



March 2024

AFGHANISTAN CRISIS APPEAL

Consolidating lessons from member agencies

Acknowledgements

Gratitude is extended to all DEC members and partners for their invaluable contributions and active engagement throughout the research process. Their dedication greatly enriched this study. Special acknowledgement is given to the Help Humanity Organisation of Afghanistan for their collaboration in delivering this research.

Finally, thanks especially go to Edward Beswick and Alexa Netty of the DEC Secretariat for an excellent partnership. They set the tone for this feminist research and challenged all involved to be more inclusive.

Lauren Burrows and Teia Rogers at JRNY Consulting carried out this research. JRNY Consulting is a feminist organisation delivering rights-based and feminist approaches to research, evaluations, learning and strategy. JRNY Consulting empowers organisations through collaborative learning partnerships grounded in an intersectional feminist approach. www.jrnyconsulting.com



Executive Summary

The Disaster Emergency Committee (DEC) launched the Afghanistan Crisis Appeal on December 15, 2021, in response to the country's deteriorating humanitarian situation. Focused on addressing urgent needs resulting from drought, economic decline, political instability, and rising food insecurity, the appeal successfully raised £51.8 million. This meta-synthesis consolidates lessons from thirteen DEC members focusing on understanding collective efforts under the operational phases from December 2021 to December 2023. The situation in Afghanistan presented unique challenges: deteriorating security, harsh environmental conditions, and restrictions impacting particularly women and marginalised groups. The DEC's response aimed to mitigate these challenges while adapting to the evolving socio-political landscape and addressing the compounded humanitarian crisis.

A detailed methodology combined desk reviews, focus group discussions, and key informant interviews. This triangulated approach ensured diverse perspectives on the DEC's interventions and strategies, focusing on six key themes: Adapting to the Operational Environment, Localisation, Health of Local Partnerships, Access to Marginalised Groups, Disaster Risk Reduction and Climate Resilience, and Sustainability and Exit Strategies.

Key Findings

Adapting to the Operational Environment

In response to Afghanistan's rapidly changing security landscape and the De Facto Authorities¹ imposition of new restrictions, DEC members significantly reconfigured their operational strategies. Members adapted operations based on community needs, regulatory mandates, and negotiations with authorities while attempting to balance humanitarian integrity with stringent regulatory compliance. Member agencies showed 'principled pragmatism'. This term comes from Bowden et al.'s (2023) 'Humanitarian Outcomes Report'² and describes how agencies skilfully balanced sticking to humanitarian principles with making practical changes to their work. This meant finding a middle ground between doing what's right and responding effectively to immediate challenges. Strategies, such as strengthening Mahram policies² to accompany women in field roles, were used to maintain access alongside gender restrictions. However, these measures may have inadvertently reinforced traditional gender norms, initiating debates over their long-term effects on gender equality. Essential to these adaptations was the collaborative spirit among members, supported by the DEC Secretariat's flexibility and space for recalibrations in response to the evolving political and social fabric.

¹ This term describes the Taliban in Afghanistan, acknowledging their current control and administration of the country without implying full international recognition or legitimacy. We use this label to maintain neutrality and precision in analysis, reflecting realities without endorsing political status.

² Under these policies, women are required to be accompanied by a man guardian for travel beyond a certain distance from their homes. These regulations stem from a strict interpretation of Islamic law that the ruling group understands and enforces.

Localisation and Health of Partnerships

The enforced shift towards localisation catalysed by international drawdowns and De Facto Authority mandates increasingly transferred responsibility and risks to Afghan non-governmental organisations, a move not entirely by design but by necessity. Amidst this rapid change, the mental health and well-being of Afghan staff emerged as critical concerns. In response, some members established systems, including mental health services, to support staff amongst new pressures.

Access to and Reaching Marginalised

In response to severe restrictions imposed by the De Facto Authority, members recalibrated strategies to ensure aid reached marginalised groups, particularly women and girls. This involved shifting from livelihood initiatives to health services and implementing remote participation methods for women staff to contribute to work from their homes. Community-led committees largely facilitated targeted assistance, ensuring aid reached the most vulnerable, including older people and the internally displaced. Mobile teams and hotlines or WhatsApp maintained service delivery and communication. Diverse strategies, from infrastructure development to direct support, were tailored to navigate and mitigate the harsh restrictions on women's rights.

Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) and Climate Resilience

Members effectively incorporated DRR and climate resilience into programming, acknowledging the critical importance of community involvement and environmental awareness. Despite recognising the value, from community-based preparedness to water conservation efforts, challenges such as limited access for women, community buy-in, and insufficient budget highlight a discrepancy between perceived importance and actual resource allocation. This shows an increased need for prioritised, well-resourced strategies to bridge the gap between value recognition and practical implementation.

Sustainability and Exit Strategies

Programmes aim to build long-term resilience by building community capacities and community-led sustainability, navigating the complexities of an ongoing emergency context. Efforts to create self-sustaining initiatives, such as agricultural co-ops and water sanitation projects, are challenged by unstable donor funding and stringent restrictions on women's involvement. The environment demands flexible transition-based exit strategies, highlighting the delicate balance between addressing immediate humanitarian needs and working towards durable, community-driven development.

Lessons Learned

- » Health of Local Partnerships: Rising mental stress and security concerns among Afghan partners demonstrated the critical need for comprehensive staff support and risk management.
- » Localisation: The shift towards local leadership highlighted a gap in support, indicating that increased local responsibilities were not matched with adequate international backing.
- » Operational Environment Adaptations: Challenges with bureaucratic hurdles and regulatory shifts revealed the importance of strong advocacy and negotiation skills.
- » Marginalised Groups Access: Innovative strategies like home-based projects for women proved essential in bypassing societal and operational barriers, emphasising the need for creative solutions.
- » Programme Flexibility: DEC's adaptive approach to programming highlighted the value of flexible funding and partnership mechanisms to respond to evolving challenges.
- » Principled and Pragmatic Adaptations: The crisis showed humanitarian actors the need to balance principled stances with pragmatic methods for effective access and inclusivity.
- » Non-linear Decision-making: The decision-making process in humanitarian operations requires continuous feedback loops, with community engagement informing strategy adjustments.
- » DRR and Climate Resilience Integration: Unanimous recognition of integrating DRR and climate resilience into programming pointed to the essential forward-looking approach to humanitarian efforts.
- » Resource Allocation Flexibility: The need for organisations to swiftly pivot resource allocation and activity prioritisation in response to shifting needs was evident.
- » Leveraging Local Knowledge: Local structures like community development committees were key to effective project design and delivery.
- » Sustainability Challenges: The impact of changing donor dynamics and operational environments, such as funding reductions, highlighted the need for increased international advocacy.

Recommendations

- » Risk-Sharing and Negotiation Support: Develop a negotiation and risk-sharing platform for DEC Members to enhance collective influence and reduce individual risks.
- » Localisation and Equitable Partnerships: Implement a clear partnership framework to foster equitable relationships and shared decision-making between international and Afghan organisations.
- » Mental Health Support: Integrate comprehensive mental health programmes for staff and communities, supported by the DEC Secretariat's guidelines and resources.
- » Inclusivity and Marginalised Groups: Develop targeted initiatives based on gender-sensitive research to address the diverse needs of women and marginalised groups.
- » Disaster Risk Reduction and Climate Resilience: Increase investment in community-based DRR projects, ensuring full integration into programme planning and adequate budget allocation.
- » Ethical Dilemmas: Establish forums and advisory groups to navigate ethical challenges and promote transparent, shared learning among humanitarian actors.
- » Programme Adaptation and Flexibility: Advocate for more flexible funding and reporting frameworks from donors inspired by DEC's adaptive models and increase knowledge exchange among members and partners.
- » Sustainability and Community Resilience: Mandate the development of dynamic exit strategies in DEC members' projects, promoting adaptable approaches and community-led sustainability.

