

Afghanistan: Needs assessment

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From 2019 to 2021, the IPC-IG and the United Nations Children's Fund Country Office in Afghanistan (UNICEF Afghanistan) worked in partnership to assess the vulnerabilities and needs of the Afghan population. This One Pager summarises the resulting needs assessment study (Burattini et al. 2022), which offers a snapshot of the country's demographic context and key vulnerability factors prior to the Taliban takeover in August 2021.

The assessment relied on microdata from Afghanistan's Income and Expenditure & Labour Force Surveys (IE&LF) from 2020. In addition, a mapping of national and state-led social protection programmes conducted by the IPC-IG between 2019 and early 2020 was used to briefly examine the country's pre-COVID 19 pandemic social safety net. After the onset of the health emergency in early 2020 and the Taliban takeover on 15 August 2021, secondary sources were used to estimate the impacts of the resulting health, socioeconomic and security crises on the Afghan population. Based on these primary and secondary sources, vulnerabilities linked to poverty, dwelling conditions, employment, education, nutrition, and shocks were analysed to determine which factors and demographic groups are more susceptible to lower living standards in the country.

Prior to the pandemic, around 47.1 per cent of the Afghan population lived below the national poverty line (NPL). While living conditions did not necessarily differ very significantly between those living above and below the NPL, the assessment identified the following vulnerabilities linked to specific population groups:

Children under 14 years old can be associated with poverty, as poor households tended to be younger than those above the poverty line. Conversely, old age could be linked to relative affluence.

While only about a third of the Afghan population was employed (with no major differences in employment status between those living below and above the NPL), most workers were in a vulnerable employment position. The share of vulnerable workers among all workers above the NPL reached 79.5 per cent, and 87.5 per cent for those below. Day labourers were those most associated with living below the NPL, while salaried workers—especially in the public sector—were the least.

Further, more than half of the population aged 14 or older was illiterate (63 per cent) and reportedly had no education (62.9 per cent). Just half of the school-aged children reportedly attended school at some point in their lives.

Women and girls were already especially vulnerable, with 84.3 per cent of women not being active in the labour force and being overrepresented in unpaid family work (60.2 per cent of female workers

and just 13 per cent of male workers engaged in unpaid family work). Further, women's literacy rate (22.6 per cent) was much lower than men's (51.1 per cent). Among children between 10 and 17 years old, just 41 per cent of girls could read compared to 62 per cent of boys.

The urban population tended to be less vulnerable than the rural or the nomadic and semi-nomadic Kuchi population. The poverty rate in urban areas was the lowest among the urban, rural and Kuchi populations, although inactivity was also highest in those areas, driven primarily by lack of women's participation in the labour force. Moreover, education indicators were the best among the urban population.

While the abovementioned population groups stood out as particularly vulnerable, it is notable that the deprivations encountered in the needs assessment already tended to affect large segments of the population even before the pandemic. However, the national and state-led social protection programmes from before the pandemic identified by the IPC-IG (one social insurance, two social assistance and two labour market programmes) targeted only either the most deprived people or (more affluent) public-sector workers, excluding a major segment of the vulnerable population.

The onset of the COVID-19 crisis and the Taliban takeover of the country aggravated several of these vulnerabilities. While rural poverty declined during the pandemic (albeit at a slower pace than before), urban poverty increased up to 55.2 per cent, reflecting the impacts of containment measures on predominantly urban and informal employment. Projections published in September 2021 suggest that, in the worst-case scenario, the Taliban takeover may result in a poverty rate of up to 97 per cent by mid-2022. Further, if the Taliban does not reverse the exclusion of women and girls from public spaces, it is also expected that the already dire indicators of female employment and education will become even worse.

During the pandemic and prior to August 2021, only one existing social protection programme mapped by the IPC-IG was expanded to respond to the health crisis. The remaining social protection response overlapped with humanitarian actions and only covered a small portion of the population. The most notable initiative is the World Bank's REACH, which, drawing from the Citizens' Charter Afghanistan Project (CCAP), aimed to provide temporary cash transfers to 2.7 million poor households. However, CCAP also offered emergency cash transfers to about 90 per cent of households already participating in the project.

Reference:

Burattini, Beatriz, Rafael Guerreiro Osorio, Louisa Wagner, Yannick Markhof and Pedro Arruda. 2022. "Afghanistan: Needs Assessment." *Research Report*, No. 66. Brasília: International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth.