Building Afghanistan's Resilience: Natural Hazards, Climate Change, and Humanitarian Needs

A Paper for the 2016 Brussels Conference on Afghanistan

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Afghanistan is facing one of the world's most serious humanitarian and environmental crises, with millions of people in need of assistance and an even greater number at risk from natural hazards and climate change. As one of the world's least developed countries, Afghanistan cannot face these challenges alone and needs support from the international community.

Unless urgent action is taken to build the resilience of Afghanistan's households, communities, and environment, much of the country's development gains over the past 15 years could be at risk. It is therefore crucial that Afghanistan and its international partners invest in disaster risk reduction (DRR) and climate change adaptation (CCA) to protect these gains, build meaningful resilience, and advance the country's development priorities.

To ensure that Afghanistan can achieve meaningful resilience, the Government and international community should prioritize: 1) integrating environmental concerns into humanitarian response and decision-making, 2) developing a national resilience framework that integrates DRR and CCA across all levels of national development plans; 3) building community-based resilience through local-level DRR and CCA planning and programming, and 4) strengthening the institutions and coordination mechanism for planning and responding to shocks when they occur.

The Afghanistan Resilience Consortium (ARC) integrates environment, disaster risk reduction, and humanitarian support to create lasting resilience for Afghanistan's communities and ecosystems. The ARC was established in 2014 as a partnership between Afghanaid, ActionAid, Concern Worldwide, Save the Children, and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). The ARC's holistic approach recognizes that conflict and environmental degradation can exacerbate the impacts of natural hazards, and strives to support communities and improve ecosystem management in order to reduce the risk of disasters and build adaptive capacity to climate change.

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OVERVIEW OF AFGHANISTAN'S SITUATION

Nearly four decades of conflict, combined with drought and environmental mismanagement, has resulted in widespread degradation of Afghanistan's natural resource base, and weakened the country's institutional capacity to implement environmental policies, plan for natural disasters, and provide humanitarian response when natural disasters occur.

Afghanistan today faces one of the most acute complex humanitarian and environmental crises in the world. An estimated 8.1 million people in Afghanistan are in need of humanitarian assistance, including 3.9 million malnourished food insecure men, women, and children.[1] More than 80 percent of the country's population relies on the natural resource base to meet daily needs, but serious environmental issues such as deforestation, desertification, climate change, aquifer depletion, ecosystem degradation, biodiversity loss, and pollution all negatively impact the resilience of the rural livelihoods that form the country's foundation.[2]

In addition, most global indices rank Afghanistan as highly vulnerable to climate change owing to both climatological factors as well as low levels of preparedness and adaptive capacity.[3] With a changing climate, it is expected that the incidence of extreme weather events such as heat waves, floods, and droughts will increase, placing even greater stress on Afghanistan's economy, stability, rural livelihoods, and food security.[4]

Afghanistan is also highly vulnerable to natural hazards and frequently affected by earthquakes, floods, drought, landslides, and avalanches. Approximately 60 percent of Afghanistan's population is threatened by natural hazards, and each year recurrent hazards affect an average of 235,000 people.[5] These hazards are indiscriminate and harm people, lands, and infrastructure alike, causing serious setbacks for many development programmes that aim to increase access to education, health, employment, transportation, and other basic services.

Addressing Afghanistan's complex humanitarian and environmental crises requires a holistic approach that prioritize disaster risk reduction (DRR) and climate change adaptation (CCA) in order to provide households and communities with the ability to prepare for, withstand, and recover from the shocks of natural hazards and climate change, and work with local and national institutions to steer change through innovation and learning.[6]

DISASTER RISK REDUCTION

In line with the famous adage "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure," investments in DRR are both practical and economical when compared to the loss of life and property, disruption of services, and costs of emergency humanitarian aid and reconstruction following a natural disaster. These points are echoed in the Sendai Framework for DRR (SFDRR) and the World Humanitarian Summit convened earlier this year, both of which call for greater investment in DRR to reduce unnecessary damages and loss of life. Similarly, a recent World Bank study on the economics of DRR in developing countries confirmed the high value of disaster preparedness and planning compared to the much higher costs incurred when disasters strike.[7] Considering the large scale of investments in Afghanistan, as well as the country's ongoing and competing needs, protecting and safeguarding gains already achieved is a prudent approach to advancing the country's development priorities.

Although many hazards cannot be fully avoided, the severity of their impacts can be mitigated. For example, community-based approaches that foster stewardship for the environment and tap into the vital services provided by local ecosystems provide practical and sustainable approaches to building the resilience of rural communities. This includes community-based hazard mapping and risk assessment, planning, early warning systems, and disaster response, coordinated with local authorities at all levels ranging from the community upwards to the district, provincial, and national levels.

Across Afghanistan, considerable progress has been made by Government, non-governmental organizations, and international partners to reduce the impacts of natural hazards, but much more remains to be done. This includes strengthening the country's institutional capacity to lead on nation-wide DRR and resilience-building and fulfil a coordination role across numerous actors and all phases of the disaster management cycle.

CLIMATE CHANGE

The urgency of addressing climate change risks to Afghanistan, and mainstreaming climate change into national development processes, cannot be overstated. In 2015, the National Environmental Protection Agency (NEPA) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) developed the most up-to-date and detailed climate change projections for Afghanistan, which are broadly in agreement with the IPCC5 conclusions for the region. These projections suggest that in the coming decades the country will see a strong increase in mean annual temperature coupled with an overall decrease in water availability, likely leading to greater incidences of extreme weather and hazards such as droughts and floods.