The Afghanistan Crisis Appeal

The Disaster Emergency Committee (DEC) launched an appeal on 15 December 2021 to support member agencies addressing urgent needs in Afghanistan, where the humanitarian situation has sharply declined due to drought, economic collapse, political turmoil, and rising food prices. This appeal raised £51.8 million, including funds from UK Aid Match, which matches public donations to charity appeals for disaster regions. Thirteen of fifteen DEC Members³ participated in the response and utilised funds raised through the appeal. The appeal was split into Phase 1 (15 December 2021 to 30 June 2022) and Phase 2 (1 July 2022 to 31 December 2023).

During the crisis in Afghanistan, members of the Disasters Emergency Committee were involved in various humanitarian activities. They focused on health, delivering mobile health and nutrition services, mental health and psychosocial support, and distributing essential food and hygiene packages, especially during the harsh winter months. Initiatives in the water, sanitation and hygiene sector included improving infrastructure and conducting community hygiene promotion training—food security efforts involved distributing food packages and implementing cash-for-work programmes to support the most vulnerable households.

The Meta-Synthesis

Background

Disaster Emergency Committee (DEC) launched an appeal on 15 December 2021 to support member agencies addressing urgent needs in Afghanistan, where the humanitarian situation has sharply declined due to drought, economic collapse, political turmoil, and rising food prices. This appeal raised £51.8 million, including funds from UK Aid Match, which matches public donations to charity appeals for disaster regions. Thirteen of fifteen DEC Members participated in the response and utilised funds raised through the appeal. The appeal was split into Phase 1 (15 December 2021 to 30 June 2022) and Phase 2 (1 July 2022 to 31 December 2023).

³ Action Against Hunger, ActionAid UK, Age International, British Red Cross, CAFOD, CARE International UK, Christian Aid, Concern Worldwide UK, International Rescue Committee UK, Islamic Relief Worldwide, Save the Children UK, Tearfund and World Vision UK.

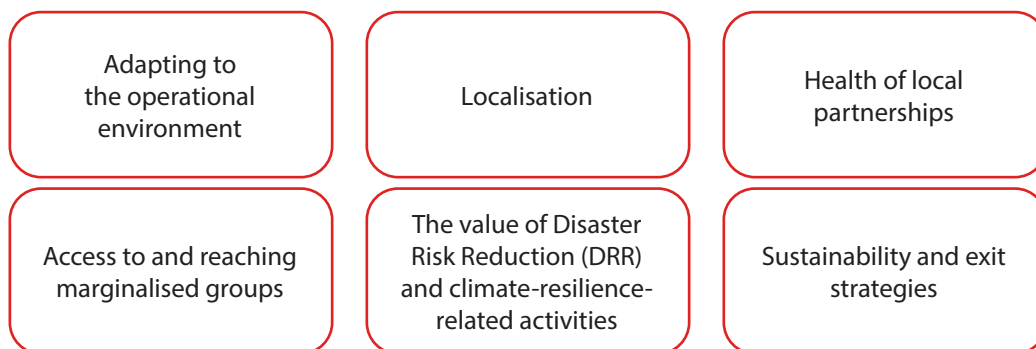
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Research Questions

The study sought to answer the following research questions and focuses on both member's activities as well as how they adapted work to the challenges that arose in a context of continuous emergency:

1. What are the key recurrent themes arising from the desk review?
2. What are the main findings and learning points?
 - a. Is there any significant divergence in the findings, and if so, what factors might affect or explain this?
 - b. Where common or consistent findings occur, what indicative conclusions do these suggest?
 - c. How have the findings from the DEC Responsive Review and Affected Population Perceptions Survey been taken onboard throughout Phase Two? What were the enabling factors in this regard?
3. How did changes in the political and operational environment impact member's programmes? How did members navigate these changes, and what informed their decision-making?
4. What adaptations or remedial strategies (if any) were made to programmes, and how successful were adaptations in addressing ongoing humanitarian needs and ensuring an inclusive and principled response?
 - a. How did these changes impact interactions with and support local partner organisations?

Lessons relating to the following themes were drawn from the research findings:



Methodology

Desk Review: This was a comprehensive review of DEC members' plans, reports, real-time response reports, perception surveys, evaluations, and non-DEC-funded member evaluations, in addition to other background materials. Using a snowball technique, bibliographies of selected documents were used to identify additional relevant papers.

Two Focus Group Discussions were conducted with representatives across the thirteen DEC members. These discussions focused on drawing more detail on the relevant themes and identifying what is significant and actionable to ensure the overall learning is useful. The discussions included a survey, enabling participants to answer quantitative questions and collectively reflect on the findings in real time.

The survey format allowed for anonymity and encouraged more honest and straightforward responses alongside the opportunity to expand or reflect immediately.

Ten Key Informant Interviews were conducted with implementing partners and DEC staff. These interviews expanded on the information gathered from the desk review and gave more opportunities to surface practical learning for and across implementing partners.

Analysis and Reporting

This study employed a thematic analysis to identify and explore recurrent themes across various data sources. This included coding the data and categorising it into themes that reflect the overarching narratives and lessons learned from interventions in Afghanistan. MAXQDA, a computer-assisted analytical software, was used to code the themes across the relevant documents. This analysis helped to uncover divergences and convergences in experiences and outcomes. Recognising Afghanistan's complex political and socio-economic landscape, the analysis was contextually informed. It critically examined how external factors, such as political changes and the De Facto Authority's policies, have influenced programmatic strategies and outcomes.

Through a validation workshop, stakeholders were invited to critically engage with the preliminary findings, prioritise lessons, and validate the insights to ensure they reflect collective experiences and are conducive to practical application.

Limitations

- Busy schedules and continued operations in Afghanistan may have limited partner organisations' or in-country teams' full participation.
- The meta-synthesis relied on secondary data about Rights-Holder's experiences and did not speak to them directly, which limits the depth of analysis in this area.

Operating in Afghanistan

Over the past two years, operating in Afghanistan for humanitarian organisations has been increasingly challenging due to the deteriorating human rights situation. The De Facto authority has imposed severe restrictions and committed widespread human rights violations, especially against women and girls, significantly impacting the humanitarian sector's ability to operate.

