



# Humanitarian Access SCORE Report: Afghanistan

Survey on the Coverage, Operational Reach,  
and Effectiveness of Humanitarian Aid



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### Humanitarian Outcomes

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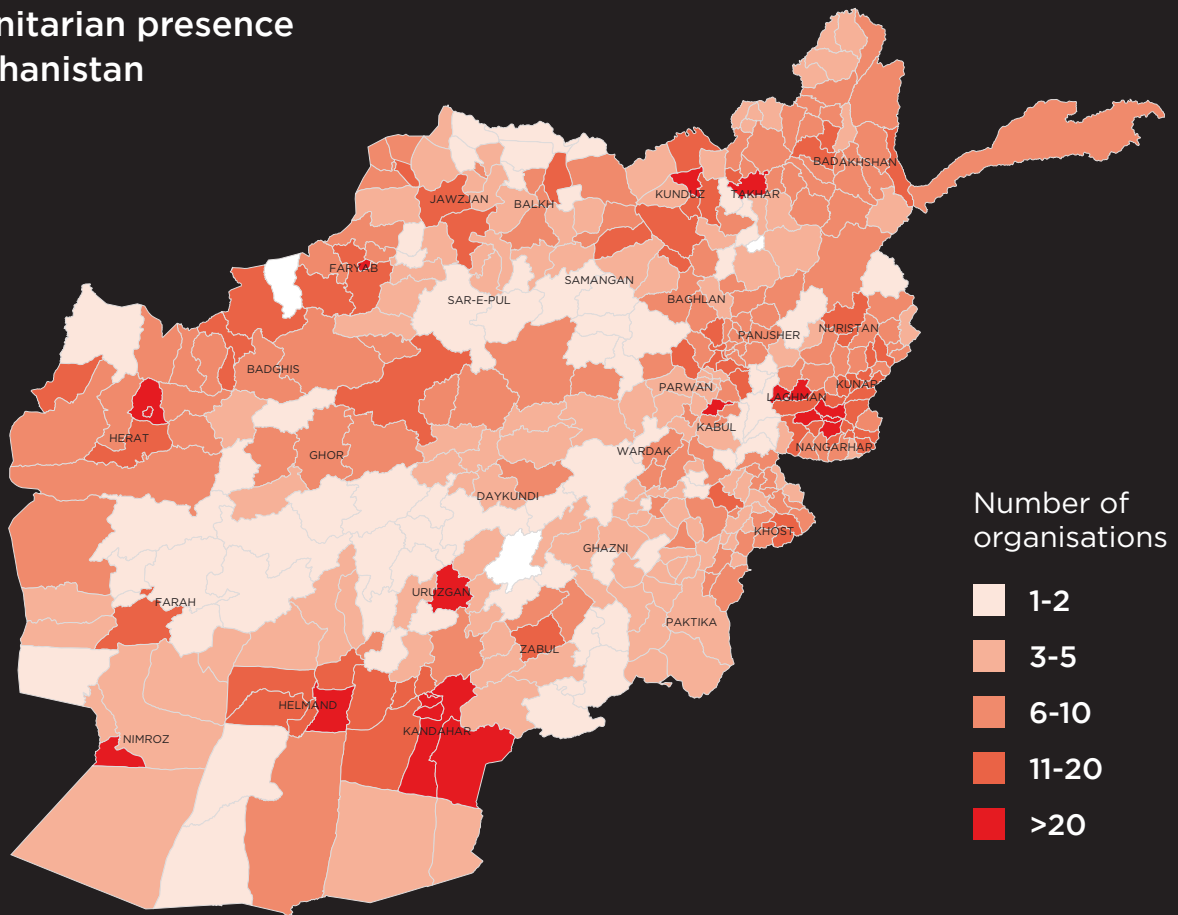
## SCORE reports

Under the CORE research programme, supported by the Office of US Foreign Disaster Assistance of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID/OFDA), Humanitarian Outcomes is studying how aid is delivered in hard-to-access conflict areas. In partnership with GeoPoll, the project conducts remote telephone surveys of crisis-affected people on their perceptions of the effectiveness of the aid response and the access challenges in their areas. Combined with key informant interviews of humanitarian responders and other contextual research, the survey results help identify the humanitarian providers and practices that have achieved the greatest presence and coverage in difficult environments.

The Afghanistan SCORE report surveyed 450 people (51% male, 49% female) in the provinces of Baghlan, Helmand, Herat, Kandahar, and Nangahar (selected for relatively high need and access challenges) in September 2019. Surveys were conducted by live operators in the relevant languages (Dari or Pashto). A follow-up survey was conducted in January 2020 with 100 of the original respondents who had agreed to be surveyed a second time to provide more in-depth information. The research team also conducted anonymous interviews with 10 humanitarian actors in Afghanistan, including NGOs, UN agencies and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. More information on the SCORE methodology, including the survey instrument and downloadable response data, are available at [www.humanitarianoutcomes.org/projects/core](http://www.humanitarianoutcomes.org/projects/core)



## Humanitarian presence in Afghanistan



Data from <http://www.unocha.org/afghanistan>

## Summary

Afghanistan remains in a state of chronic humanitarian crisis. Decades of unrelenting armed conflict, recurrent natural disasters, and extreme poverty have placed the country near the top of the Global Crisis Severity Index,<sup>1</sup> and ongoing challenges to humanitarian access have meant that coverage of humanitarian needs has been patchy, inadequate, and often skewed toward areas of lesser need where aid organisations find it safer to operate.<sup>2</sup>

The overall humanitarian presence in Afghanistan has been declining for many years since the peak of post-invasion international response in the early 2000s. International NGOs that once operated projects in multiple districts per province have contracted their presence over the years, and while remaining operational in the country, most have not sought to gain or regain ground for programming. Many vulnerable people across the country are unable to access resources to meet their basic needs.

