Afghanistan is highly vulnerable to the effects of climate change, with more frequent extreme weather events and temperatures that are increasing faster than the global average. These factors, coupled with the legacy of four decades of war, a complex humanitarian emergency and an economic crisis since the Taliban’s takeover of the government in August 2021, have heightened the vulnerability of the Afghan population.

- Climate-related extreme weather events and natural hazards threaten Afghan livelihoods, increase poverty and food insecurity, and erode the resilience of communities, households and individuals.
- Climate change and environmental stressors contribute to widespread internal displacement and changing migration patterns. Displacement and rapid urbanization can exacerbate food and livelihood insecurity, place additional pressure on environmental resources and increase the vulnerability of marginalized groups, particularly women and girls.
- In a security landscape that continues to be marked by the presence of armed actors, climate change may heighten the risk of local conflicts over land and water resources.
- In the absence of an inclusive governance system, local natural resource competition and conflict elevate the risks for marginalized social groups and can exacerbate political and economic inequality.

The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and UN specialized agencies and their partners have continued to operate in Afghanistan since August 2021, providing humanitarian and emergency assistance through the Special Trust Fund for Afghanistan and the Transitional Engagement Framework. While physical access by UN agencies and partners has become easier due to a dramatic decline in security incidents since August 2021, international sanctions and political concerns—including about the Taliban’s increasingly repressive policies towards women—have reduced the scope for medium- to long-term planning, financing and programming in addressing climate and environmental challenges. UNAMA should continue to work with local communities and the implementing organizations still operating in Afghanistan to strengthen climate adaptation and resilience, especially for the most vulnerable groups.

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS:

- The UN Security Council should mandate UNAMA to incorporate analysis of climate-related peace and security risks in its work. This will require capacity building for mission staff and regular assessments of climate-related security risks, supported by the appointment of a dedicated climate security adviser.
- The UN Security Council should request that the UN secretary-general report on climate, peace and security risks in Afghanistan. This would inform Security Council members and guide long-term planning to support stabilization and build resilience.
- UNAMA and the UN Country Team should continue to work with local communities to manage climate-related security risks linked to livelihood deterioration and to improve community resilience, including by improving sustainable natural resource management, especially in agriculture. Programmes should incorporate the needs of women, girls and female-headed households in particular.
- The UN and its member states should resume funding and support for the implementation of climate and environmental projects, particularly those that are focused on enhancing local adaptation and resilience, disaster preparedness and risk mitigation. Humanitarian assistance and related short-term programming can lay the groundwork for addressing longer-term climate and environmental challenges. Drought and famine early warning systems, as well as disaster information systems, should be maintained and strengthened.
- The UN and its member states should explore options for the Afghan population’s representation in climate and environmental forums. UNAMA should consider ways to facilitate dialogue between the de facto authorities in Afghanistan and downstream riparian states over transboundary water issues.

* This is an updated version of the fact sheet on Afghanistan released in February 2022.

Climate change and other environmental stressors have differentiated impacts on different agricultural livelihoods and geographic regions. For example, the north and parts of the Central Highlands, where rainfed farming and pastoralism dominate, have been more adversely affected. Meanwhile, snowmelt-dependent irrigated agriculture in Kabul and its surrounding areas has been affected by reduced winter snowfall in the supplying Hindu Kush mountains. In other regions, the number of heavier precipitation events has risen in the past 30 years, with increased rainfall-related and riverine flooding. Vast areas of Afghanistan have experienced a severe drought since 2021, which has affected more than 64 per cent of the population. Coupled with economic contraction, these climate and environmental stressors are exacerbating an ongoing, complex humanitarian crisis. Some 28.3 million people (nearly three quarters of the estimated total population) are projected to require direct humanitarian assistance in 2023. The most recent food security assessment from May 2022 projected that 47 per cent of the population would be living with emergency or crisis food insecurity levels at the end of 2022. In the absence of adaptive capacity and sustainable resource management practices, socioecological vulnerabilities to climate threats, as well as humanitarian needs, will only increase further.

Climate-related peace and security risks

Climate change and its social outcomes can have an impact on peace and security. Although there is no direct causal relationship between climate and conflict, research has identified multiple pathways through which climate change interacts with environmental, political and social stresses to compound existing vulnerabilities and tensions. While Afghanistan has seen a drastic reduction in conflict-related deaths in 2022, climate and environmental stressors continue to undermine development, negatively impact community resilience and exacerbate social divisions. This fact sheet uses four pathways to navigate the complex relationship between climate change, peace and security: (1) livelihood deterioration, (2) migration and mobility, (3) militant and armed actors, and (4) political and economic grievances.

Livelihood deterioration

The effects of climate change, environmental degradation and conflict have negatively impacted natural resource-dependent livelihoods in Afghanistan. Poverty was estimated to have impacted up to 97 per cent of the population in mid 2022. Climate stressors have exacerbated the humanitarian crisis in the country and the ongoing crisis has led to negative coping mechanisms, including increased opium poppy use.

Negative climate impacts disproportionately affect the poorest and most vulnerable in society, with women and girls experiencing heightened risks. Restrictions on their freedom of movement, employment and higher education—imposed by the Taliban—place women in a position of greater financial dependence on men, increasing their vulnerability and reducing their adaptive capacity. Traditionally, women have been involved in agricultural work, but little is known about how their roles might have changed since August 2021. Nevertheless, previous research has shown trends of rising female unemployment and shrinking public activity in rural areas from the mid 2010s onwards, in part reflecting increased social conservatism. On average, female-headed households have lower incomes and experience more economic shocks than male-headed households.

