Policy brief

Proposals for a safety net in Afghanistan

Developing humanitarian transfers for resilience

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Recommendations

Humanitarian and other actors in Afghanistan should:

Develop and strengthen a technical dialogue on the vision for a 'non-governmental safety net' and on an agenda for its design and implementation

Commit to systematically document and learn from their programmes and to jointly define how ongoing operations could be funded, implemented and monitored to more effectively form the basis of a safety net

Develop a dedicated single high-level forum for overseeing the development of the safety net based on enhanced coordination models under the United Nations Strategic Framework for Afghanistan and that contributes to the work of Afghanistan Coordination Group's Joint Framework

Donors and international financial institutions should commit to fund the agenda to build a non-governmental safety net in Afghanistan and help set a clear vision of the safety net and how to make progress towards it.

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About this publication

This study was commissioned by the World Food Programme (WFP) office in Kabul with a view to informing its engagement in the social protection sector in the humanitarian, development and peace nexus in Afghanistan. It was informed by discussions with WFP staff across multiple programmes and divisions, as well as its regional bureau in Bangkok and headquarters in Rome.

It should be noted that the study began prior to the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021, and was reformulated and repurposed to reflect the changing socio-political situation.

The views herein are the authors' and do not necessarily represent the views of WFP or any of the agencies that participated in interviews or consultations for this study.

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We believe that our conversations unearthed a deep desire across actors to foster a spirit of genuine collaboration towards the stability and socioeconomic development of Afghanistan and the protection and prosperity of its people.

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Abbreviations

ACG	Afghanistan Coordination Group
ACRLP	Afghanistan Community Resilience and Livelihoods Project
ABADEI	Area-based Approach for Development Emergency Initiatives
CDC	Community Development Council
CVWG	Cash and Voucher Working Group
DFA	de facto authority
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organisation
GDP	gross domestic product
HDP	humanitarian, development and peace (nexus)
HRP	Humanitarian Response Plan
IFI	International Financial Institution
IPC	Integrated Food Security Phase Classification
ISIL-KP	Islamic State – Khorasan Province
MIS	management information system
NGO	non-governmental organisation
NRF	National Resistance Front of Afghanistan
OCHA	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
ODA	Official Development Assistance
SOP	standard operating procedure
TEF	Transitional Engagement Framework
UN	United Nations
UNCT	United Nations Country Team
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNSFA	United Nations Strategic Framework for Afghanistan
WFP	World Food Programme

1. Introduction

Afghanistan's economy crashed following the Taliban takeover in August 2021 as international aid, which represented 20% of the country's gross domestic product (GDP), was withdrawn. This step change exacerbated long-term structural weaknesses. Repeated droughts and shrinking irrigated agricultural land had already weakened livelihoods for the majority, and insurgency had sapped growth, undermined security and created large-scale displacement. Weak and corrupt governance, together with a heavy dependence on military and development aid, led to slow and patchy progress on basic services and human development. The population had increased due to the return of refugees and high fertility rates and conflict-related displacement was prominent. Conflict, economic pulls and, most recently, emigration have resulted in a shifting and fragmented population already riven by ethnic and religious divisions.

1.1 The hunger and poverty crisis

While armed conflict has mostly disappeared since August 2021, any gains from increased peace have been undermined by economic collapse and the political rigidities of a fundamentalist de facto authority (DFA). Poverty levels are predicted at 97% (UNDP, 2021) and severe food insecurity threatens much of the population: 47% were in International Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) phases 3 or 4 in the spring of 2022, with a minimal projected fall to 45% (19 million people) for the rest of the year (IPC, 2022). A $4.4 billion call for emergency humanitarian assistance for Afghanistan in early 2022 was the largest-ever humanitarian appeal.

The United Nations (UN) and the wider international community do not currently recognise the Taliban government. Official Development Assistance (ODA) ceased, crippling employment and worsening already fragile living standards. The UN has adopted a multi-agency Transitional Engagement Framework (TEF) in order to operate a country-level presence in the absence of a formally recognised government partner. This is evolving into the United Nations Strategic Framework for Afghanistan (UNSFA) and a wider Afghanistan Coordination Group (ACG) including donors and international financial institutions (IFIs).