<sup>1</sup> INFORM Global Crisis Severity Index. Available at <https://drmkc.jrc.ec.europa.eu/inform-index/Global-Crisis-Severity-Index>

<sup>2</sup> Stoddard, A., Jillani, S., Caccavale, J., Cooke, P., Guillemois, D., and Klimentov, V. (2017). Out of reach: How insecurity prevents humanitarian aid from accessing the neediest. *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development*, 6(1), 1.

Our surveys found that:

- ▶ most respondents had not received any aid, though all of them reported having needed it
- ▶ most perceived a decline in humanitarian presence
- ▶ insecurity for aid workers was seen as the main obstacle to humanitarian access
- ▶ while food has been the most frequently received type of aid, people would like to see increased medical and cash programming
- ▶ respondents felt that the best way to improve humanitarian access would be through greater consultation with communities and cooperation with local councils.

Complicating the picture of humanitarian presence in Afghanistan is that a large portion of it is effectively invisible. Most NGOs in Afghanistan have dealt with insecurity risks by adopting extreme low-profile and localised modes of programming. For this reason, apart from the Afghan Red Crescent Society (ARCS) (the most present aid provider in the country), and the UN agencies, people surveyed were hard pressed to name specific organisations, local or international, that they saw as particularly effective in reaching the most vulnerable and maintaining presence. Danish Committee for Aid to Afghan Refugees (DACAAR) and the Aga Khan Development Network were the most frequently recognised—both are technically international organisations that have distinctively Afghan identities through their long presence and nationalised leadership.

As with the survey respondents, humanitarian staff we interviewed for this study reported security concerns as the biggest obstacle to expanding programming. After years of insecurity, and several high-profile targeted attacks, the risk appetite remains understandably low and seemingly resistant to changes in conflict dynamics and donor pressure. The Taliban's demands for the taxation of aid coming into the territories under its control has created particular problems for the humanitarian community over the last year, as has corruption among Afghan authorities.

Some good practices and promising advances have emerged in negotiated access at the individual and collective level for agencies; however, the enormity of need compared with the relative paucity of humanitarian capacity in-country suggests the answer lies not (or not merely) in expanding aid organisations' access to people in need, but rather in making it easier for people to access aid resources. Greater use of remote and flexible resource transfer (i.e. cash programming, which has lagged in Afghanistan compared to other contexts), combined with better targeting of the most vulnerable segments in society, would seem to be critically important for closing this gap. Both of these require more and better community consultation, which has started to be recognised by the humanitarian sector and reflected in collective investment in outreach and accountability mechanisms.

## The crisis in Afghanistan

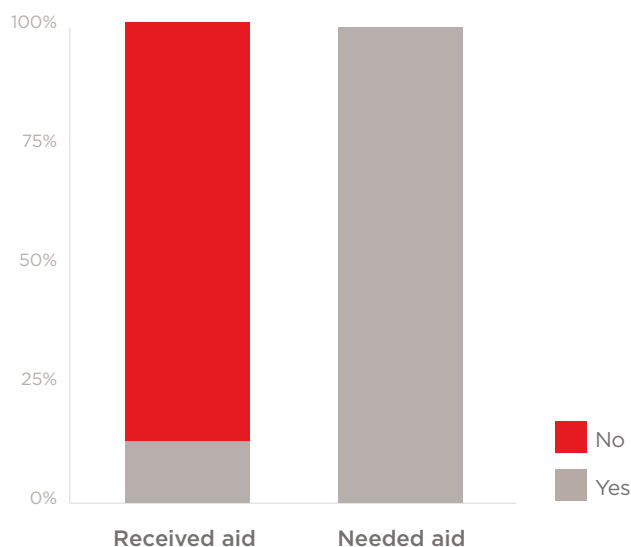
A situation report issued by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) summarised Afghanistan's severe and complex challenges: 'With 2019 almost over, humanitarian needs continue to grow in Afghanistan due to ongoing violence, natural disasters, internal displacement, growing food insecurity and dropping temperatures.'<sup>3</sup> OCHA estimated that 9.4 million people—a quarter of the population—were in need of humanitarian assistance, which is over three million more people in need than in 2018.

Security conditions remained tense and uncertain, with new gains made by the Taliban, as well as sporadic ISIS activity. Armed clashes affecting civilians and causing population displacements continued across many parts of the country against a backdrop of a contentious election and uncertain peace talks. Roughly one-third of people in Afghanistan faced severe acute food insecurity, while one-third (mostly those living in hard-to-reach areas) lack access to a functional health centre within two hours of their home.<sup>4</sup>

After several years of declining funding and growing donor fatigue, a severe drought in 2018–2019 served to mobilise resources and created a surge in the humanitarian response to reach 5.2 million affected people. Even so, a large gap remains between people in need and those able to access aid.

Most Afghans surveyed for this report said that they had not received aid in the past year (not by itself surprising in the sample of 400)—but when asked whether they had needed aid in that time, all of them answered 'yes'.

**Figure 1: Did you receive aid in the past year? Did you need aid in the past year?**



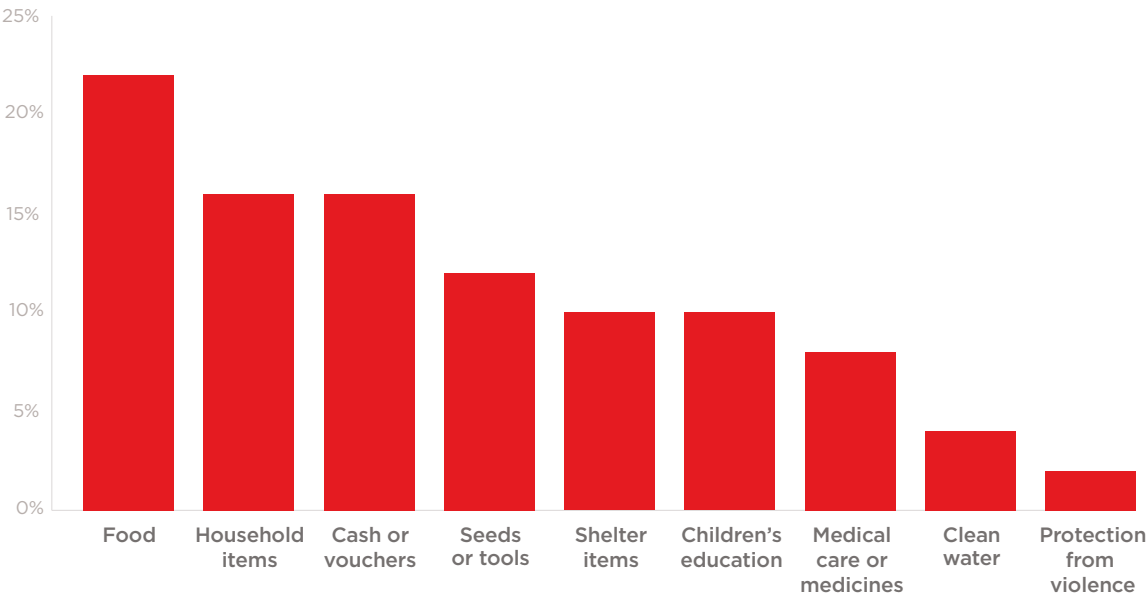
*Survey on Coverage Operational Reach and Effectiveness (humanitarianoutcomes.org/projects/core)*

