afghanistan at its weakest moment. Its economy, its infrastructure and its population have been worn ragged over a very long period by war and poverty. And, whilst the population is remarkably resilient, as the UN's Humanitarian Coordinator has said "the cumulative impact of four decades living with constant stress and fear, trauma and injury, drought and floods, repeated displacement and crushing poverty is now taking a terrible toll".
6. A child born in Afghanistan will stand a 50% chance of starting life below the poverty line, but a 90% chance of being born into a family whose income cannot meet their basic needs. That child will stand a 40% chance of being physically and mentally stunted by malnutrition.

If that child is a girl, she will stand only a 20% chance of being literate by age 15. She will stand a 30% chance of being married before the age of 18 and a 50% chance of suffering domestic violence at the hand of her husband. All this was before COVID-19 hit.

7. COVID is a dramatic exacerbating factor in an already desperate situation, further disrupting already very fragile livelihoods and driving unemployment. The World Bank predicts that the economy will shrink by 5.5% in 2020. Some 80% of employed Afghans work in the informal sector exposing them to the impact of job losses. Moreover, the flow of remittances, an important source of household income, has been impacted by the pandemic as many Afghans abroad have been forced to return home or faced unemployment or reduced incomes.
8. There are already signs of serious socio-economic impact of COVID on the Afghan population and humanitarian needs have been revised accordingly. In June, the international humanitarian community estimated the number of Afghans in acute humanitarian need to have reached 14 million for 2020 – a 45% increase on original estimates for the year. And most of the population is considered to need some form of short-term transfer under a social protection scheme, just to mitigate the impact of COVID-19.
9. The impact of COVID-19 is worse for women and girls simply by virtue of their sex. UN Women reports that the pandemic will widen the poverty gap between men and women globally. Afghanistan has seen a surge in gender-based violence (GBV) and negative coping strategies among women and girls including early or forced marriage. According to Oxfam's 2020 Multisectoral Analysis: 88% of respondents answered that there has been an increase in protection issues and GBV since the beginning of the pandemic. Services in place for survivors of GBV are not being used at the same rate as they were previously - there are serious access and service delivery constraints due to the pandemic and a gap in data collection from the community level which means that the situation is likely to be much worse than the reports indicate.
10. Food insecurity is alarmingly high. According to the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, between April and May 2020, 10.9 million people faced 'crisis' or above levels of hunger. Driving food insecurity are high food prices, reduced employment opportunities and conflict. Unusually high food prices linked to border closures and panic

buying caused by COVID-19 have significantly limited food access among households already living below the poverty line. WFP's analysis shows that almost all main food commodity prices are significantly higher than they were pre-COVID.

11. The Afghan Government has launched an ambitious and positive response providing bread to 250,000 families affected by rising food prices and in addition has launched a national Covid-19 relief programme, "Dastarkhan-e-Milli" supported by the World Bank Projects and potentially covering 33 million people with one to two cash or food transfers.

Drivers of conflict and the link to hunger

12. COVID-19 has hit Afghanistan at a moment when violence remains high. In January to June this year, there were over 3,400 civilian casualties. The US-Taliban agreement has changed the dynamic positively. However, in 2020, with a considerably lighter international military footprint, the situation is unpredictable. Moreover, there is a good chance that heightened tensions and violence will accompany the intra-Afghan talks.
13. The fragility also stems from Afghanistan's demographics. Two-thirds of the population is under the age of 25 and, according to the World Bank, 42% of the youth are not in school, training or employment.
14. Food security and well-functioning food systems are central to achieve and maintain stability. Evidence from a SIPRI-WFP joint report shows that food security interventions can help to address potential long-term drivers of conflict – root causes – and thus to mitigate and prevent violence and contribute to peace in the long term. Indeed, food insecure countries have a 40% higher chance of relapsing into conflict than those that are not food insecure.
15. Food assistance provided to people affected by crises to address their immediate food needs, contributes to restoring stability and re-establishing a sense of normalcy among affected populations. At the community-level, food assistance can have a positive impact by helping to build resilience and social cohesion; outcomes which contribute to reducing violence. At the national level, effective social protection schemes need to be there to mitigate the climate and

economic shocks and provide for those unable to meet their basic needs.

16. In Afghanistan, WFP supports the Government with the provision of social safety nets and to strengthen broader national social protection and food systems. For example, WFP has helped to build the national strategic grain reserve, which will contain 75,000 MT of government wheat aiming to support 4.5 million households. WFP has introduced food fortification and works with local millers to add essential micronutrients to the staple wheat flour.
17. WFP also offers employment opportunities for youth which helps address root causes of conflict. These community-level projects are creating rural jobs, fostering community cohesion and contributing to from the ground up.
18. Continued and expanded donor investment in Afghanistan is essential in 2020 and 2021 to preserve what is already a very fragile stability in the country. The revised Humanitarian Response Plan for Afghanistan calculates that the humanitarian community requires USD 1.1 billion to reach 11.1 million of the most vulnerable people with life-saving assistance until the end of the year – this appeal is currently only one third funded.
19. The UK is a long standing and top donor to WFP globally and is in the process of confirming a contribution of GBP 15 million to WFP's activities in Afghanistan. This support is greatly needed and appreciated.

Note about WFP's presence in Afghanistan:

WFP is the largest UN aid agency in Afghanistan and a key actor supporting the Government of Afghanistan in the response to COVID-19. With more than 470 staff stationed in 7 offices and a fleet of more than 100 trucks delivering food assistance across the country in areas controlled by the Government and by other actors, WFP is scaling up assistance to reach people affected by job losses and movement restrictions – these are mainly in urban areas.

WFP operates the UN Humanitarian Air Service, which serves more than a dozen locations across the Country and is currently transporting over 25,000

passengers from 160 humanitarian organizations and essential medical equipment and cargo. International flights stopped abruptly in early 2020, prompting WFP to set up a humanitarian air bridge between Kabul and Doha, which has been the only way in or out of the country since April.

This year, WFP has already assisted close to 5 million people in Afghanistan and expects to reach 10 million by the end of the year. In addition to food, WFP is the largest provider of cash assistance in Afghanistan using biometrics to register beneficiaries which makes WFP processes more efficient and less prone to fraud. WFP's five-year programme in Afghanistan is valued at about 780 million pounds.

The humanitarian operating environment is getting harder. There are delays in procurement and transport from Pakistan into Afghanistan. Humanitarian actors still face constraints in reaching people in need.

Afghanistan remains one of the most dangerous places in the world for humanitarian workers and negotiating safe access is a critical part of WFP's role. The lack of staff safety hampers the humanitarian community's ability to operate at full capacity. Over the past months, up to 80 WFP staff have been off sick at the same time, either with COVID-19 or in quarantine. There are minimal health facilities for humanitarian staff and dependents - the health and wellbeing of staff remains a serious concern.

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