The banking and financial sectors imploded and liquidity disappeared, while the threat of sanctions made international transfers impossible and the delivery of financial aid difficult. Sanctions policy has been clarified to allow both humanitarian and longer-term services, but operations are still held back by the lack of banking and financial services across the country (Sahak, 2021).

Slow economic improvement in early 2022 (World Bank, 2022) failed to dent high household food insecurity: 18.9 million people were estimated to be acutely food-insecure between June and November 2022, and 90% of households struggled to meet their food needs in the summer of 2022 (WFP, 2022). By the final months of 2022, food prices had stabilised but remained 22%

higher than in 2021, while diesel and energy prices were 81% higher (ibid.). Half a million people received emergency aid in some form following earthquakes in Khost region in June 2020 (ReliefWeb, 2022), highlighting again the persistent risk of seismic and weather-related shocks in a country already devastated by drought and economic collapse.

The cessation of large-scale conflict has improved the general security situation, but attacks by Islamic State – Khorasan Province (ISIL-KP) against religious minorities and by the National Resistance Front of Afghanistan (NRF) undermine peace and mean that a conflict-sensitive approach to the development of a safety net will be needed. The ubiquitous check-points, heavy policing of civil rights, attacks on girls' and women's economic and social rights and Islamic mahram and hijab-wearing directives mean that many Afghanis view 'improved security' simply as the replacement of armed conflict by repression.

2. Responses to the crisis

Humanitarian transfers of food, cash and other 'in-kind' aid have scaled up significantly since 2021. The question now arises as to how to plan for the medium to longer term. The TEF contains an explicit aim to create a *'non-governmental safety net'* (UN, 2022), while the UNSFA currently under development also incorporates safety nets in its 'essential services' priority (Priority 1). The World Bank and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) have initiated two new transfer programmes: the Afghanistan Community Resilience and Livelihoods Project (ACRLP) and the Area-based Approach for Development Emergency Initiatives (ABADEI), both of which will operate at scale.

There are two related problems in implementing a non-government safety net: first, current Humanitarian Clusters and Sectors cut across safety net programmes; second, new actors sit outside of the UN and its Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)/Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP).

Our review of non-government programmes is summarised in Figure 1. We define a 'safety net' to include transfers of cash and in-kind assistance, and to include services to improve household productivity/employment/human capital and boost nutrition. All of these activities represent a nascent safety net present in current humanitarian and other development programming.

Figure 1 Non-government programmes relevant to a safety net

Agency/ organisation	Non-government programmes and safety net functions						
	Transfers		Employment/improving productivity			Nutrition and feeding	
	Cash/voucher	In-kind/ food	Cash/ food for work	Agricultural inputs	Training/ business development	Maternal and infant	School feeding
WFP	x	x	x		x	x	x
FAO	x	x	x	x			
UNHCR^	X	X^					
UNICEF*	x					x	
UNDP	x		x		x		
World Bank	x	x	x				
NGOs	x	x	x	x	x	x	

Figure 1 clearly shows the widespread use of cash and vouchers across agencies and the large presence of in-kind transfers and public works-based employment – together with less-consistent service packages.

Any 'nascent' safety net is frustrated by a plethora of differing mandates and different implementation approaches, often in reaction to emerging disasters and situations and without necessarily speaking to a comprehensive common vulnerability framework or response policy. Programmes are not packaged or implemented in a such a way to form a coherent safety net that can more predictably and consistently cover population needs. At the same time, many of these programmes operate with coordination under humanitarian 'clusters' and 'working groups', but inclusion and coverage are not consistent.

The lack of a consistent approach to meeting chronic needs, rather than emergency/humanitarian ones, represents one gap. An assessment would need to be made to establish how far programmes consistently address different approaches to cash and in-kind transfers:

● regular cash and in-kind support for 'chronically poor and food insecure'
● seasonal support to people with cyclical basic needs relating to planting and harvesting and weather-related (winter and hungry season) reasons
● one-off or repeated emergency or shock-related support (Covid, floods, earthquakes).