The ban on women's employment, particularly in international non-government organisations and the United Nations, except in specific sectors like healthcare, nutrition, and primary education, has led to a severe decline in women's participation in public life and the workforce. In addition to the impacts of restrictions on the rights and freedoms of women and other community members, this situation has had dire economic consequences, with the United Nations Development Programme estimating an annual cost of USD 1 billion. It has severely affected the country's GDP and ranks Afghanistan lowest in terms of women's inclusion globally.^{ii,iii}

Vulnerability assessments have identified women and girls, recent returnees, households with people with disabilities and rural households as the most affected groups. Despite a slight improvement in food security, these groups face challenges, including higher reliance on unimproved water sources, lower income, and increased vulnerability due to emergency coping strategies like early marriage and child labour.^{iv}

It's estimated that 23.7 million people in Afghanistan will require humanitarian assistance in 2024, highlighting the crisis's complex, continuity, and protracted nature, including small-scale emergencies within a protracted situation. The ban on Afghan women aid workers has particularly worsened access to assistance and services for women and girls, leading to increased vulnerability and isolation for women-headed households.^v

During the appeal period from December 2021 to 2023, the following key events occurred that interacted with the humanitarian landscape:

2021

Dec 21: The De Facto Authority bars girls and women from attending university, expanding their previous ban from middle and high school.^{vi}

Dec 24: Afghan women are prohibited from working with national and international non-governmental organisations.^{vii}

2022

March 23: The De Facto Authority abruptly cancels their previous promise to allow girls above the sixth grade to attend schools.^{viii}

May 7: The De Facto Authority Virtue and Vice Ministry order that women wear full public coverings.^{ix}

June 22: A severe earthquake hits eastern Afghanistan, exposing the De Facto Authority's challenges in disaster response and highlighting the critical role of humanitarian aid.^x

Sept 30: A suicide bomber attacks an education centre in Kabul.^{xi}

Nov 10: The De Facto Authority imposes a nationwide ban on women using gyms and parks.^{xii}

Nov 20: Public floggings resume, enforcing strict De Facto Authority rules and legal practices.^{xiii}

Dec 8: The first public execution under the De Facto Authority since their return to power takes place.^{xiv}

2023

March 9: Afghanistan is declared the most repressive country for women and girls by the United Nations, indicating a severe decline in rights and freedoms.^{xv}

April 10: The United Nations warns that its operations in Afghanistan are severely underfunded, impacting the delivery of essential humanitarian aid.^{xvi}

July 4: As ordered by the De Facto Authority, the closure of beauty salons affects tens of thousands of women entrepreneurs and limits social spaces for women.^{xvii}

July 23: Flash floods in Kabul, Ghazni, and Maidan Wardak provinces result in at least 31 deaths and 74 injuries, further straining the country's resources and exacerbating the humanitarian conditions.^{xviii}

October 7: Two significant earthquakes strike Herat Province, resulting in at least 2,445 deaths and 9,240 injuries, severely straining the already limited humanitarian resources.^{xix}

Dec 31: The De Facto Ministry of Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice starts arresting young women and girls in Kabul, particularly in the western parts mainly populated by Shia/Hazara and Tajik communities, for "not observing the hijab".^{xx}

Key Findings

Adapting to the operational environment

Events described in the 'Operating in Afghanistan' section show the increasing difficulties faced by humanitarian organisations due to the De Facto Authorities restrictions, especially those concerning women and girls. The timeline of events impacted member agencies in the following ways:

Education and Employment: The bans on girls' education and women's employment have severely limited the capacity for human development, restricting gender equality opportunities and women's rights and contributing to economic deterioration.

Healthcare: Restrictions on women's mobility and employment in the healthcare sector have led to decreased access to medical services, particularly for women and girls, further straining the already fragile healthcare system.

Food Security: The combined effects of political instability, economic decline, and restrictions on women's rights have exacerbated food insecurity, making humanitarian aid more crucial yet more challenging to deliver effectively.

Protection: The increasing restrictions on women's rights and public freedoms have heightened the need for protection services, especially for women and girls. However, the pressures on civil society and humanitarian organisations have made it more challenging to provide these services.

Access: The ban on women working in non-government organisations has severely impacted the delivery of humanitarian assistance. Many humanitarian programmes rely on women staff to access and assist women and children, who are among the most vulnerable in Afghan society.

How did DEC members adapt, and what strategies did they use?

DEC members adapted by strengthening existing community ties and engagement, often facilitating project implementation amidst restrictions. For example, one member noted, "Our organisation activities were closed and suspended for a short time, but due to close coordination with the community, we satisfied the community with our activities. This caused the community to be in full support of the organisation". This reflects a common strategy

among members: community support was and remains pivotal in overcoming operational challenges and in some cases supporting negotiations with the De Facto Authorities.

A significant adaptation among members was the transition from mobile services to static centres or hybrid models, particularly in health services, to comply with restrictions from the De Facto Authorities while maintaining service delivery. One member's experience illustrates the shift: **"Responding to the Ministry of Public Health's directive...the project team coordinated with the Department of Public Health to convert three out of four facilities [from mobile to static]"**. This demonstrates a broader trend of flexibility and compromise in service delivery among DEC members.

Member organisations reallocated resources to adapt to the new operational context. For instance, after facing project suspension, one member redirected its focus, stating, **"As a result, some activities such as vocational training courses, improved wheat seed distribution, multipurpose cash distribution, hygiene promotion training for the community leaders, and Psychological First Aid (PFA) training for teachers were not completed in this Province"**. This highlights a common adaptive measure: pivoting project activities to align with what was permitted by authorities.

Some member organisations adopted or strengthened existing Mahram policies to comply with the gender work restrictions while retaining the involvement of women staff. The "Mahram policy" requires that women must be accompanied by a man family member to whom they cannot be married, for travel or in public settings, significantly impacting their mobility and independence (Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, 2022). This strategy represents a common thread among DEC members, aiming to maintain gender inclusion within the constraints imposed.

Another shared strategy was focused on internal adaptations, such as remote working arrangements; **"having women staff work remotely and coming to the office occasionally"** reflects a broader organisational shift toward flexible working arrangements to sustain women's involvement. However, Bowden et al. (2024) remind us that 'working from home' in Afghanistan is not so easy, given challenges with electricity, internet, and limited accommodation for women's needs.

Engaging and empowering community structures was another prevalent strategy. The use of community committees and local negotiation facilitated project acceptance and implementation, highlighting a convergence in strategies aimed at leveraging local support and insights for project delivery. For example, one partner organisation reported:

"Developing an adaptation strategy by establishing an Access Department within each regional office, composed of Religious Scholars, Technical Experts, Project Experts, and Project Managers. This department was dedicated to ensuring projects comply with new regulations while maintaining community engagement and impact through continuous dialogue with the DFA and problem-solving at project sites".

In a few reported cases, partner organisations were able to obtain specific permission for senior women staff to attend the office or bypass the office and work in the field alongside a close man relative.

What informed these decisions?

A combination of community feedback, authority policies, and organisational and humanitarian

principles appeared to inform the decisions to adapt and what to adapt to. For example:

- Member agency's decisions were significantly informed by community needs and local

engagement. One member said, “Community is at the centre of every decision, and organisational strategy guides us through any decision-making process”. The alignment with community needs and local structures was a common thread, supporting the decision-making process across different organisations. Another member said:

“So most of our decisions were based on the Project Administration committee’s feedback; for example, at the beginning, we focused mainly on food distribution and some other activities, but later on, based on these committees, we started cash-based activities.”

- Adaptations were heavily influenced by the evolving regulatory environment and the necessity for negotiation with authorities. Divergences appeared in the degree and success of these negotiations, with some member agencies securing more freedoms than others. This variation in success might stem from how different ministries and authorities, at various levels, interpreted the restrictions on working with women, with some being more flexible than others. This varied interpretation depended on relationships, different districts, and an evolving understanding of the ban on working with women over the appeal period. For example, one member reported that:

“Our female colleagues actively participated in distribution teams, adhering to Hijab regulations and obtaining necessary permissions from authorities”.

- The balance between adhering to humanitarian principles and complying with new regulations informed decisions. This is where divergences emerged; while all member agencies worked to maintain their core values, approaches varied based on individual and organisational policies, donor expectations, and operational feasibility.

“A combination of mutual agreement between the red lines and principles of our organisation and our partners’ - particularly informed by partners’ assessment of risk and possibilities.” (Member agency)

- Technological solutions, such as using hotlines or texting, were informed by the practical challenges faced on the ground. Divergences

in this aspect were mainly due to varying resource availability and infrastructure levels among member agencies, which impacted the feasibility and effectiveness of such adaptations.