<sup>3</sup> OCHA. (2019a). Afghanistan: Monthly humanitarian update (October 2019).

<sup>4</sup> Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) Alert on Afghanistan, 2019 (<http://www.ipcinfo.org/ipcinfo-website/ipc-alerts/issue-15/en/>) and OCHA. (2019). Afghanistan humanitarian needs overview 2020.

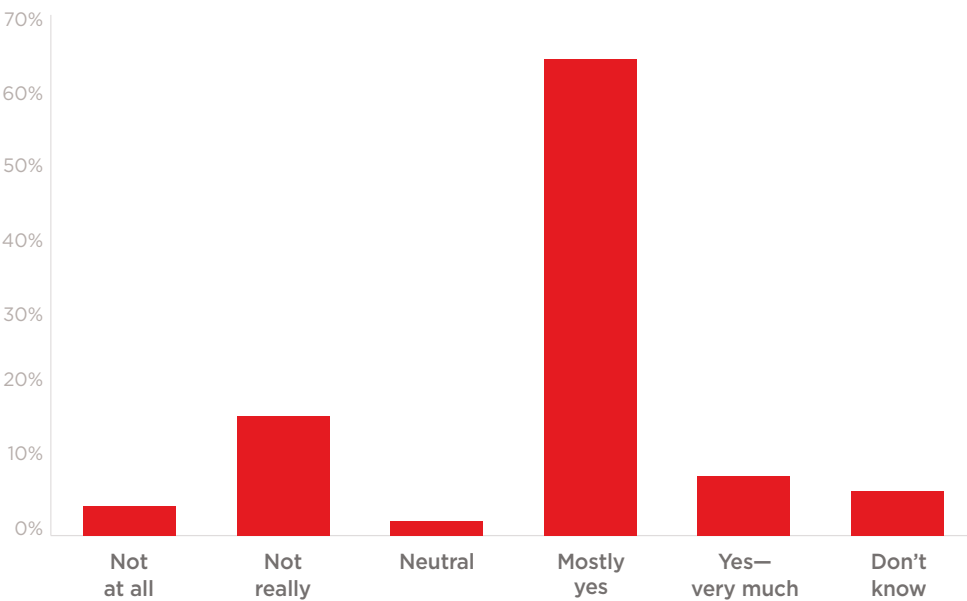
Of the minority of respondents that received aid, most reported that the type of aid they received was food, followed by household items and cash or vouchers (Figure 2). When asked whether the aid they received met their basic needs, a majority answered ‘mostly, yes’ (Figure 3).

**Figure 2: Types of aid received**



*Survey on Coverage Operational Reach and Effectiveness ([humanitarianoutcomes.org/projects/core](https://humanitarianoutcomes.org/projects/core))*

**Figure 3: Relevance of aid to needs**



*Survey on Coverage Operational Reach and Effectiveness ([humanitarianoutcomes.org/projects/core](https://humanitarianoutcomes.org/projects/core))*



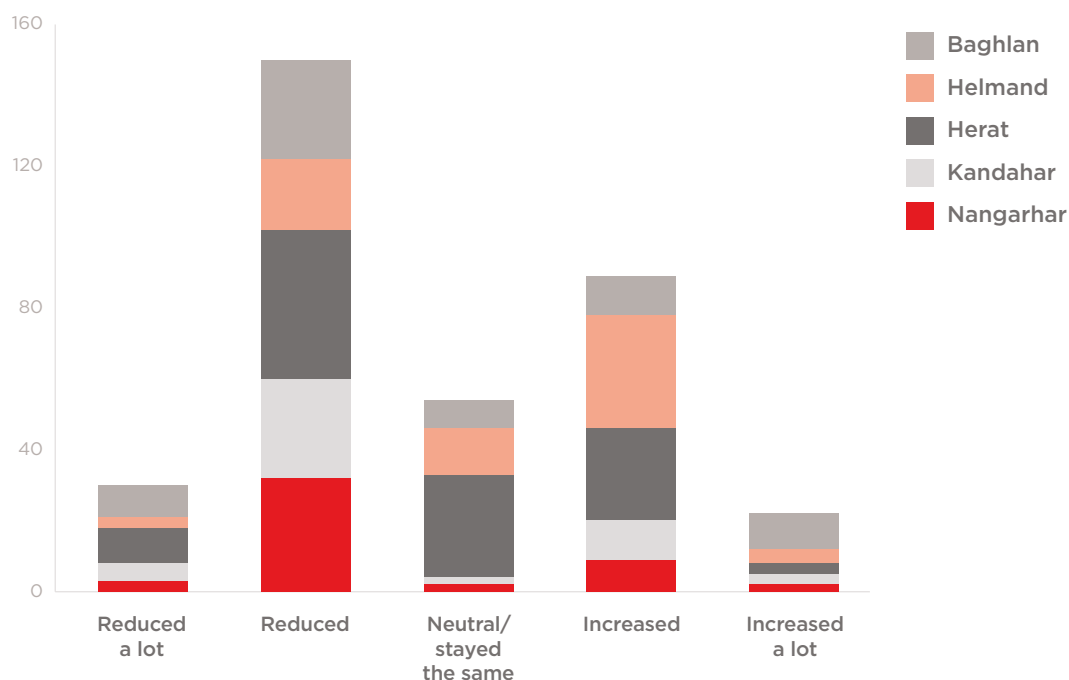
## The humanitarian presence

A previous study, as part of the Humanitarian Outcomes Secure Access in Volatile Environments (SAVE) programme, found that international NGOs had reduced their district-level programming presence in Afghanistan by 40 per cent between 2012 and 2014, as opposition forces regained territory and significant attacks against aid operations and personnel caused a hunkering down effect.<sup>5</sup> In the intervening years, the operational presence has fluctuated in different areas in response to sudden shocks like floods, or to changing security conditions and conflict dynamics. However, the overall trend of contraction has not reversed even as a (very small) number of international agencies have sought to step up their capacity for negotiating access and expand their programming to new areas.

OCHA Afghanistan, which undertakes comprehensive and detailed tracking of operational presence data, reports there were 79 national NGOs and 62 international NGOs participating in the humanitarian response at the end of 2019, along with 11 UN organisations and the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement entities.<sup>6</sup> In the course of 2019, according to OCHA, humanitarian assistance was delivered to 372 of 401 districts—or 93 per cent of all districts in the country. The only exceptions were districts where ISIS is active. Without further information on the size of the programming presence (self-reported ‘projects’ and their reach can vary hugely), and the number of people in need being successfully reached with what level of assistance, it is difficult to gauge the impact. Assessing presence is further complicated by the fact that the NGO community is largely engaged in low-profile and localised operations. It is therefore often the case that only the direct beneficiaries will be aware of a programme—and even they might not be aware of the organisation running it.

In any event, aid presence is perceived to be lower than in previous years (Figure 4).

**Figure 4: How has the aid presence changed in your area?**



*Survey on Coverage Operational Reach and Effectiveness (humanitarianoutcomes.org/projects/core)*

<sup>5</sup> Stoddard, A., Jillani, S., Caccavale, J., et al. (2017). Out of reach: How insecurity prevents humanitarian aid from accessing the neediest.

<sup>6</sup> OCHA. (n.d.). Who does what, where (3W). Retrieved from [humanitarianresponse.info](http://humanitarianresponse.info), [www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/afghanistan/3w](http://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/afghanistan/3w) [20 April 2020].

More than the number of organisations operating, the key question would seem to be whether the combined programming presence of the humanitarian actors, together with the Afghan government and other actors, has a meaningful impact on the enormity of the needs of the population or only touches a small fraction of them. As one interview noted, even if these agencies were to see substantial improvements in access, large gaps in coverage would unquestionably remain.

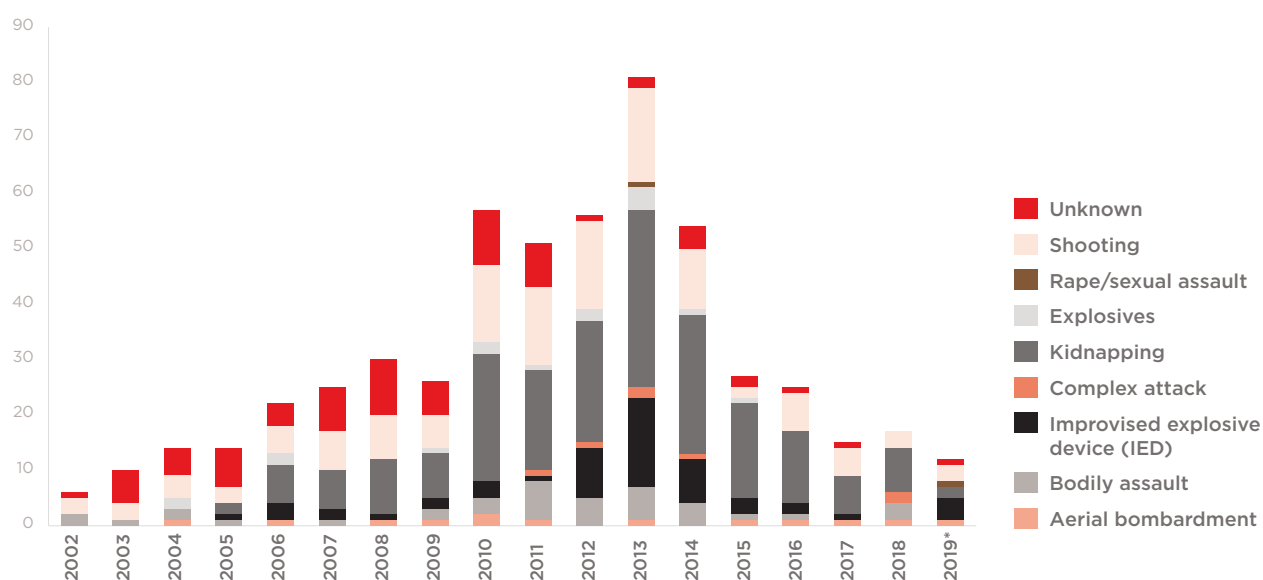
## Access obstacles

In addition to heightened insecurity, the Afghanistan Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) for 2018–2021 notes particular challenges to humanitarian access coming from growing bureaucratic constraints from the government and the Taliban’s demands to collect taxes on aid entering its areas of control.<sup>7</sup> Aid groups attempting to find common solutions to access problems through the Kabul-based Humanitarian Access Group (HAG) have underscored the issues of ‘greater negotiations with parties to the conflict on road access, interference in programming and taxation requests.’ In early 2020, the humanitarian actors appear to have made some headway on the taxation issue, but persistent insecurity, political, and coordination challenges combine to hamper access, giving Afghanistan a 4 out of 5 (‘extreme’) rating on the ACAPs index of access constraints.<sup>8</sup>

## Insecurity and access inertia

Afghanistan has consistently been among the top five most insecure contexts for aid workers since the early 2000s. Although the number of attacks on aid personnel has fallen since its peak in 2012/2013 (Figure 5), Afghanistan remains among the most violent places to operate, and has an all-time total number of aid worker attacks higher than any other country recorded in the Aid Worker Security Database (1997–present). In addition, compared to other conflict contexts, aid workers in Afghanistan have suffered relatively higher numbers of kidnappings and so-called complex attacks, involving explosives and multi-shooter armed incursions.<sup>9</sup>

**Figure 5: Attacks on aid workers in Afghanistan, 2002–2019**



Humanitarian Outcomes, Aid Worker Security Database ([aidworkersecurity.org](http://aidworkersecurity.org))

\*Preliminary figures, pending verification

<sup>7</sup> OCHA. (2018). Afghanistan. Humanitarian response plan 2018–2021.

