

Afghanistan

1 year later



A year has gone by since the entire world was watching the dramatic scenes that were taking place in Afghanistan. However, the attention of international media did not take long in switching elsewhere, focusing on other humanitarian crises that struck different parts of the world in the last 12 months. The situation of the Asiatic country has therefore been relegated to the second page, if not almost completely forgotten, while the conditions of the population have precipitated into an alarming deterioration.

THE HUMANITARIAN OVERVIEW

The country has experienced 40 years of war and hunger, financial straits, poverty and internal displacements have been a reality for a long time. However, the return of the Taliban authorities last August, followed by the initial halt of international humanitarian aid, highly exacerbated these phenomena. Ever since, the country GDP has dropped by 40% and 82% of the Afghan have lost part or all access to revenues. Consequently, in 2022, 24.4 million people, meaning more than half of the population, have been identified as in need of lifesaving humanitarian assistance, among which more than half are children and 5.8 million are internally displaced. In 2021, the people in need were 18.4 million, and the year before 9.4. Furthermore, during 2022, 97% of the population is expected to be under the poverty line: in 2019, the percentage was 54.

The country's context is even more fragile due to the strong demographic growth, the higher-than-usual rates of cross-border returnees and 47% of the inhabitants being under 15 years old, making the population one of the youngest in the world. Not only does this asset put a higher strain on the already-limited resources and basic services, but it also increases the protection risks of the most vulnerable groups. In 2021, Afghanistan ranked at the bottom of two worldwide indexes: the Global Peace Index and the Women, Peace and Security Index. Furthermore, the elevated presence of explosive hazard contamination all across the national territory makes the situation even more risky for children in particular and for civilians in general, who are the first victims of the conflict.

The decrease of fighting across the country following the collapse of the former government has allowed humanitarian teams to access areas previously hardly reachable for security reasons. The number of people to assist has therefore increased, while the resources to do so are more and more limited.

The abovementioned data underline how any further shock, either man or nature induced, would have a huge repercussion in the country. In fact, the 5.9-magnitude earthquake that struck the southeastern provinces of Paktia, Paktika, and Khost along the border with Pakistan on June 22 is a proof of this: humanitarian operators mobilized quickly and had access to the affected areas; however, rescue activities have been hindered by the lack of resources and the very limited access to local health structures. The people that remained homeless are widening the already-large ranks of those in need of emergency shelter assistance.

THE CLIMATE STRAINS

Alongside the highly severe political, economic and social crises, and seismic risks of the territory, the Afghan population is also experiencing the merciless effects of the climate change. Winters have always been rough, but the last one was particularly harsh, putting a further strain on families that, while trying to find food to put on the table, had also to look for something to keep their houses warm. The heavy snowstorms blocked many roads, further compromising access to essential goods and services.

On the other hand, one of the phenomena that is contributing the most in putting the country to its knees is the long-lasting drought, the worst of the last three decades. The production of the traditional crops has been highly reduced. As a result, deep-rooted rural customs, such as subsistence economy and solidarity among neighbors, are no longer sustainable and hunger is spreading. In fact, until a few years back, rural families who lived off the sale and consumption of crops such as wheat used to offer a third of their harvest to their neighbors in need. Today, those families find themselves also struggling every day to secure food in their own homes. The social fabric across the country is thus gradually being torn

apart under the weight of extreme daily difficulties. Furthermore, another plague present in Afghanistan is the widespread addiction to drugs, mostly opium and derivate products including heroin. There are an estimate of 3.5 million addicts across the country, mostly among the poorly skilled laborers who end up consuming it to avoid work fatigue but also as a substitute to cope with hunger or psychosocial issues due to poverty and conflict.

The effects of the drought can be considered directly responsible for the high rise on the number of people living with food insecurity: a 35% increase compared to the year before, for a total of 23 million suffering from it, which is the highest number currently registered worldwide in a single country. Moreover, water scarcity and contamination, along with the repercussions of the recent earthquake, have increased the risk for the population to contract many diseases, usually preventable.

THE HEALTH SYSTEM

After decades of conflict, epidemics related to hygiene and food shortages, and the current health crisis related to Covid-19, the national health system is very limited in resources and facilities. Moreover, the major political developments of the last year have completely transformed the sector, which had been built in the 20 previous years with the central help of the international community. In this context, infectious diseases are spreading, including measles and cholera. On the other side, these deficiencies have led to an increasing prevalence of corrupt practices, where medical services are often conditioned on obtaining a personal benefit. In such a system, it costs over 10 USD to fill a prescription, plus the cost of getting to the nearest health center. .

THE POSITION OF WOMEN AND CHILDREN UNDER THE NEW REGIME

For human rights as for Afghan women, the return of the Taliban to power has entailed the gradual but strong reinstatement of restrictions and discriminations against them. As of today, women can no longer travel further than 50 km from their homes without being accompanied by a male member of their family, a *Mahram*. In addition, female employment is scrutinized and from May 7, the *de facto* authorities have imposed all women to wear an *abaya* – a long dress covering the whole body - and to cover their faces in public spaces. Moreover, due to the high rate of men who have died in recent conflicts or as a result of the pandemic and other widespread diseases, over 2 million women have become widows nationwide. As their possibilities to find a job, or even of begging on the streets, are almost absent in the light of the abovementioned restrictions, women who find themselves at the head of their households rarely have a source of income. This privation of autonomy and economic independence make their survival conditions and their access to food, as well as those of who depend on them, at high risk.

To cope with such situations, many children are compelled to drop school to work or to beg on the streets, with all the psychological, developmental and physical risks linked to such conditions. Therefore, education has become a rarity rather than the right it should be. Almost 8 million Afghan children are currently in need of humanitarian assistance regarding their education, with half of them out of school. Before last summer, the number of those in need was 2.6 million. Furthermore, the attendance dropped drastically after the decision, on March 23, to forbid girls to attend secondary school. After more than 6 months of closed schools, following the political events of one year ago, and without a previous warning, the gates only opened for young boys. In the Afghan context, for girls to attend secondary school is also a fundamental tool to tackle the traditional and spread use to force them into marriage for economic reasons.

At last, one of the most dramatic consequences of the compounding restrictions and crises for the children is that of many of them whose mothers, unable to keep ensuring at least one meal per day, abandon them in front of orphanages. Children are therefore extremely vulnerable, with more than half of the population under five years old suffering from acute malnutrition. They are, along with their

mothers and all the other women living in the country, the most affected by the compounding emergencies that are hitting the country: the same categories that WeWorld prioritizes in its operations worldwide. Almost all the population of Afghanistan is struggling to survive and their everyday burdens are far too heavy to be managed by themselves.

THE RENEWAL OF HUMANITARIAN AID

Despite the difficult penetrability of cash in the country due to the disrupted banking system, the negotiations with the authorities concerning the presence of women in the staff and as beneficiaries, and the reluctance of some donors due to the political situation, it has been gradually possible to reintroduce humanitarian aid programs of monetary nature.

WeWorld has been able to operate again in the country thanks to the deep-rooted presence and connections of its local longstanding partner Rural Rehabilitation Association for Afghanistan (RRAA) in the province of Herat.

In the rural areas of the targeted territories, many have left because of the effects of the drought. Among them, some have managed to cross State borders, while others have joined the displaced masses surviving in the streets of the country's major cities. The few remaining residents of the Robat E Sangi area describe this past year as the worst they can remember. More than 70 km away from the nearest city, reachable by winding mountain roads often blocked by snowstorms or thick fog, the only sources of income are currently relegated to the few crops resistant to adverse conditions, such as licorice. Adults go to the fields with pickaxes and small children run behind tractors that move the soil and bring the roots to the surface. In the villages, retailers buy 4 kg of roots for the equivalent of nearly 1 USD.

The organization has implemented a Cash for Food project in the rural areas of Robat E Sangi, precisely in support of the women who found themselves at the head of their families. 180 households are currently benefiting from the program, counting overall more than 1000 people of whom $\frac{3}{4}$ are children. Among the beneficiaries, 95.5% resulted to suffer from hunger and 71.1% from severe hunger during the assessment, some of them feeding themselves only with bread and tea for a couple of weeks. 240 new households will soon start to benefit from a second Cash for Food project in the same area.

Their severe lack of income has forced them to adopt many negative mechanisms: the recurrent borrowing of money to buy food; the cutting off on expenses such as health and education; selling whatever item available such as furniture, appliances, doors and so far as their income generating equipment or means of transportation; reducing the number of meals per day or readdressing the quantities from adults to children. To tackle these negative coping techniques and in general the harsh conditions in which the selected households survive, the aid takes the form of a distribution of money and vouchers for the equivalent of 80 USD per month per family. The amount was calculated through a humanitarian coordination with World Food Program standards and it is based on the average food needs and number of members per family and on regional costs and availability – even though the prices are constantly increasing.

Among the beneficiaries, some have stated that the cash assistance has been the only way for them to be able to stay and not risk their lives through migration, which was until little before the only plausible option to try to get by. Through the distribution of money, the families have purchased mostly food items and medicines. However, some have used the money to pay the debts they had with the shops and to buy stationaries for their children to go to school.

Women staff who are working with WeWorld have claimed that while the community leaders and the *de facto* authorities are very strict with the rules that they have to follow to be able to work, in the field the communities are more open and supportive towards them.

The stories of Afghan women whose names and existences – marked by a restriction of their freedoms and rights - we can hardly imagine, is made of grueling barriers and daily efforts. Their children are direct victims of this situation and child labor, hunger and death, and forced marriage for girls are a reality in

nowadays Afghanistan. All of these measures against women and girls are reminiscent of the first Taliban regime.

In such light, external support, which is currently the only available one, is more than ever vital and fundamental, as it is urgent. The continuity of emergency programs must be guaranteed by the international community, also at each governmental level, along with finding a solution to the local banking situation. Afghan population cannot afford cuts in humanitarian response funds at the moment: they need money to feed their children but the banking crisis holds back on this objective.

WeWorld has undertaken 5 distributions so far. The intent is still to strengthen and make sustainable the cash for food assistance by extending it to a more comprehensive response including protection, emergency education, water access, sanitation and hygiene, and to scale up by reaching the left-behind people in need in the area.