- DEC, as a funder, was repeatedly mentioned for its flexibility, thus enabling member agencies to respond and adapt as political, economic and disaster events arose:

“DEC’s flexibility (and deadline for resumption) was useful for focusing efforts while providing latitude and time to implement alternative measures.”

“We listened to the advice of the local partner and empowered them to come up with solutions which they felt were appropriate, safe, dignified and principled. This was only possible because DEC was so patient, flexible and practical and was very supportive throughout the whole process of project amendments”.

“DECs continued flexibility in re-implementation, change, and ensuring the response remains as relevant as possible and responds to changing needs and priorities, which is always welcome. In this context, flexibility re the earthquake response and general adaptations to the project based on restrictions placed on female colleagues and service users was vital in ensuring we could still work to achieve outcomes and broader objectives”.

“The flexibility provided by DEC was instrumental in allowing us to redesign and develop a programme inclusive of women. We advocate for DEC’s continuation of this flexibility, as it upholds project quality and supports a principled, effective programming approach through financial and temporal leeway”.

Were members able to deliver a principled response?

Member agencies demonstrate a strong commitment to core humanitarian principles. The principle of humanity, ensuring human welfare and dignity, was central to the decision-making process as reported by members. This principle guided members to persist in negotiations with the De Facto Authority and seek community-based solutions.

Decisions were also guided by the principles of neutrality and impartiality, aiming to provide humanitarian support based on need and without discrimination. However, adherence to these two principles has been tested. The humanitarian principle of neutrality (not favouring any side) faced significant tests among member agencies. Partner organisations highlighted the line of maintaining neutrality reinforced by mandatory compliance with Ministry of Economic decrees and obtaining permissions, challenging neutrality due to the inherent act of engaging with and potentially legitimising the ruling authority. Another partner organisation mentioned the adaptation of project documents and terminologies to align with new political sensitivities, showing the implicit challenges to neutrality as organisations attempt to maintain operations without endorsing the De Facto Authorities ideologies.

The discourse on 'principled pragmatism,' drawn from the Bowden et al's Humanitarian Outcomes Report provides a nuanced and realistic perspective. This concept embodies the delicate balance between upholding humanitarian ethics and adjusting to operational realities. Member and partner insights exemplify this tension.

The principle of 'Do No Harm' was also evident in the careful planning and adaptation of activities to ensure that aid delivery did not exacerbate tensions or contribute to harm. This involved considering the impact of interventions on community dynamics and the broader sociopolitical context.

Discussions with members also revealed a dedication to programme quality standards aligned with the Common Humanitarian Standards, emphasising safeguarding, accountability, and neutrality.

These challenges hint at a broader issue within the humanitarian sector: a potential reticence in openly discussing the failures and ethical dilemmas encountered in adhering to humanitarian principles. The Humanitarian Outcome Report highlights the sector's challenge in providing clear guidance for navigating ethical dilemmas. This hesitancy, could be rooted in fear of undermining organisational values or compromising the respect and trust foundational to operations, suggesting a need for greater transparency and reflection within the humanitarian community. A more open discourse can shape evolving strategies to navigate complex crises, ensuring a principled approach that resonates more authentically with the realities faced by communities.

To adapt and support decision-making, member agencies also referred to coordination with other member agencies, clusters, and particularly with the Agency Coordinating Body for Afghanistan Relief and Development (ACBAR). The coordination supported the continuity of services amidst new restrictions and operational challenges. For example, one partner highlighted the role of ACBAR and United Nations-led clusters in informing their adaptation process: *"We always depend on donors and in communication, consultation, and coordination with the HCT, ACBAR, and other donor agencies since the issuance of the directive, especially the ban on women's work."* The coordination was necessary for

sharing information and resources but also for advocating for operational changes and flexibility within the new political context.

Overall, the decision-making process involved continuous feedback loops. Information from community engagements informed negotiations with authorities, and the outcomes of these negotiations led to adjustments in community approaches. Similarly, moving to remote working, using WhatsApp or hotlines, often required revisiting community needs and regulatory negotiations, as changing circumstances demanded ongoing adjustments. As one member agency outlined:

“Each district, with its unique set of rules and norms, acts as a microcosm, often complicating broader strategic policies. Acknowledging and adapting to these local intricacies is essential, as it shapes the effectiveness of any humanitarian intervention.”

While there are apparent convergences in community-focused approaches and the adoption of hybrid service models, divergences emerge in the specifics of negotiations with authorities, the extent of technological adaptations, and the application of internal policies. It is also important to recognise that many member agencies have a long-standing presence in Afghanistan, and thus, relationships with partners enable quicker adaptation under trust built and internal knowledge present. Alongside DEC’s flexibility in allowing the organisations to pause and pivot, these were all enabling factors that member agencies could use and access.

Localisation and Health of Local Partnerships

Under the Grand Bargain’s framework, Afghanistan’s humanitarian approach has strengthened local and national responders, highlighting a commitment to shifting the paradigm from international-led responses to one that foregrounds local capacities and leadership. The Grand Bargain commitment includes actionable goals: significant funding redirection, aimed at a minimum of 25% direct allocation to local entities, strengthening local capabilities through sustained multi-year investments, and streamlining partnerships to alleviate bureaucratic barriers. It also emphasises the integration of local responders within global and national coordination mechanisms, advocating for a balanced representation that respects humanitarian principles while acknowledging the unique challenges posed by Afghanistan’s socio-political landscape.^{xxi}

Practically, localisation has translated into greater reliance on Afghan non-governmental organisations, which, despite facing abrupt operational shifts, have shown an increased capacity to navigate the socio-political complexities. Member agencies recognise Afghan non-government organisations’ increased effectiveness and relevance due to a deep understanding of the operational realities and the communities they serve. For instance, one member agency noted the advantages Afghan organisations hold due to their familiarity with the community needs and the trust they build with the community and the De Facto Authority, stating that this localisation directs funds in a helpful way.

The shift toward localisation gained momentum in Afghanistan following the De Facto Authority’s resurgence and the associated restrictions on women’s engagement, forcing international organisations to scale back their direct involvement. This resulted in an environment where Afghan organisations became more central to the humanitarian response, aligning, not by design, with the Grand Bargain’s emphasis on local capacities. However, this shift appears limited, highlighted by the observation from only one partner organisation that noted an increase in funding opportunities since August 2021. This indicates that while political changes have nudged the humanitarian sector toward greater reliance on Afghan partners, the anticipated broad shift in funding and empowerment of local entities remains gradual and incomplete, revealing a slow and complex transition toward full localisation in the challenging Afghan context.

The intricate dynamics of forced localisation post-international non-governmental organisation drawdown reveal a mixed picture: while it offered Afghan non-governmental organisations unprecedented growth opportunities and, in one case, increased funding, it also drives them into a new

realm of operational and ethical dilemmas. One partner representative shared a critical viewpoint that the sudden transfer of responsibilities to national organisations while creating job opportunities may have negative future impacts due to potential gaps in capacity compared to international organisations. According to some member agencies, the rapid transfer of responsibilities revealed these capacity gaps, necessitating a phased and supportive approach to localisation. Other partners highlighted that they have had to negotiate and take on significant risks, dealing with new procedural requirements for project implementation and navigating banking and financial transaction challenges due to the lack of formalised systems. As international organisations took time to pivot and determine how to respond to the ban on women working in non-governmental organisations, partners felt the gap in support more acutely.