<sup>8</sup> ACAPS. (2020). Afghanistan/Overview. Available at [www.acaps.org/country/afghanistan/crisis/complex-crisis](http://www.acaps.org/country/afghanistan/crisis/complex-crisis)

<sup>9</sup> The pattern of kidnappings in Afghanistan reported in the 2013 Aid Worker Security Report, [The new normal: Coping with the kidnapping threat](http://aidworkersecurity.org) continues today, whereby the large majority of aid worker kidnappings are resolved with the victim released within a few days following intervention from community leaders.



Most attacks against aid workers have been perpetrated by armed opposition forces, most prominently the Taliban and allied armed groups like the Haqqani network. A few years ago, ISIS had managed to gain control of some territory and launch deadly attacks, making them seemed poised to be an additional significant threat, but they since lost ground and today their activities are largely confined to border areas in the provinces of Nangarhar and Kunar.

Although the violence has decreased somewhat, several high-profile, fatal attacks against NGOs, UN and Red Cross Movement entities over the years have fostered what some have called a ‘bunkerised’ mindset among many agencies.<sup>10</sup> A country director for one prominent NGO who had worked in the country for several years acknowledged that the overall humanitarian presence has been shrinking since 2012, especially in terms of internationals venturing outside of provincial capitals. After an initial contraction of presence, many organisations settled into operational patterns whereby they maintained presence through a combination of highly localised staffing (for some projects, the NGO country directors have never visited) and near or complete organisational invisibility, meaning no logos or any sort of staff identification, the use of local vehicles, etc.). Interviews with humanitarian personnel confirmed that despite increased levels of need, and pressure from the UN and donors to expand coverage, humanitarian organisations have mostly continued to maintain low-profile operations in areas where they have been present for years and achieved a comfort level in terms of security, choosing not to expand their footprint. Sudden-onset disasters in some areas have proven to be an exception and, over the years, operational surges have taken place in response to catastrophic floods, drought conditions and other shocks—but the long-term patterns persist, with only a handful of exceptions.

A few agency interviewees suggested that it may be time for NGOs to shift away from the low-profile approach. Said one, ‘Afghanistan INGOs have been low-profile for so long, a lot of the local people don’t know who exactly they are dealing with. [This is a problem because] we don’t want to be seen as part of the government. We are now [going back to being] mostly branded in most places. Even the Taliban says, “you should identify yourself”.’

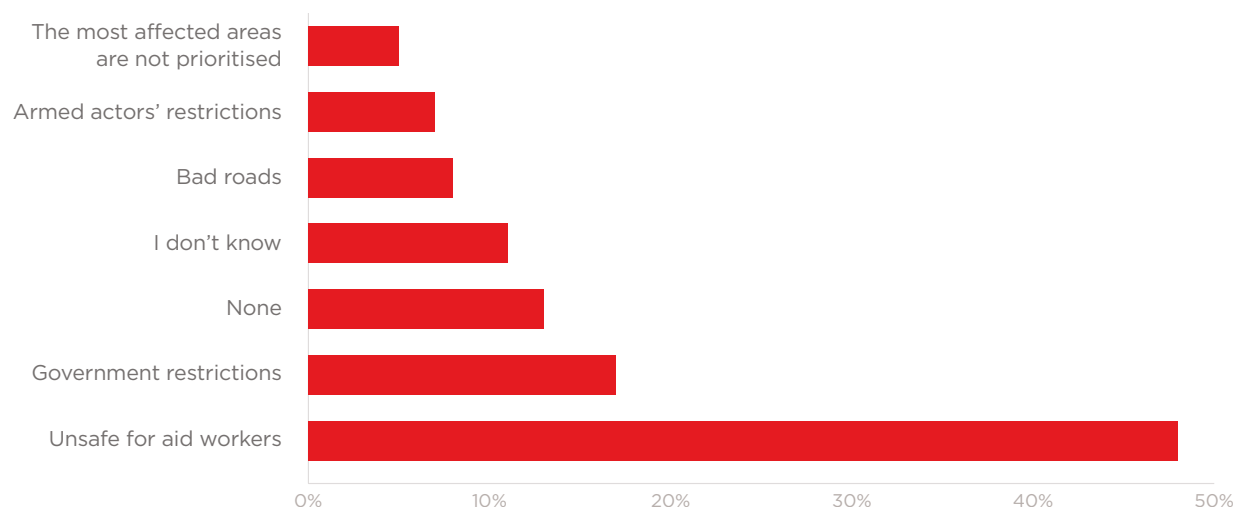
As the Taliban has incrementally regained control of more territory and ‘matured’ as a political actor of growing power vis-à-vis the government, some humanitarians interviewed report that, in principle, negotiated access is possible in most places. They further accuse some NGOs of citing ‘lack of access’ to explain their limited operational scope, when it has more to do with lack of appetite for risk. The Taliban’s track record of unpredictability and willingness to target aid groups and civilians looms large over agencies that have been operating in the country for a long time and feel little incentive to push the boundaries. When it comes to risk appetite, he said, ‘there is not much interest in expanding’.