Competition over land and water resources is a significant source of local conflict. In 2014 a reported 93 per cent of disputes settled through traditional mediation systems were connected to land and water conflicts, with surveys showing that while only 12 per cent of respondents had suffered from insurgency-based violence, 41 per cent had experienced land disputes. Although more primary source data is required to understand current and future natural resource conflicts, tensions can be exacerbated by climate and environmental stressors.

UNAMA and the UN Country Team should continue to work with local communities and the implementing organizations still operating in Afghanistan to strengthen climate adaptation and resilience, especially for the most vulnerable groups. Programmes should incorporate the needs of women, girls and female-headed households in particular.

Migration and mobility

Displacement and migration have complex and multifaceted drivers. As of April 2022, the total number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Afghanistan was estimated at 5.9 million, of which 1.8 million were displaced by natural disasters. Conflict has long been among the primary drivers of displacement, but it was surpassed by natural disasters in 2022. For example, flooding, drought and earthquakes displaced 124,000 people in the first half of 2022, compared with 7400 displacements from conflict. While sudden-onset disasters are a significant driver of climate-related displacement, longer-term changes in temperature and rainfall also affect population movement. Environmental strains on agricultural livelihoods and a declining rural economy contribute to rapid urbanization in Afghanistan, which has one of the fastest rates of urbanization worldwide.

Although migration is often a coping strategy, it can leave migrants vulnerable to discrimination and economic insecurity and reduce their access to services. In receiving areas such as Kabul, migration places a strain on limited land and water resources, public services and environmental governance. Furthermore, it increases the risk of tensions and sometimes conflict with host populations. Since August 2021, the Taliban authorities have been forcibly evicting and relocating IDPs, heightening their vulnerability.

Afghan men and women have different migration opportunities and vulnerabilities based on gender norms. Female-headed households can be particularly vulnerable; if men migrate to find employment in the wake of a disaster, the women remaining as the heads of their households may face increasing poverty, as well as abuse or discrimination when working to provide for their families.

The UN and its implementing partners should work with local communities to invest in disaster management and preparedness, including early warning systems for increasingly frequent droughts and floods. Programming should include a focus on the specific risks faced by IDPs and migrant communities, as well as women and girls.

Militant and armed actors

Climate and environmental stressors in Afghanistan undermine livelihood security and fuel local disputes over water and land. Such disputes take place in a security landscape with multiple, and sometimes competing, militant and armed actors. Armed actors can intervene and capitalize on tensions to advance their strategic aims, including using perceived and real injustices to recruit fighters—as the Taliban have done. Armed actors can also use force to appropriate limited resources. Since taking power, the Taliban have forcibly seized control of limited land resources, often from minorities, for redistribution to their fighters.

---

14 UNEP (note 11); and Gansch, L., Women in Agriculture in Afghanistan, Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit: July 2017.
15 OCHA (note 12).
17 United Nations [note 11].
25 Spinke (note 30).
26 NEPA (note 7).
28 NGO (note 16).
Complicated and poorly enforced customary and formal land ownership rules have further weakened the rule of law. The involvement of armed actors in local resource disputes increases the risk of wider social tensions, including across identity-based groups. Such tensions can feed into the recruitment tactics of armed groups, including the Islamic State–Khorasan Province, which operate in Afghanistan.

Regionally, the effects of climate change on freshwater resources can increase interstate tensions over water sharing. Four of Afghanistan’s five major river basins flow into neighbouring states, and future water pressures may increase the risk of local tensions and violence in some border regions. With limited transboundary water governance in these important regional river basins, the development of much-needed national water storage capacity could contribute to improving Afghanistan’s relations with its riparian neighbours.

UNAMA should place emphasis on sustainable resource management and facilitate equitable resource agreements in its community-level programming and partnerships. Under its mandate to support regional cooperation, UNAMA should work with the UN Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia to facilitate transboundary water cooperation.

**Political and economic grievances**

Decades of conflict have eroded natural resource management in Afghanistan, with implications for how local tensions are resolved. Some 70 per cent of serious violent crimes are connected to land ownership disputes and these can result in small-scale conflicts. How such frictions and conflicts are managed varies widely across local contexts, but they often intersect with ethnic and other divisions. Afghanistan’s lack of inclusive governance and weak rule of law, coupled with its historically insecure and legally ambiguous land rights, can exacerbate political and economic grievances and contribute to larger-scale conflict.

Reduced livelihood opportunities, displacement and return, and the involvement of armed actors—including the Taliban—play out, for example, in the long-standing tensions over land ownership and use between the nomadic pastoral Kuchis and the more sedentary Hazara farming communities in the Central Highlands. The Taliban have intervened in several such land conflicts in support of the Kuchi co-ethnic group. The UN notes persistent reports of campaigns to dislodge minorities from agricultural land. In 2022, this contributed to several armed clashes and uprisings in northern Afghanistan. As the effects of climate change diminish productive land and water resources and reduce livelihood security, resource disputes may become more common and violent, especially when exploited by elites. In the absence of good governance, local natural resource disputes can feed broader economic and political grievances, leading to instability and conflict.

The UN has recognized the need for an ‘equitable land tenure system to ensure long-term peace and stability’ in Afghanistan. UNAMA should work with international partners and local communities to map and assess the capacity of local resource dispute resolution mechanisms, identify gaps and facilitate community-based mechanisms for land and water use and ownership.

---


44 United Nations (note 35).


46 United Nations (note 11).