Climate, Peace and Security Fact Sheet

Afghanistan*



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.



Figure 1. Data sources: World Bank Group and the Asian Development Bank, Climate Risk Country Profile Afghanistan (2021); Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Second National Communication Under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (2017); IOM DTM, Baseline mobility and emergency community based needs assessment report: Round 15 (March–April 2022); UNDP Human Development Report (2021–22); Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC), Acute Food Insecurity Situation for March–May (2022) and Projection for June–November (2022); UNFPA, World population dashboard: Afghanistan; Vision of Humanity, Global Peace Index: Afghanistan (2022); Notre Dame Global Adaptation Initiative, ND-GAIN Rankings: Afghanistan (2020).

Climate exposure: Trends and projections

Afghanistan is a landlocked country with a varied topography and differentiated exposure to changing temperatures and precipitation patterns. Some 63 per cent of the country is mountainous, with the glacial Hindu Kush in the north and deserts in the south-west.¹ Extreme weather events like droughts and flooding are influenced by changing temperatures, snowmelt and rainfall, but patterns differ across ecological zones.² Climate change is predicted to increase the frequency and intensity of both slow- and sudden-onset extreme weather events.

Temperature: Mean annual temperatures rose by 1.8°C between 1951 and 2010, with variations by elevation and by region. The Hindu Kush region experienced the smallest increase (0.6°C), while the largest increase was in Afghanistan's east (2.4°C). In 2021 the mean annual temperature was recorded at 14.3°C—the highest since 1901.³ Projections of future increases—of 1.7–2.3°C by 2050—are in agreement that temperatures in Afghanistan will continue to rise faster than the global average.⁴

Precipitation: Afghanistan experienced a less than 10 per cent reduction in mean annual rainfall between 1951 and 2010, although this average masks considerable variability across regions and seasons.⁶ Since 1997, almost all years have been drought years, and by 2030–even under optimistic emissions scenarios–local droughts are predicted to become the norm rather than temporary, cyclical events.⁶ While some projections forecast relatively stable rainfall through to the year 2100, rising temperatures will increase evapotranspiration, leading to water stress and diminished groundwater resources.⁷

Socioecological vulnerabilities

Four decades of conflict in Afghanistan have contributed to considerable environmental degradation, which has negatively impacted livelihoods and further reduced the coping and adaptive capacity of the population.[®] Soil erosion and desertification, including through overgrazing, deforestation and poor natural resource management, have also heightened people's vulnerability to climate stressors.

Agriculture, which is sensitive to changes in rainfall and water availability, supports around 80 per cent of the Afghan population directly or indirectly.⁹ Projected temperature increases, evapotranspiration and shrinking rivers are expected to reduce the area of arable land, which has already been degraded by decades of conflict and poor resource management. Water scarcity reduces the amount of both irrigated and rainfed land in use.¹⁰ Limited water infrastructure, including storage and distribution systems, increases water stress and decreases the ability of Afghans to adapt to the effects of climate change.

- ¹ Aich, V. et al., 'Climate change in Afghanistan deduced from reanalysis and coordinated regional climate downscaling experiment (CORDEX): South Asia simulations', *Climate*, vol. 5, no. 2 (2017), p. 38; and Omerkhil, N. et al., 'Climate change vulnerability and adaptation strategies for smallholder farmers in Yangi Qala District, Takhar, Afghanistan', *Ecological Indicators*, vol. 110, (Mar. 2020).
- ² Afghan Government, 'Intended nationally determined contribution submission to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change', United Nations, Nationally Determined Contributions Registry, 21 Sep. 2015; Baizayee, B. (ed.), *Building Adaptive Capacity and Resilience to Climate Change in Afghanistan (LDCF): Baseline Assessment Report*, Technical Report 2014/001 (UNEP: Kabul, 2014); Qutbudin, I. et al., 'Seasonal drought pattern changes due to climate variability: Case study in Afghanistan', Water, vol. 11, no. 5 (2019), p. 1096; and Pervez, S., Budde, M. and Rowland, J., 'Mapping irrigated areas in Afghanistan over the past decade using MODIS NDVI', *Remote Sensing of Environment*, vol. 149 (June 2014), pp. 155–65.
- ³ World Bank, 'Country: Afghanistan: Current climate: Climatology', Climate Change Knowledge Portal, 2021.
- ⁴ World Bank Group and the Asian Development Bank, *Climate Risk Country Profile: Afghanistan* (World Bank Group/Asian Development Bank: New York/Metro Manila, 2021); and Aich et al. (note 1).
- ⁵ World Bank Group and the Asian Development Bank (note 4); and and Aich et al. (note 1).
- ⁶ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), Afghanistan Drought Risk Management Strategy, 2019 (FAO: Feb. 2020).
- ⁷ Aich et al. (note 1); Afghan National Environment Protection Agency (NEPA), Second National Communication under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) (NEPA: Kabul, Dec. 2017); and Afghan Government (note 2).
- ⁸ Saba, D. S., 'Afghanistan: Environmental degradation in a fragile ecological setting', *International Journal of Sustainable Development and World Ecology*, vol. 8 (2011), pp. 279–89.
- ⁹ FAO, 'FAO marks World Food Day to highlight dire food insecurity situation in Afghanistan', 16 Oct. 2022; and NEPA (note 7).

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 increasingly faced drought. 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.¹¹ Vast areas of Afghanistan have experienced a severe drought since 2021, which has affected more than 64 per cent of the population.¹²

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 2023.¹³ 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 2022.¹⁴ 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.¹⁶ 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.¹⁶

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.¹⁷

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 2022.¹⁸ Climate stressors have exacerbated the humanitarian crisis in the country and the ongoing crisis has led to negative coping mechanisms, including increased opium poppy

- ¹³ OCHA (note 12); and Save the Children, 'Afghanistan crisis: Save the Children's Response in Afghanistan: September update', 25 Oct. 2022.
- ¹⁴ Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC), 'Afghanistan: Integrated food security phase classification snapshot March–November 2022', 9 May 2022.
- ¹⁵ Van Baalen, S. and Mobjörk, M., 'Climate change and violent conflict in East Africa: Integrating qualitative and quantitative research to probe the mechanisms', *International Studies Review*, vol. 20, no. 4 (Dec. 2018), pp. 547–75.
- ¹⁶ International Crisis Group (ICG), Afghanistan's Security Challenges under the Taliban, Asia Report no. 326 (ICG: Brussels, 12 Aug. 2022); Moran, A. et al., The Intersection of Global Fragility and Climate Risks (USAID: Sep. 2018); and de Coning, C. and Krampe, F., Multilateral Cooperation in the Area of Climate-related Security and Development Risks in Africa, Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI) Report 4/2020 (NUPI: Oslo, Feb. 2020).
- ¹⁷ Mobjörk, M., Krampe, F. and Tarif, K., 'Pathways of climate insecurity: Guidance for policymakers', SIPRI Policy Brief, Nov. 2020; and Nordqvist, P. and Krampe, F., 'Climate change and violent conflict: Sparse evidence from South Asia and South East Asia', SIPRI Insights on Peace and Security no. 2018/4, Sep. 2018.
- ¹⁸ United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Afghanistan Country Team, Economic Instability and Uncertainty in Afghanistan after August 15: A Rapid Appraisal (UNDP: 2021).

¹⁰ United States Agency for International Development (USAID), 'Climate change risk profile: Afghanistan', Fact Sheet, Apr. 2016.

¹¹ United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), Climate Change in Afghanistan: What Does It Mean for Rural Livelihoods and Food Security? (UNEP: 2016); United Nations, United Nations Development Assistance Framework for Afghanistan 2015–2019 (United Nations: 2014); and Iqbal, M. S. et al., 'Impact of climate change on flood frequency and intensity in the Kabul River Basin', Geosciences, vol 8, no. 4 (2018), p. 114.

¹² Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET), 'Afghanistan food security outlook: June 2021 to January 2022', 2021; and United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), *Humanitarian Needs Overview: Afghanistan* (OCHA: 2023).

cultivation.¹⁹ Incomes to poppy farmers represented nearly a third of the agricultural sector's total value in 2021. In 2022, poppy cultivation—which requires less water than wheat—grew by 32 per cent compared with the previous year, although the Taliban issued a ban in April 2022.²⁰

Negative climate impacts disproportionately affect the poorest and most vulnerable in society, with women and girls experiencing heightened risks.²¹ 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.²² On average, female-headed households have lower income levels and experience more economic shocks than male-headed households.²³

Competition over land and water resources is a significant source of local conflict.²⁴ In 2014 a reported 93 per cent of disputes settled using 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.²⁵ 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.²⁶ 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.²⁷ While sudden-onset disasters are a significant driver of climate-related displacement, longer-term changes in temperature and rainfall also affect population movement.²⁸ 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.²⁹

Although migration is often a coping strategy, it can leave migrants vulnerable to discrimination and economic insecurity and reduce their access to services.³⁰ In receiving areas such as Kabul, migration

- ¹⁹ World Bank, 'Population ages 0–14 (% of total population)', Data, 2019; Brown, O. and Blankenship, E., United Nations Country Team in Afghanistan, *Natural Resource Management and Peacebuilding in Afghanistan* (UNEP: Nairobi, 2013); Ferrie, J., 'Drought drives desperate Afghans to marry off children for money: UN', Reuters, 27 Nov. 2018; and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 'Afghanistan: Western Region drought response', Humanitarian Situation Report no. 3, 15 Nov. 2018.
- ²⁰ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), Opium Cultivation in Afghanistan: Latest Findings and Emerging Threats, UNODC Research Brief (UNODC: Nov. 2022).
- ²¹ World Bank Group and the Asian Development Bank (note 4).
- ²² UNEP (note 11); and Ganesh, L., Women in Agriculture in Afghanistan, Issues Paper (Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit: July 2017).
- (Arghanistan Resear ²³ OCHA (note 12).
- Iqbal, M. W. et al., 'Farmers' perceptions of and adaptations to drought in Herat Province, Afghanistan', *Journal of Mountain Science*, vol. 15 (2018), pp. 1741–56.
 ²⁵ United Nations (note 11).
- ²⁶ International Organization for Migration (IOM), Displacement Tracking Matrix, 'Afghanistan-Key findings: Baseline mobility and emergency community based needs assessment report, Round 15 (March-April 2022), 2022.
- ²⁷ Giffin, K., 'One year on: The Taliban takeover and Afghanistan's changing displacement crisis', Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) Expert Opinion, Aug. 2022.