Partner organisations advocated for a blend of immediate support and long-term development strategies to bridge capacity gaps. An ACAPS's thematic report,^{xxii} however, reminds us that this capacity strengthening must be both ways:

“The same INGO said that international actors assume that local responders need capacity-strengthening while disregarding that international actors have much to learn from local responders, especially in adapting programmes to specific community needs (INGO 29/11/2022). – ACAPS)”

Member agencies have reported that working with partner organisations in their operational modalities and leveraging their areas of expertise are effective. Communicating with local authorities and implementing projects through local partners, especially in contexts like negotiating access with the De Facto Authorities post-ban on women working in Non-Government Organisations, has proven essential. However, the lack of partnership guidelines and the challenges posed by forced localisation by De Facto Authorities, especially in education, are areas needing further exploration. The engagement with Afghan partners highlighted the need for clear communication, respect for local expertise, and joint planning to create a sense of ownership and commitment towards shared goals, which are crucial for the success of localised approaches.

There's a clear recognition of the need for equitable relationships between international and Afghan partners, where local knowledge and capabilities are valued and supported. One member's evaluation of the appeal points towards a strategy that balances rapid response with building the capacity of local partners, highlighting the importance of shared objectives and mutual accountability.

The mental health and well-being of Afghan partner staff have emerged as critical concerns, exacerbated by the socio-political environment and operational pressures, as evidenced by the responses above. These insights call for a comprehensive approach to partnership health, integrating mental well-being with operational capacity-strengthening. One member agency responded by offering well-being sessions for staff and providing access to counselling services. This highlights the need for sensitive and supportive partnerships that are mindful of unique stressors, ensuring that mental health interventions are embedded within the ways of working rather than being standalone solutions.

Following the earthquake, one member agency also provided additional support to staff, including supplementary salaries and clinical mental health support for those who suffered household damage. This reflects an understanding of the compounded stresses on staff and the need for comprehensive support mechanisms to maintain partnerships' health.

Security concerns also remain a significant risk for Afghan partners, with organisations needing to ensure the safety of their staff while delivering aid. Strategies for mitigating these risks across member agencies and partners included leveraging local knowledge, engaging with community structures for project implementation, and maintaining flexibility in operational plans to respond to security incidents. According to the ACAPS report (2023), national non-governmental organisations undertake more significant risks at reduced costs and with fewer resources. This situation stems partly from the local organisations' need to validate their effectiveness by demonstrating their ability to deliver superior, more cost-efficient, and impactful humanitarian assistance compared to their international counterparts.

However, the cessation of aid⁴ following the December 24, 2022, prohibition against women's employment in non-governmental organisations significantly heightened the vulnerabilities faced by national non-governmental organisations (ACAPS 2023). This diminished community trust, compelling Afghan organisations to justify halting their operations (ACAPS 2023). The risks and levels of engagement with communities due to international withdrawal may have exacerbated risks.

While partner solutions have been acknowledged, their influence on decision-making remains constrained. This is mirrored in the experiences shared where Afghan partners faced abrupt operational shifts without proportional increases in decision-making power, emphasising a disconnect between responsibility and authority. ACAPS captures this scenario: "Although localisation should lead those close to a crisis to decide on the direction of a response, NGOs feel that within the current system, they are not adequately involved in high-level decision-making about the direction of humanitarian response funding." This reveals a significant gap between the intent of empowering Afghan organisations and their involvement in strategic decisions, for example, where resourcing is allocated, highlighting the need for a more balanced and inclusive approach to the humanitarian response framework in Afghanistan.

The transition towards a more localised humanitarian approach, as reflected in the Grand Bargain's framework, also promotes community leadership and feedback. Perception Surveys^{xxiii} delivered across the DEC members' response reveal that local leaders and religious figures like the Imam Masjid are pivotal in identifying those in need, affirming the value of integrating local structures and wisdom into the humanitarian response. This aligns with the core goals of localisation, where trust and effectiveness leverage indigenous knowledge and leadership. However, the same surveys highlight pressing concerns, such as the need for gender-responsive approaches, suggesting that localisation must evolve to address the nuanced needs and voices within the community, particularly those of women and girls.

"Community members generally feel respected by humanitarian staff, but there are mixed views among women and girls about their feedback being valued by these organisations, highlighting a need for enhanced gender-responsive practices. While 64% of communities in DEC-supported provinces have provided feedback, notable gaps exist, such as in Nangarhar, where feedback on aid distribution was not facilitated, pointing to regional inconsistencies in feedback mechanisms." (Afghanistan AAP CC #2 Report revised)

Additionally, the community's feedback calls for the inclusion of local councils in the selection procedures, reflecting a broader desire for accountability and transparency in community involvement in humanitarian actions. This feedback loop, essential for refining localisation strategies, also points to Afghan organisations' critical role that essentially bridges the gap between international humanitarian goals and local realities.

The move towards localisation in Afghanistan, highlighted by the Grand Bargain's framework, has shifted focus to Afghan non-government organisations, which have faced sudden operational shifts while dealing with new responsibilities. International organisations have leveraged Afghan partners in some cases for operational execution. However, the mutual benefit of these partnerships remains ambiguous. The overarching humanitarian framework, particularly regarding donor funding, has yet to align adequately with Afghan organisations' escalated demands, risks, and operational expansions. This misalignment undermines the principles of localisation but also stifles the potential for a more effective and sustainable humanitarian response, calling for more supportive approaches and greater advocacy for partners in calling donors to account for achieving Grand Bargain commitments.

⁴ "Cessation of aid" in this context means stopping or greatly reducing the help and support given by organisations in Afghanistan. This happened because of a new rule on December 24, 2022, that stopped women from working in non-governmental organisations leading to a big drop in the help provided.

Access to and reaching marginalised groups

This section explores the strategies member agencies implemented to reach marginalised groups in Afghanistan, which refers to communities or individuals systematically disadvantaged and excluded from full participation in society due to factors like race, gender, disability, economic status, or ethnic origin. The focus is on methods prioritising the most vulnerable while navigating gender and cultural norms and regulations.

Strategies included:

- » Targeted approaches to selecting people to support, prioritising the most vulnerable, including widows, older people, and households with people with disabilities. This includes coordination with elders and community representatives to identify participants.
- » Distributing money to women in the presence of their Mahrams, a strategy that ensures

women’s direct benefit while complying with local regulations.

- » Employing Mahrams for women staff field duties and offering financial support to Mahrams.
- » Separating men and women during training.
- » Delivering projects focusing on kitchen gardening and other livelihood activities that address immediate needs and contribute to resilience within home spaces.
- » Using WhatsApp and hotlines to communicate with marginalised communities to collect feedback.
- » Working with community volunteers to target cash distributions while adapting to De Facto Authority regulations.
- » Advocacy for women’s participation in humanitarian work, engaging with community leaders and local authorities to find acceptable solutions.

Convergent Strategies

Engaging directly with community leaders and formed committees that included women, youth, and internally displaced persons to ensure the equitable selection of project participants.

Involving Mahrams in distribution ensuring women can still access financial aid and balance compliance with reaching women.

Accessible healthcare services and specialised support, including modifying physical infrastructures and providing targeted health interventions to meet the unique needs of persons with disabilities, should be incorporated.

Divergent Strategies

Some organisations focused on indirect methods to involve women (e.g., separating training sessions by gender and utilising Marham’s for field duties). In contrast, others took a more direct approach by forming community committees that included women.

Delivering activities in home settings, such as kitchen gardening projects, to reach women.

Securing permission for women staff to operate under certain conditions shows some organisations may have more leverage or success in negotiations than others.