These climatological changes will have myriad impacts on Afghanistan's diverse ecosystems, as well as the plants and animals that inhabit them. Considering that approximately 80 percent of Afghanistan's population relies directly on these ecosystems for their livelihoods, these climatic changes also have the potential to seriously disrupt the foundation of the country's economy, stability, and food security.

Climate change is also expected to significantly exacerbate Afghanistan's vulnerability to natural hazards, unless measures are taken to strengthen the country's adaptive capacity. Mainstreaming climate change into Afghanistan's development processes is an essential step towards realizing that adaptive capacity. Thus, coordinated action is urgently needed among diverse partners and across numerous sectors to ensure that the risks of climate change are minimized and that development progress is not undermined.

Afghanistan's adaptation needs are highlighted in its Intended Nationally Determined Contribution (INDC) prepared in advance of the Paris Climate Conference (COP21) in December 2015. This INDC lays out Afghanistan's commitments to adopting a low-emission development strategy as its contribution to limiting global greenhouse gas production, but also estimates that Afghanistan's adaptation needs will require some US$10 billion of financial, technological, and capacity investment over 10 years.[8] While Afghanistan is committed to making a global contribution to fight climate change and build the adaptive capacity of its people, the resources required are beyond the country's means and vital support from the international community is needed.

WHAT THE GOVERNMENT AND INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY CAN DO

The Government of Afghanistan continues to face the impacts of decades of conflict and frequent natural hazards, and requires the continued assistance of international partners to address its urgent humanitarian and environmental needs. However, building resilience to natural hazards and climate change also requires a coherent approach, from both Government and international partners, which integrates environmental sustainability and resilience principles into humanitarian and development actions.

Thus, the Government of Afghanistan and its partners should work together to ensure that greater programmatic linkages are formed between humanitarian aid, development assistance, and environmental management in order to facilitate adaptation to climate change, build DRR capacity, and create more resilient communities. This is particularly relevant to Afghanistan's achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), many of which explicitly address environmental issues and the importance of tackling climate change challenges. Investments in DRR and CCA should be prioritized in order to protect and safeguard current development gains from hazards and climate shocks. Likewise, DRR and CCA should be mainstreamed into development plans to ensure that actions are designed and implemented as sustainably as possible, as well as able to withstand climatic and natural shocks.

Achieving this coherent approach to building resilience will require a combination of financial resources complemented with capacity building initiatives, the transfer of innovative technologies, policy and institutional strengthening, and concrete on-the-ground actions to directly build the resilience of local communities and encourage greater participation at all levels of decision-making.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To the Government of Afghanistan:

- Develop and implement a National Priority Programme (NPP) to holistically address resilience to hazards and climate change that integrates international commitments, national planning, and local actions, with the involvement of Government, the international community, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).
- Establish a national resilience framework that effectively convenes cross-sectoral and inter-ministerial actors to address the country's major climate and hazard vulnerabilities, needs, and priorities in the short-, medium-, and long-term.
- Strengthen capacity in the Afghanistan National Disaster Management Authority (ANDMA) to monitor and assess environmental data on hazards and climate change, develop action plans for building resilience and responding to specific hazards, and convene cross-sectoral and inter-ministerial actors to address the country's vulnerabilities to natural hazards and climate change.
- Integrate resilience-building principles and approaches from the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Paris Climate Agreement, and Sendai Framework for DRR (SFDRR) into national development plans, such as the Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework (ANPDF), and as a crosscutting theme across NPPs.
- Implement the SDGs, Paris Climate Agreement, and SFDRR through a combination of policy, capacity, and practical actions that build cross-sectoral collaboration to build resilience, enhance preparedness, and improve response to natural hazards.
- Ensure that development initiatives, such as the Citizen's Charter, promote community-based approaches that foster local stewardship for the environment and tap into the vital services provided by ecosystems to rural communities, including: community-based hazard mapping and risk assessment, planning, restoration ecology, early warning systems, and disaster response

To the International Community:

- Invest in programmes to promote linkages between development assistance and humanitarian response, with an emphasis on DRR and CCA.
- Support the meaningful application of the Environment Marker in humanitarian programming to ensure that environmental resilience and sustainability are not ignored during times of response.
- Integrate context-specific guidance on the environment and natural resource needs of affected communities in order to better inform humanitarian response operations.
- Support Afghanistan's implementation of its INDC through the provision of financial, technological, and capacity assistance.
- Assist Afghanistan to access global sources of bilateral and multilateral climate financing, such as the Green Climate Fund (GCF), Global Environment Facility (GEF), International Climate Fund (ICF), etc.

1. OCHA. (2015) 2016 Afghanistan Humanitarian Needs Overview. Kabul: OCHA, p. 6.
2. Ibid.
3. DARA Climate Vulnerability Monitor (2012); GermanWatch Global Climate Risk Index (2013); and Notre Dame Global Adaptation Index (2014). Afghanistan. (2015) Intended Nationally Determined Contribution. Kabul: National Environmental Protection Agency, p 1.
4. Afghanistan. (2015) Intended Nationally Determined Contribution. Kabul: National Environmental Protection Agency, p 1.
5. UNOCHA. (2016) Humanitarian Response Overview. Kabul: UNOCHA.
6. UNDP. (2013) Position Paper: A Resilience-based Development Response. New York: UNDP, p. 5.
7. World Bank. (nd). Cost Benefit Studies on Disaster Risk Reduction in Developing Countries; Working Paper Series No. 27. Washington, DC: East Asia and Pacific Disaster Risk Management Team of the World Bank
8. Afghanistan. (2015) Intended Nationally Determined Contribution. Kabul: National Environmental Protection Agency, p 5-6.