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.³¹ Since August 2021, the Taliban authorities have been forcibly evicting and relocating IDPs, heightening their vulnerability.³²

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.³³

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.³⁴ 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.³⁵ 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.³⁶ 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.³⁷

- ²⁹ UN Habitat, 'Afghanistan's urban future', Discussion Paper no. 1, 2014.
- ³⁰ Spink, P., Climate Change Drives Migration in Conflict-ridden Afghanistan (ActionAid International: Dec. 2020).
- ³¹ Majidi, N., 'Urban returnes and internally displaced persons in Afghanistan', Middle East Institute and the Foundation for Strategic Research, Jan. 2011.
- ³² Norwegian Refugee Council, 'Afghanistan: 20 000 displaced people evicted from makeshift camps in freezing temperatures', 15 Dec. 2022.

- ³⁴ NEPA (note 7)
- ³⁵ ICG (note 16); United Nations, Security Council, Thirteenth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to Resolution 2611 (2021) concerning the Taliban and other associated individuals and entities constituting a threat to the peace stability and security of Afghanistan, S/2022/419, 26 May 2022.
- ³⁶ ICG (note 16).
- ³⁷ Human Rights Watch, 'Afghanistan: Taliban forcibly evict minority Shia', 22 Oct. 2022.

²⁸ BBC News, 'Afghanistan flash floods kill dozens and destroy 500 homes', 26 Aug. 2020; and Hagen, E. and Teufert, J. F., 'Flooding in Afghanistan: A crisis', eds J. A. A. Jones, T. G. Vardanian and C. Hakopian, *Threats to Global Water Security* (Springer Netherlands: Dordrecht, 2009), pp. 179–85.

³³ Spink (note 30).

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.³⁰ Such tensions can feed into the recruitment tactics of armed groups, including the Islamic State–Khorasan Province, which operate in Afghanistan.³⁰

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.⁴⁰ 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.

Livelihood zones and food security Afghanistan Mazar-e Sherif KABUL lalala **Livelihood Areas** Kandahar Mixed agriculture Agropastoral Rainfed agriculture Irrigated agriculture Cross-border labour and trade Food security status Figure 3. Data sources: BICC, FEWS, IPC, Natural Earth. Emergency (IPC phase 4)

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.⁴¹ How such frictions and conflicts are managed varies widely across local contexts, but they often intersect with ethnic and other divisions.⁴² 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

- ³⁸ Wily, L. A., Looking for Peace on the Pastures: Rural Land Relations in Afghanistan, Synthesis Paper Series (Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit: Kabul, Dec. 2004); and Gaston, E. and Dang, L., 'Addressing land conflict in Afghanistan', United States Institute of Peace (USIP) Special Report no. 372, June 2015.
- ³⁹ Webber, L. and Valle, R., 'Islamic State in Afghanistan seeks to recruit Uzbeks, Tajiks, Kyrgyz', EurasiaNet, 17 Mar. 2022.
- ⁴⁰ Faizee, M., 'The emerging dynamics for conflict and cooperation between Iran and the Taliban over the Helmand River', Water, Peace and Security (WPS) blog, 9 Sep. 2022.
- ⁴¹ European Union Agency for Asylum, 'Country Guidance Afghanistan: 2.16.2. Land disputes', Apr. 2022.

communities in the Central Highlands.⁴³ 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.⁴⁴ In 2022, this contributed to several armed clashes and uprisings in northern Afghanistan.⁴⁵ 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.⁴⁶ 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.

- ⁴² Pain, A., 'Land, power and conflict in Afghanistan: Seeking to understand complexity', *Revue des mondes musulman et de la Méditerranée*, vol. 133 (2013), pp. 63–81.
- ⁴³ Foschini, F., 'Conflict management or retribution? How the Taleban deal with land disputes between Kuchis and local communities', Afghanistan Analysts Network, 22 Dec. 2022.
- ⁴⁴ United Nations (note 35).
- ⁴⁵ Foschini (note 43); Pannier, B., 'Taliban's arrest of ethnic Uzbek commander sparks clashes in northern Afghanistan', Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 29 Jan. 2022; and Goldbaum, C., Rahim, N. and Hayeri, K., 'The bloody uprising against the Taliban led by one of their own', *New York Times*, 18 Aug. 2022.
- ⁴⁶ United Nations (note 11).

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