Finally, interviewees noted a tendency to focus on the actions of the Taliban and neglect the access constraints caused by the government authorities and their associates. Paramilitary forces associated with the government pose particular access and accountability challenges, and bureaucratic constraints (customs, visas, government taxes) create delays and operational difficulties. Deconfliction failures and the threat of air strikes remain important constraints to access as well, and one interview underscored the emergence of the Afghan Air Force as adding to this uncertainty.

The ever-present background threat of violence and sudden instability seems to pervade the inhabitants’ attitudes as well. Survey responses strongly indicated that Afghans also view insecurity for aid workers as a primary obstacle to humanitarian access (Figure 6).

<sup>10</sup> Jackson, A. and Zyck, S.A. (2017). Presence & proximity: To stay and deliver, five years on.

**Figure 6: What prevents aid from reaching where it is needed most?**



*Survey on Coverage Operational Reach and Effectiveness ([humanitarianoutcomes.org/projects/core](https://humanitarianoutcomes.org/projects/core))*

## Political and ethical challenges

Over the past year, humanitarian organisations working in Afghanistan have found themselves grappling with Taliban demands for taxation on the one hand and government corruption on the other, complaining that aid agencies seem to be held to different standards than private sector actors and to be subject to heavy scrutiny and compliance accountability to donor governments.

The Taliban has demonstrated clear interest in attracting aid agencies to service the populations in areas under its control, agencies say, but at the same time has taken an implicitly assertive and intimidating tone in demanding taxation in the form of payments or a percentage of the cargo, either before, during or after distributions. As in many other aid contexts, a situation had emerged where aid agencies were making the decision to pay for access at a very local level, and not discussing it externally, or even within the organisation.<sup>11</sup> One interviewee said that because some small NGOs see their comparative advantage as being able to access difficult places, they are naturally tempted to bend the rules (i.e. make payments) to do this. As another put it, 'No one is admitting to paying tax, but everyone assumes that everyone else is'.

Such taxation demands from the Taliban were not new to the humanitarian actors, but had become more centrally directed and strident, based on the logic that aid actors pay the government taxes on the import of aid supplies and salaries of aid workers in the country, so should do the same when they are operating in areas held by the Taliban. At the same time the Taliban was ratcheting up its demands, donor governments were also increasing pressure on scrutiny of their agency fundees to not run afoul of regulations and anti-terrorism legislation against aid diversion to armed groups. From a strictly ethical standpoint, both the government's and the Taliban's demands are problematic in relation to the humanitarian principle of independent and unhindered access to people in need. One humanitarian interviewee observed, 'Agencies would be on much stronger ground to say no to the Taliban if they could also say no to the government. But donors aren't willing to grasp that nettle'.

<sup>11</sup> Haver and Carter (2016). *What it takes: Principled pragmatism to enable access and quality humanitarian aid in insecure environments*.

The taxation issue prompted a collective response by the humanitarian organisations (with the matter referred up to senior Taliban leadership), which resulted in the joint operating principles (JOPs) established by the Humanitarian Access Group and adopted across the community. The JOPs serve as both a training and an advocacy tool, explaining that humanitarian organisations will not accede to requests to pay duties or taxes. At the time of writing, many credit the collective JOPs initiative with having a positive outcome, with demands for taxation having abated. However, interviewees cited continuing concerns with millions going missing from government-run aid programmes for which neither private companies nor the government were being held to account. This created a risk for the international agencies associated with it in the eyes of a population long incensed by government corruption.

In many areas held by the Taliban, there are increasingly hybrid systems of service delivery with district and provincial-level governments working increasingly in tandem with the Taliban in areas such as health and education. Taliban officials, for instance, will monitor staff attendance and inspect equipment and medicine stocks in health facilities where staff are paid by the government. In government schools, they may regulate the curriculum, vet teachers, monitor attendance and observe classes.<sup>12</sup> This means that humanitarian organisations involved in service delivery increasingly have to navigate these hybrid systems at local level in ways that necessitate direct and indirect negotiations with the armed opposition groups.

## Coordination, communication and transparency

The fear of being caught up in anti-terrorism legislation and zero tolerance approaches to corruption means that there is very little willingness to openly share information between agencies on this topic. The mistrust and lack of openness around who was or was not paying for access had strained inter-agency relations, according to those we interviewed, while inevitably leading to a more fragmented, less principled and less effective humanitarian counterpoint to Taliban demands. Like in many other protracted conflict settings where non-state armed actors hold territory, the access negotiations that take place are typically informal and ad hoc, with country directors and senior managers in Kabul often unaware of what is happening at the sub-office level. HAG members are trying to encourage trust and sharing among NGOs, interviewees report, but many admit that it is an uphill battle and extremely sensitive for all parties.

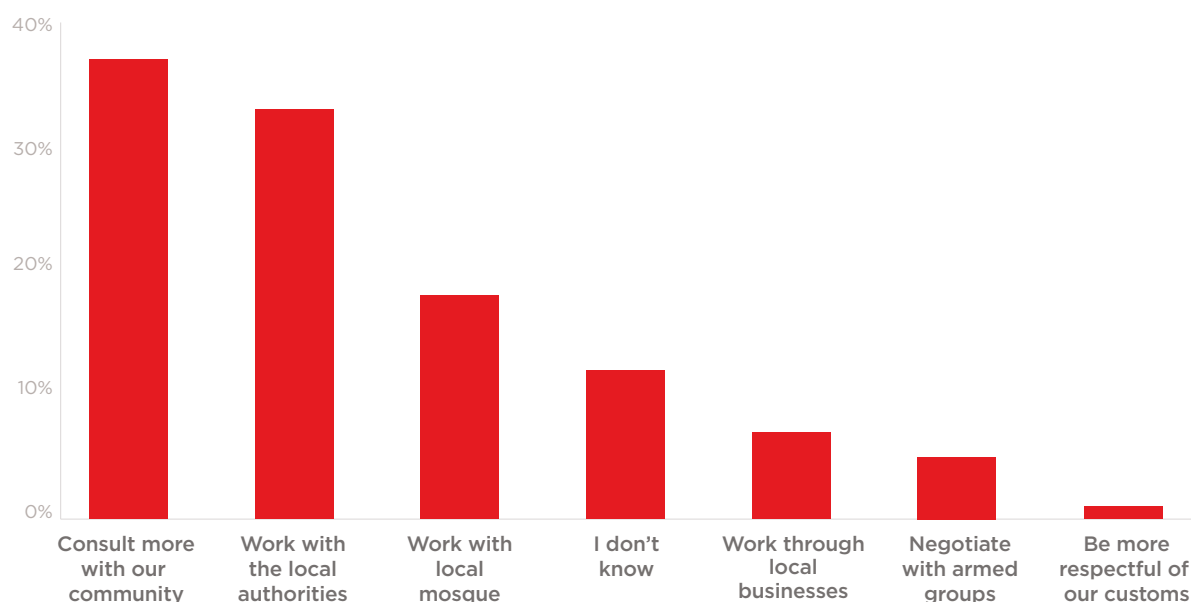
Inter-agency communication and accountability problems may be arguably less of a liability, however, than the decades of weak communication links between the humanitarian community and affected people. While many individual agencies have set up their own complaints mechanisms or other information channels with their own beneficiaries, Afghans have long and repeatedly lamented the lack of consultation with community members on aid projects, particularly in the project planning and design stage.<sup>13</sup> It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that most survey respondents chose ‘consult more with our community’ as their top suggestion for how aid agencies could address the access problem (Figure 7). Accountability to affected populations (AAP) is also identified as a priority in the current humanitarian response plan: ‘Improving accountability to affected people will be heavily emphasised in the 2020 response with an anticipated scale-up of in-country resources in the first months of the year expected to boost capacity and reinvigorate buy-in from partners’.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> See: Jackson, A. (2018). Life under the Taliban shadow government; and Clark, K. and Bjelica, J. (2018). [One land, two rules \(1\): Service delivery in insurgent-affected areas, an introduction](#).

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, ALNAP’s State of the humanitarian system reports 2012 and 2015.

<sup>14</sup> OCHA. (2018). Afghanistan. Humanitarian response plan 2018-2021.

**Figure 7: How could aid providers best improve reach?**



*Survey on Coverage Operational Reach and Effectiveness ([humanitarianoutcomes.org/projects/core](https://humanitarianoutcomes.org/projects/core))*

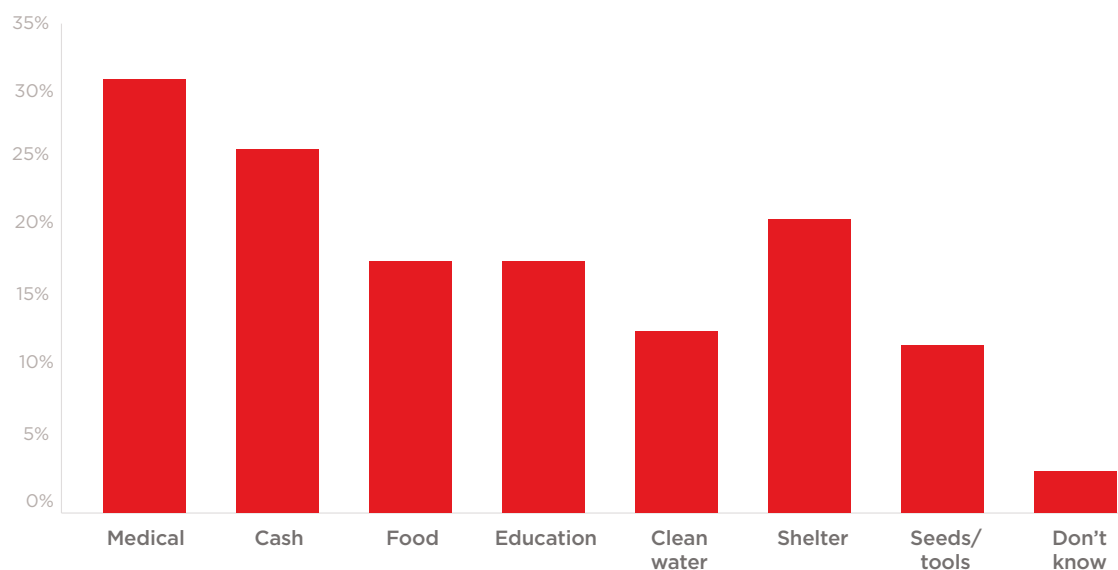
As already noted, even with unconstrained access, the humanitarian capacity in Afghanistan cannot begin to meet the level of need created by decades of war and lack of development. Said one country director, whose agency had been working to meet emergency water and sanitation needs in Afghanistan for 30 years, ‘We are not going to solve Afghanistan’s GDP problem’. And in fairness, of course, this is not a problem meant for humanitarians to solve. If this is the case, then maybe humanitarian actors are approaching the problem of access in the wrong way. Interviewees noted the need to focus on the second part of the definition of access (the ability of people to access service and assistance) as much as the first part (ability of aid agencies to access populations) and that the second part was relatively neglected in analysis and planning.

Calls for greater community consultations perhaps hold the key for shifting the current mindset towards ways of supporting people’s ability to access health and education and other services and meet basic needs. Humanitarian actors, even those most engaged in the HAG, have identified that the humanitarian community’s orientation to the access issue in Afghanistan seems to be fixated on ‘how can we get to places’ as opposed to how can people get access to the resources they need. As one said, offering this contrarian take on declining agency presence, ‘Maybe there were too many NGOs to begin with, so natural filtration and decrease is not a bad thing’. To begin to replace the ‘expeditionary’ aid access paradigm to one that focuses on the ability of communities to access to resources, more communication and consultation is a necessary first step. The Awaaz initiative—a call centre for two-way communication between affected people and the humanitarian sector—appears to be a step in the right direction and is now fielding thousands of calls every month.<sup>15</sup> Although the service still appears to be used more for getting feedback on existing programmes rather than input on needs and planning for future programming, Awaaz’s whole-of-sector approach provides a needed and useful complement to the individualised agency AAP mechanisms.