Reasons for Divergence

The ability to implement innovative or indirect methods for reaching marginalised groups depends on the organisation's resources, technological capacity, and operational flexibility. Success in negotiating with local authorities for exemptions or special permissions appeared to be based on pre-existing relationships, the ability to navigate local political landscapes and the specific demands of local authorities. The divergence also highlights where organisations focus on immediate versus longer-term needs or a mix of both. Sometimes, member agencies work with communities as partners to negotiate with authorities.

The effectiveness of these strategies varies, with several member agencies reporting successful adaptation and continued engagement of marginalised groups despite operational challenges. Creative solutions like indirect participation methods and focusing on infrastructure, using WhatsApp or hotlines, and community-based approaches such as committees or kitchen gardening have ensured that vulnerable populations, especially women and girls, continue to access support. However, challenges remain, particularly with the sustainability of such approaches and the need for continuous negotiation with local authorities to maintain these gains.

The Mahram Strategy and Power Dynamics

Humanitarian organisations' adaptation to the ban on women working in Afghanistan included strategies such as employing Mahrams for women's field duties and requiring their presence during financial transactions with participants. While these measures have facilitated aid access, they also work within local power dynamics and gender norms, inadvertently reinforcing them. Though ensuring women's access to assistance, the dependency on Mahrams embeds traditional gender roles deeper within humanitarian interventions, presenting questions regarding the long-term impact on gender equality and empowerment.

The concept of Mahram, initially intended as a protective measure for women, has often morphed into a control mechanism in societies where women are perceived as subordinate. Faqihuddin Abdul Kodir highlights that while meant for women's safety, the Mahram requirement frequently curtails their freedom, emphasising societal imbalances and the necessity for these norms to be reassessed to fulfil their protective purpose without being restrictive.^{xxiv}

Single and unaccompanied Afghan women endure harsh restrictions under the De Facto Authorities, facing severe limitations on their movement, employment, and healthcare access due to the absence of a Mahram. Many find themselves virtually imprisoned within their homes, unable to undertake even basic activities or access vital services, magnifying their isolation and vulnerability.^{xxv}

A UNAMA report states that half of the women interviewed reported feeling unsafe without a Mahram, a condition exacerbated by new decrees targeting them. Such regulations have entrenched men and family members as enforcers within families, adhering to the De Facto Authorities' misogynistic values under social and governmental pressure. This has led to a substantial reduction in women's influence within their communities and decision-making processes, as highlighted by the significant drop in their reported influence from 17% in January 2023 to just 1%.^{xxvi}

Member agencies' reliance on Mahrams as part of their adaptation strategies represents a trade-off. By embedding traditional gender roles within the framework of humanitarian interventions, member organisations might unintentionally perpetuate a system that undermines women's autonomy and reinforces their subordinate status. This dynamic is evident in the broader societal impacts highlighted by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan report, where increased restrictions and social pressures decrease women's influence and participation in community decision-making. This strategy reflects a pragmatic approach to navigating the challenging operational environment in Afghanistan but shows the complexities of implementing humanitarian principles in contexts where women's freedoms are severely restricted.

Intersectional Challenges and Inclusion Efforts

Member agencies and partners shared strategies to reach marginalised groups. However, there appears to be a gap in addressing intersectional challenges faced by subsets of women, such as single mothers, older women, women with disabilities, lesbian women, and the broader Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, plus (LGBTQ+) population. The strategies primarily focus on broad categories like widows and older people without detailed differentiation or acknowledgement of the varied and compounded vulnerabilities within these groups. For example, the strategies mentioned do not explicitly address the unique barriers faced by unmarried women without children or lesbian women, whose experiences of marginalisation may differ significantly from those within the more traditionally recognised vulnerable groups. However, it may very well be that these women do not self-identify with non-governmental organisations out of fear. It highlights the necessity for member agencies to develop discreet and culturally sensitive strategies that acknowledge the unique needs of marginalised individuals without compromising their safety or exacerbating existing vulnerabilities.

Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) and Climate-resilience

Member agencies have unanimously acknowledged the importance of incorporating Disaster Risk Reduction and climate resilience into their programmes. Initiatives across member agencies involved significant community engagement, such as establishing community-based disaster risk management committees, Project Administration Committees, and community-led assessments.

A common challenge across member agencies is the limitation posed by budget constraints and access issues, particularly in remote or conflict-affected areas. These challenges hinder the scope of DRR and climate resilience activities that can be implemented and require innovative solutions and flexible funding mechanisms. Member agencies also highlight the challenges of ensuring the sustainability of DRR measures and securing community buy-in, particularly in changing environmental conditions and disaster risks.

The approaches to promoting environmental health and reducing plastic pollution vary, from distributing informational flyers and hygiene promotion activities to more structured ecological health education. This divergence likely reflects organisational priorities, available resources, and community needs. The scope and scale of DRR activities vary, from small-scale agricultural interventions to more extensive infrastructure projects like check dams and irrigation canals. These differences might be attributed to organisations' varying capacities, funding availability, and each community's specific environmental threats.

Examples of member agency strategies for integrating DRR and climate resilience include:

- » One partner reported distributing seedlings and vegetable seeds, especially to women, for home cultivation, serving dual purposes. This initiative emphasises women's resilience and integrates DRR with environmental protection and food security enhancements.
- » One partner organisation reported working on the orientation on environmental protection against plastic pollution. This example shows a proactive yet smaller-scale effort to integrate DRR with ecological awareness, highlighting the project's innovative approach within its operational limitations.
- » One member agency exemplifies structured community engagement by establishing Project Administration Committees. These committees oversee DRR activities from assessment to project decision-making stages, embedding community leadership in disaster preparedness and enhancing local ownership and the potential sustainability of DRR measures.
- » One partner worked on rehabilitating and constructing deep wells and cleaning traditional Karez irrigation systems. These projects tackle immediate water needs and contribute to long-term climate resilience, showcasing an integrated approach to DRR and environmental sustainability.

- » Some member agencies adopted a dual focus on soft components (like DRM training and community hazard mapping) and hard components (such as tool distribution and building check dams), which showcases a comprehensive approach.
- » A common strategy among member agencies was strengthening capacity and raising community awareness regarding disaster preparedness, environmental protection, and climate-smart practices. This strategy converges on the principle that informed communities are better equipped to face and adapt to environmental challenges.

Reflecting on the experiences of the member agencies in Afghanistan, integrating DRR within high-intensity conflict areas presents significant challenges alongside essential needs for community resilience. This reality mirrors the findings of Rodrigo Mena and Dorothea Hilhorst's study,^{xxvii} which emphasises the necessity for context-specific DRR strategies in conflict-affected settings. Their research reinforces the importance of adopting integrated approaches that consider both natural hazards and social vulnerabilities, a principle that resonates with the adaptive measures reported by member agencies.

The study also reinforces the critical need for conflict-sensitive DRR initiatives, as highlighted by member agencies' struggles and successes in navigating local power dynamics and societal tensions. Furthermore, Mena and Hilhorst's emphasis on the potential of DRR activities to build community cohesion and contribute to peacebuilding finds an echo in this meta-synthesis, where member agencies have made efforts to embed DRR in broader community development and engagement strategies.

In conclusion, the collective insights from this meta-synthesis and the Mena-Hilhorst study indicate a case for the continuous evolution of DRR practices in conflict settings. The evidence points towards a combined approach where acknowledging the interlinkages between disaster risk, conflict, and development could lead to more effective and sustainable outcomes.

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Sustainability and Exit Strategies

The continuous emergency context in Afghanistan challenges traditional notions of sustainability, prompting a need for innovative approaches that blend immediate relief with long-term resilience-building under fluid conditions. Member agencies highlighted the dependency on external donor support and the challenge of moving towards sustainable, self-reliant community structures amidst limited public-private partnerships and systemic and institutional weaknesses.

Members and partners used the following sustainability or exit strategies:

- » Aligning initiatives with existing community practices and knowledge, for example, through traditional irrigation systems rehabilitation.
- » Establishing community committees, such as community-based disaster risk management committees and water management committees, that are trained and linked with local authorities for future collaboration.

- » End-of-project planning: from project inception to completion, measures and plans ensure a sustainable transition, such as transitioning students from community-based education to formal schools.
- » Establishing Project Administration Committees (PAC) that continue monitoring projects post-completion exemplifies a strategic approach to embedding sustainability within community structures.
- » Establishing community-based structures that continue to generate income and promote skills post-project, for example, job-creation models, self-help groups and localised micro-enterprises.
- » Handing over constructed structures to communities with a commitment to their maintenance. Training communities on maintenance and effective resource use ensures the durability of project benefits.

From the member's and partners' strategies, there is an alignment of initiatives with existing community practices and knowledge, showing respect for local traditions and systems. This method promotes community buy-in by affirming local knowledge and creating a sense of ownership and responsibility towards the sustainability of projects. Rehabilitating traditional irrigation systems, for example, is about infrastructure improvement and recognising the long-standing wisdom and resilience within communities. This strategy suggests a move away from imposing external solutions.

The formation of community committees for disaster risk management and water management signals a shift towards decentralisation and local governance of project outcomes. By integrating these committees with local authorities, there's a clear drive for institutional integration and continuity beyond the lifecycle of the projects. This indicates foresight in planning for sustainability, acknowledging that when empowered and connected with formal governance, community structures can sustain and expand the impacts of development interventions.

The creation of community-based structures for income generation and skill promotion post-project indicates a move towards economic self-reliance as a cornerstone of sustainability. The strategies reflect an understanding that economic empowerment is fundamental to lasting change by focusing on job-creation models, self-help groups, and localised micro-enterprises. This economic foundation of sustainability efforts recognises the financial realities underlying social and environmental challenges.

Together, these strategies depict an approach to sustainability rooted in the shift to community-centric approaches, where institutional and systems strengthening at national or even sub-national levels are less favourable in the current Afghanistan context.

Lessons Learned

Adapting to the Operational Environment

Navigating complex bureaucratic processes and changing governmental regulations illustrates the need for robust advocacy and negotiation skills within implementing organisations to sustain programme delivery.

DEC's flexibility in programme implementation allowed for adaptive responses to evolving needs and challenges, highlighting the importance of flexible funding mechanisms and donor partnerships that permit real-time strategy adjustments.

Leveraging local knowledge and structures (like community development committees) is key to effective project design and delivery.

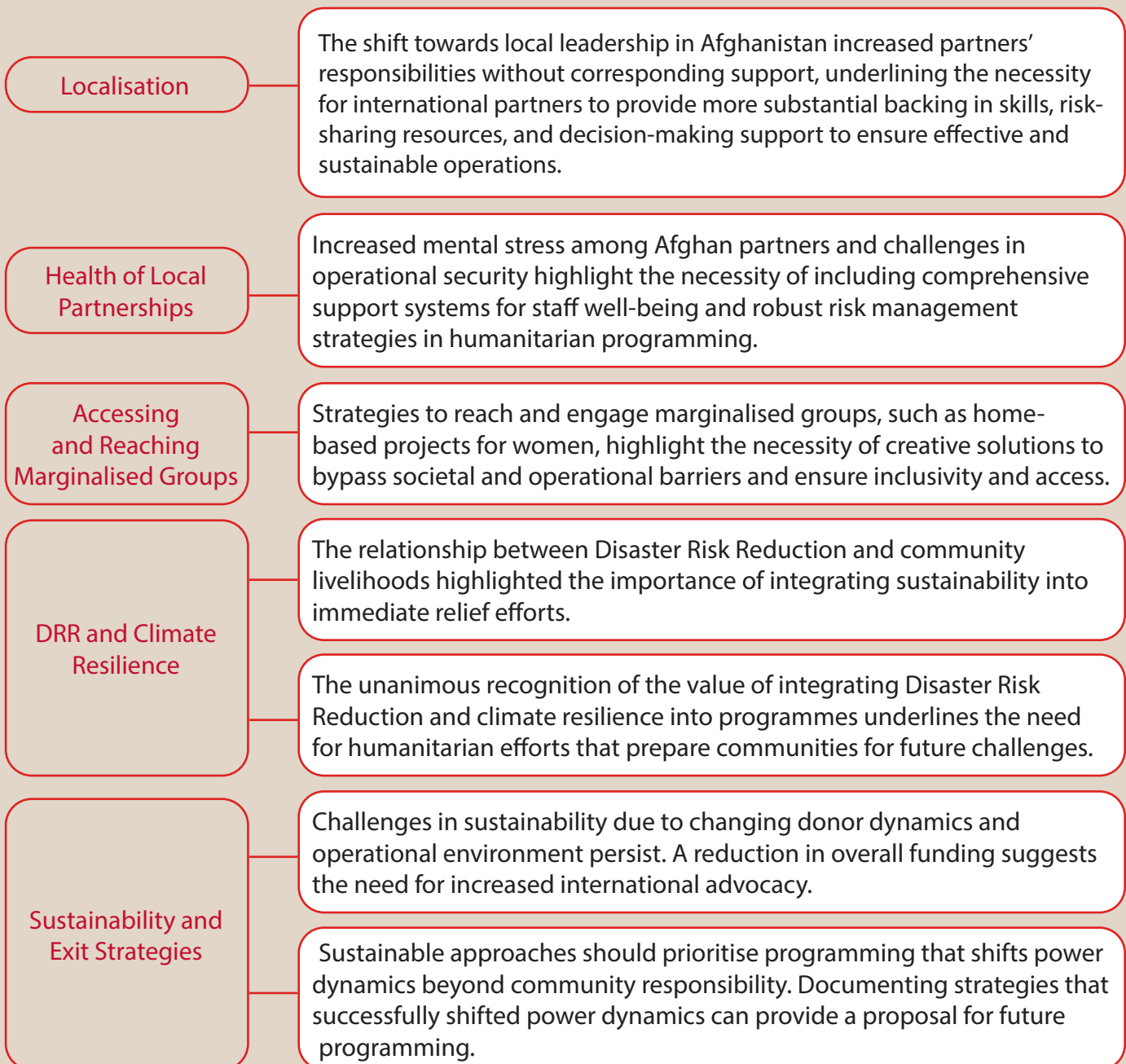
The decision-making process in humanitarian operations is not linear but relies on continuous feedback loops. Community engagement informs negotiations with authorities, and the outcomes of these negotiations prompt adjustments in community strategies. This adaptive approach is critical for ensuring that operations remain relevant and effective.

Organisations must navigate the challenge of remaining true to their core humanitarian principles while adapting to the regulatory environment and operational constraints. This balancing act involves making pragmatic decisions that uphold humanitarian values without compromising the effectiveness of aid delivery.

A critical adaptive capability is pivoting resource allocation and activity prioritisation in response to changing needs. Organisations must be prepared to pivot focus and effectively leverage resources to address emergent needs and constraints.



Lessons Learned



Recommendations



Recommendations

Audience: DEC Secretariat

Risk-sharing and Negotiation Support

1

Develop a shared platform or toolkit for DEC Members that outlines effective negotiation with De Facto Authorities, focusing on risk-sharing frameworks. This can include templates for agreements protecting partners and staff and case studies of member agency experiences. Promote collective influence and strategies, reducing risks to individual member agencies and partners.

2

Establish a support fund or mechanism to assist member agencies and partners facing critical negotiation or adaptation challenges, for example, supporting indirect costs, especially where parallel systems are required to ensure the continuation of working with women. (Finding: Mismatched responsibility and support).

Ethical Dilemmas

3

Facilitate platforms for discussing ethical challenges faced in adapting to De Facto Authority regulations, encouraging transparency and shared learning among humanitarian actors. Consider establishing an ethics board or advisory group to review and guide decisions. (Finding: Ethical challenges in adapting to operational environment)

Audience: DEC Members, National organisations, DEC Secretariat

Mental Health Support

4

Mandate comprehensive mental health support programmes within member agencies and their partners, with the DEC Secretariat offering guidelines and resources. This should include training for mental health first aid, access to professional psychological services, and the creation of peer support networks. National organisations should implement community and staff mental health initiatives; DEC members should provide resources and training; DEC Secretariat should gather and generate learning.

Audience: DEC Members

Inclusivity and Marginalised Groups

5

Develop programmes and policies that recognise the diverse needs and experiences of women and girls in Afghanistan. This involves conducting gender-sensitive research to identify distinct challenges faced by different groups (e.g., single women, older women, women with disabilities, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, plus individuals). Based on these findings, implement targeted initiatives. Avoid acknowledging women and girls as a monolith and take an intersectional approach to this assessment. (Finding: Challenges in accessing and reaching marginalised groups)

Refinement of Disaster Risk Reduction and Climate Resilience Initiatives

6

Increase investment in community-based DRR projects, ensuring they are fully integrated into programme planning. This includes facilitating community learning in hazard assessment, mitigation strategies, and emergency response planning. Encourage initiatives that enable communities to identify and address their vulnerabilities to natural disasters. Provide specific budget allocations for DRR initiatives within project proposals and reports.

Programme Adaptation and Flexibility

7

Use learning from this appeal to advocate for donors and funders to introduce more flexible funding and reporting frameworks that recognise the volatile context of Afghanistan, drawing inspiration from DEC's existing adaptive models. Propose specific changes such as fluid budget lines, adaptable project objectives, and simplified reporting metrics that reflect realities.

Increase opportunities for member agencies and partners to share learning experiences.

8

Establish a structured programme for knowledge exchange among DEC member agencies and local partners, facilitating regular webinars, workshops, and an annual symposium focused on crisis adaptation strategies and operational lessons learned. Create an accessible digital repository of case studies, tools, and guidelines derived from these sessions for ongoing reference and learning.

Sustainability and Community Resilience

9

Require all DEC member agencies to develop and document dynamic exit strategies within their project planning processes. These strategies should outline adaptable approaches based on evolving community needs and environmental realities, with clear criteria for transitioning from emergency aid to long-term development, including community training and resource handover protocols.

Explore approaches prioritising programming that shifts power dynamics

10

Encourage DEC members to document and analyse instances where programming has successfully shifted power dynamics towards community-led initiatives. Develop a good practice guide based on these findings, promoting methodologies that empower community leadership and ensure community voices drive project priorities and decisions.

Audience: DEC Members and Local Organisations

Localisation and Equitable Partnerships

11

Create and implement a clear partnership framework that acknowledges and leverages international and partners' unique strengths and contributions. This framework should establish mutual expectations, equitable resource sharing, and joint decision-making processes, ensuring that local organisations are equal stakeholders in the humanitarian response. (Finding: Value-add and usefulness of international organisations)

Appendices



Appendices

Documents Reviewed

Member Agency Evaluations	Islamic Relief, World Vision, CAFOD, IRC
Appeal Reports	Afghanistan crisis appeal six-month report Afghanistan crisis appeal real-time response review
DEC Member Plans	Age, World Vision, BRC, Tearfund, Islamic Relief, CARE, CAFOD, IRC, ActionAid, Save the Children, Concern, Christian Aid
DEC Member Reports	AAH, Age, World Vision, BRC, Tearfund, Islamic Relief, CARE, CAFOD, IRC, ActionAid, Save the Children, Concern, Christian Aid
Perception Survey	Afghanistan AAP CPS #2 Report DEC Afghanistan Appeal CPS #2 Report Perception survey Phase 1 and Phase 2
Prior Appeals	Rohingya Meta-synthesis Terms of Reference DEC ITA Meta-synthesis Terms of Reference Inception Report version one DEC Idai Meta-synthesis Terms of Reference Meta-synthesise final report: Cyclone Idai Meta-synthesis final report: Indonesia Meta-synthesis final report: Rohingya

Appendices

Quality of Evidence

This short assessment reviews the quality of evidence assessed within this meta-synthesis and across members. The purpose is to challenge the diversity of knowledge used to inform lessons in the humanitarian sector, challenge the assumptions and biases that may have been reinforced, and provide lessons on improving meta-synthesis or research overall in the humanitarian sector.

1. Use of Academic, Grey, and Tacit Knowledge

This meta-synthesis used a blend of academic insights (e.g., referencing studies on Disaster Risk Reduction in conflict settings), grey literature (such as United Nations and Non-Governmental Organisation reports), and tacit knowledge derived from interviews and focus group discussions with implementing partners. However, tacit knowledge is also indirectly gathered from member evaluations, reports, and perception surveys. This is no less valuable but may reinforce any assumptions or biases that were represented in the original studies.

Member evaluations and final reports are predominantly from international organisations; there may be a bias towards Western perspectives. Including interviews with community members suggests an attempt to incorporate local voices, which is positive. However, the balance between these sources is not precise.

Suggestion: Including peer-reviewed academic literature in future humanitarian research could strengthen the report's grounding in established research, particularly in mental health impacts and strategies for engaging marginalised groups.

Suggestion: Humanitarian learning on localisation and the engagement of local partners sometimes inadvertently assume that all local partners have the same capabilities or face the same challenges. This can create a bias towards treating local partners homogeneously without acknowledging the diversity in their capacities, needs, and the contexts in which they operate. Future meta-synthesis and assessment of humanitarian research should approach the evidence with more nuance when applying localisation and partners.

2. Relevance and Methodological Soundness:

The evidence in this meta-synthesis is relevant to the humanitarian context in Afghanistan, addressing critical operational, ethical, and strategic challenges faced by DEC members and their partners.

Gap: There is a less explicit discussion on the methodological limitations of some members' evaluations and, more broadly, across humanitarian learning, such as potential biases in participant selection for interviews or the representativeness of focus group discussions.

3. Use of Indigenous Knowledge

Evidence from members and the wider humanitarian sector mentions incorporating local structures and wisdom, especially in the context of Disaster Risk Reduction and community-led assessments. This indicates an appreciation for and inclusion of indigenous knowledge. However, evidence sources do not mention indigenous knowledge or alternative forms of knowledge beyond formal interactions with interviewers. This presents a significant gap in the interpretations of what is and is not working.

More explicit acknowledgement of how indigenous knowledge systems specifically informed programme strategies and decision-making processes could offer more profound insights into the value of local expertise.

4. Recommendations for Bridging Knowledge Gaps

For Intersectional Challenges: Engage in more targeted research or partnerships with organisations specialising in gender and minority rights to gather nuanced data on the experiences and needs of highly marginalised groups.

For Indigenous Knowledge: Establish more systematic mechanisms for documenting and integrating indigenous strategies and approaches into programme design and evaluation, highlighting specific examples of success and challenges.

Appendices

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