3. Developing a safety net

Implementing the UNSFA's mandate for a 'non-governmental social safety net' will entail defining a common vulnerability framework. While food security, nutrition and protection of essential needs across risks and shocks may be the priority for the World Food Programme (WFP), other agencies with different mandates and objectives might approach vulnerability through different, albeit complementary, lenses.

3.1 Building blocks of a safety net

3.1.1 Governance, capacity and coordination

Coordination and governance need to occur across donors, UN agencies and IFIs, and may be best done within the grouping of organisations in the Afghanistan Coordination Framework. This should oversee the development of a safety net with technical working groups delegated to consider issues of implementation.

Dedicated coordination structures would have to be implemented   with actors that span the humanitarian, development and peace (HDP) nexus and have a demonstrated interest and ability to engage in social assistance system-building. A commitment to learning, documenting and standardising programmatic procedures is needed – for instance, developing, based on current experiences, standardised operational manuals, roles and competencies, and adequate training content and curricula.

3.1.2 Platforms and infrastructure

A consistent and comprehensive safety net is best based on a common shared registry that is regularly updated to reflect population movement. Standardising management data across programmes will be crucial.

Beneficiary identification and targeting approaches are currently only aligned at a high level – using categorical groups (such as disabled, pregnant and mothers of infants, elderly people and female-headed households) and through needs assessments using scorecards or other non-means-tested approaches. Standardisation and formalisation of these approaches would be needed based on assessments of success in adequately reaching these target groups in previous programming.

Implementation of community targeting by local community leadership groups – Community Development Councils (CDCs), Gozar councils, mosque committees – will need to establish common and consistent standard operating procedures (SOPs).

The type and value of transfers need to be adapted in line with the objectives of individual programmes in the safety net. The major element of current programming is food and other in-kind transfers, but the use of cash depends on multiple factors such as inflation, markets, target groups, technology and comparative advantage. There is a need to reflect on links between transfers and social services to ensure no one is left behind, in particular girls and women, children, people with disability and ethnic minorities.

Grievance, appeal and feedback mechanisms should be made consistent, further developed and rolled out.

3.1.3 Planning and financing

Cross-agency analysis of the state of play in terms of coverage, programme content and implementation should be undertaken. Household and other surveys can provide evidence of coverage gaps, exclusion/inclusion errors and effectiveness and efficiency issues.

Administrative costs to implement the safety net will need to be coordinated across agencies and at the higher United Nations Country Team (UNCT)/country level. A transparent approach to auditing programmes and assessing value for money and effectiveness should be developed from the outset.

Change will have to be incremental, with three to four stages to reach a safety net with a clear 'unified' stage by a stipulated end point, in accordance with agreed timelines and scenarios. These multi-year timelines should influence annual planning.

Donors will have a large role to play in both planning and financing and should be part of any governance structure. The aid architecture and associated trust funds for Afghanistan will require consideration in order to be consistent with a cross-agency unified safety net. Explicit earmarking in humanitarian budgets of longer-term developmental components develop the safety net will be needed in the medium term.

3.1.4 Assessments and analysis

A stocktaking of programme-level timelines, transfer modalities and levels and coverage will need to be put in place to understand how the current components of a safety net can be assessed in terms of their combined operational coverage, generosity and durability. This will give a clear indication of financing scenarios for making a coordinated safety net durable and scaleable.

The safety net will require a systematic approach to vulnerability assessment and evidence generation, which may involve new baseline survey data to inform design and costing and

capture and monitor implementation. Representative and coordinated survey data on incomes, consumption, food security and other material aspects of living standards, together with indicators of vulnerability and human rights, should be at the heart of safety net planning.

Integration of geographical and population-specific differences in poverty and food insecurity will be essential to plan programmes. Management information system (MIS) data will need to be used at all levels (within and across agencies) to ensure robust analysis of performance.

3.1.5 Monitoring, evaluation and learning

A systematic approach to documenting, learning and evaluation should be central to planning how current transfer programmes evolve into a common safety net.

High-quality MIS data and a robust evaluation approach should be in place to assess programme impacts, cost-effectiveness and participants' experiences.

A commitment to public accountability through empirical independent monitoring and evaluation and financial audit will be key to the reputation and probity of the scheme and its governance.

Incremental and cumulative progress in the evolution of the safety net from the adaptation of programming should be clearly tracked in programming outputs and evaluated, and the lessons from such changes brought into the further development of the safety net.

3.1.6 Advocacy

Advocacy in humanitarian appeals and HRP planning will need to adapt to a medium-term strategy once the remit and timing of the plan to implement a safety net is clear.

Advocacy should also encompass efforts to make the safety net inclusive and respectful of human rights, while foreseeing future scenarios for transition to national authorities.

4. Making progress

Our most important conclusion is that the current set of non-government humanitarian and other programmes that deliver cash and in-kind support to poor/food-insecure households *are in a form and at a scale that can be seen to represent a nascent safety net*. All the ingredients for a safety net are present; they are just working to different operational and organisational mandates.

A clear vision and policy goal of establishing an integrated 'safety net' should be established at the highest level possible – within, but most importantly across, the current set of programme actors (UN agencies, donors and IFIs).

The important change in thinking is to move beyond operational coordination between agencies and, instead, focus on how to be strategically incremental to integrate policies and programmes that can build towards a safety net in measurable terms.

Three levels of action are needed.

4.1 At agency level

- First, adapt country programme planning processes to include a medium-term 'resilience' safety net as a stipulated aim for each agency.
- Second, both internally and in partnership with other relevant actors and agencies, map existing programmes to see what fits where. Which programmes are already medium-term, and where would they fit into the set of programmes in place for the safety net?
- Third, commit to systematic learning and documentation in current humanitarian programming.
- Fourth, consider changes in the policy environment and, in particular, the development of UNDP's Area-based Approach for Development Emergency Initiatives and the World Bank's Afghanistan Community Resilience and Livelihoods Project, which will run alongside programmes in 2023 and beyond.
- Fifth, invest in training and capacity-building around social safety nets for in-country programme and managerial staff.

4.2 At cross-agency level

- Use the 'building blocks' outlined above to formulate and prioritise action towards a safety net.
- Agencies should set out a clearly timetabled plan to allow incremental expansion of joint MISs and reporting across agencies. Set up joint evaluation of programmes in place and of the evolving aggregate safety net.

4.3 At country level

- The absence of a national government partner lays a greater responsibility on all agencies to be accountable to a 'sovereign' policy-making approach.
- The HRP process needs to align with the planning and implementation of a national non-governmental safety net alongside humanitarian responses.

Donors have a strategic responsibility towards national-level policy such as a safety net. They will also be best-placed to recognise the inefficiencies of aid spending where there is duplication of roles and responsibilities across agencies in the current arrangements. However, policy 'silos' do not just occur between agencies but also within donors themselves, who often have different sections dealing with their humanitarian and development policy approaches.

Important issues for research and analysis lie across and above technical working groups on programming design and implementation. Two high-level streams of analysis and research are recommended:

- On safety net effectiveness, ensure that coverage of the poor and hungry is as extensive as possible given the level of existing and potential funding streams, and that programme mix and design are assessed and evaluated to ensure impacts and outcomes are optimal.
- On safety net efficiency, identify and quantify the costs of duplication and other inefficiencies arising from multi-agency programming.

Important strategic decisions on funding are needed to develop and establish a safety net – both in terms of the timing and duration of funds and their specificity – at the level of emergency or longer-term programming and at the programmatic response level. Funds that can be used to bridge emergency and medium-term development needs (resilience or otherwise) need to be identified and assigned towards establishing a safety net. A safety net will only be successful if consistent multi-year donor funding is in place. Agreement on priorities and coordination with donors from the outset is critical.

At national level, there should be a body with the power to oversee the safety net and prioritise and reach agreement across actors and sectors. The terms of reference and representation of this body will need to be considered as a matter of urgency. This grouping would need to reflect a wider set of development partners than purely UN agency or IFI-led governance models, and would thus be most easily reflected in the membership of the Afghanistan Coordination Group.

As a final and critical consideration, in the absence of political representation of the Afghan people, the development of a safety net must ensure that the issue of sovereignty has some leverage over policies and programmes that will eventually evolve into a template for future government. The key priority of any 'non-governmental safety net' is how it could evolve and be taken over and run by a government in what currently looks like a distant future.

⁹ References

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