<sup>15</sup> OCHA. (2019b). Afghanistan humanitarian needs overview 2020.

When asked what type of aid needs to be increased, follow-up survey respondents indicated that medical care/medicines were lacking most of all, and second to this, expressed a preference for additional cash and voucher programming, which would give them more flexibility and control over meeting their own needs. Cash programming has a mixed reputation in Afghanistan, with some aid actors lamenting its limited use when compared to other humanitarian contexts, and others citing poor outcomes from past attempts, including diversion, theft, and poor outcomes for families where men hold control over the spending. Both sides agree that cash should be increased in the country, in the context of well researched and carefully targeted programmes.

**Figure 8: What kind of aid should be increased to meet the needs of people in your area?**



*Survey on Coverage Operational Reach and Effectiveness ([humanitarianoutcomes.org/projects/core](http://humanitarianoutcomes.org/projects/core))*

## The most present and effective aid providers

The Afghan Red Crescent Society, a well-known and widely operational organisation working across the country, was widely cited by survey respondents to be the most present and effective at accessing the most vulnerable areas. The picture is less clear when it comes to other aid actors, however. Because most NGOs continue to operate low-profile, when asked to name other aid organisations present in their areas, the survey respondents named UN agencies with far more frequency than either international or national NGOs. The most present UN agency was perceived to be UNICEF, followed by UNHCR, then WFP. Interviewees explained that UN agency use of local implementing partners and extension of their branding can create a somewhat misleading impression of physical presence, but that the UN agencies, particularly WFP, are able to reach almost every district in the country with their assistance.

The Aga Kahn Foundation and DACAAR were the most frequently referenced by the few respondents that were able to name an NGO. Tellingly, although these are both technically international organisations, in more than one instance respondents identified them as ‘national NGOs’. Both organisations have operated in the country for many years and have assumed highly nationalised leadership structures and an Afghan identity. They also remain branded rather than working low-profile. Other NGOs that respondents named were Danish Refugee Council (DRC), the International Rescue Committee (IRC), ACTED, and Afghanaid.

According to a Kabul-based humanitarian security professional, certain international organisations working in Afghanistan have developed valuable contacts and sophisticated

access strategies, which allows them to extend their work into remote areas, but they confine their work to a small number of locations—going deep rather than wide. A small number of others have invested more in national access capacity (including training, coaching, professional support and outreach teams) in an attempt to expand their presence to greater numbers of provinces. ‘There’s no magic bullet,’ said the interviewee, ‘Good access is all about solid, old fashioned and dogged community engagement.’

Some interviewees felt that national aid organisations could find it harder to resist demands from parties to the conflict around issues like taxation and noted that they felt unprotected by international partners. Some international organisations had shifted to more of a direct implementation approach because of risk management concerns around taxation and diversion, a desire to have more direct control, fewer layers in the context of growing concerns around anti-terrorism legislation, and a donor focus on taxation risks. The HAG noted a need for it to focus more on supporting national NGOs, which were often the ones working in the most contested areas. National NGOs are sometimes more reliant on individual connections than formal strategies, and the HAG sees itself as playing a possibly useful role in supporting national NGOs in particular to systematise approaches to access.

The box below provides a snapshot of experience and opinion from a cross-section of humanitarian actors with regard to improving humanitarian access in Afghanistan.

## Strengths and advantages

- ‘A lot of work is going into building negotiation capacities within organisations. Agencies are hiring access teams and negotiators.’
- ‘We have a dedicated access coordinator, aka “tea-drinker”, which is good to maintain relationships.’
- ‘It’s important to have very clear red lines. These are: control over who you hire; no payment of taxes to the Taliban; and no sharing of beneficiary information.’
- ‘Our success comes from having a long history in the country, nationalising our staff, and sticking to our [core area of expertise].’

## Areas for improvement

- ‘Leadership skills, overall, is what is missing for access—both for the humanitarian community, and in the country leadership of organisations. We could be very strategic individually and collectively. That’s the main skill that’s missing.’
- ‘A lot of access work is still very ad hoc, with a lot of delegated responsibility to junior field staff with limited awareness of HQ strategy and policy.’
- ‘It’s hard to find a safe way of sharing data [with the HC and donors] on sensitive issues. What you really need is [a way to provide] a snapshot of what is really going on with anonymised data.’
- ‘There is not as much community consultation as there should be. Community acceptance isn’t weighed properly by NGOs.’
- ‘The tendency has been to lean on community leaders to argue for access for agencies, rather than engage communities about their wider ability to access services.’



## Conclusions

Aid agencies in Afghanistan have faced huge challenges over the last two decades in maintaining a large humanitarian response and have had to face considerable security risks and repeated targeted violence. Given this, access across the country is in some respects impressive and praiseworthy. Agencies are able to negotiate with all parties to the conflict and OCHA's mapping notes that 93 per cent of districts were reached with assistance in 2019. There are also examples of good practice at the organisational level in terms of investments in staffing, skills and capacities, and at the collective level in coordination through the HAG and collective negotiation and advocacy such as the JOPs.

However, in spite of these best efforts, it remains hard for international humanitarian actors to adequately meet needs and to successfully navigate the access restrictions arising from both government and non-state armed group actions. A continued and strengthened focus on community engagement may help to focus attention on people's options for accessing services and meeting basic needs as well as aid agencies' ability to be present. But there remains no magic bullet to better support people in crisis. Without a political solution, aid agencies will need to continue the hard, often thankless and dangerous task of trying to support people with insufficient funding and a constrained ability to meet even basic needs.

Covid-19, and the associated mitigation measures and restrictions, are likely to create multiple new challenges for agencies in terms of maintaining access and supporting services. Most directly, health services will come under severe strain and people will be less able to access them. Lockdown measures and the associated livelihood and economic impacts will increase the need for humanitarian assistance at the same time as agencies find it harder to provide assistance due to movement restrictions. More than ever, agencies may have to rely on—and devolve responsibility to—local staff and organisations. And cash-based support that can be delivered remotely may be particularly needed and relevant.

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