

Humanitarian Senior Official Meeting, 13 September 2023

Afghanistan: stock taking and way forward

Chair conclusions

1. The second Afghanistan Senior Officials Meeting (SOM) was hosted by the European Union and brought together 31 donors, and 17 humanitarian actors and the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) to discuss the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. It was preceded by preparatory consultations in Kabul with UN agencies led by UNOCHA and with international and national non-governmental organisations (NGOs) led by the Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief and Development (ACBAR), on 5-6 September. A diverse group of Afghan civil society organisations and diaspora also met with donors to present their views in preparation for the SOM.
2. Participants recognised that the repressive Taliban policies, the economic and financial crisis, displacements, lack of available cash, the suspension of development aid and the suspension in structured delivery of basic services have affected the entire population and in particular women and girls.
3. Against the grim humanitarian outlook caused by the worsening food crisis, the SOM aimed to discuss next steps following the six months trial period following the ban of women from working in NGOs¹. At the previous SOM on 14 February 2023, donors adopted the “Guiding principles and donors’ expectations following the ban on female NGO workers in Afghanistan”². These principles framed the way for donors to continue funding humanitarian assistance to people in need. The Guiding Principles presented a unified donor position for humanitarian organisations working in Afghanistan in response to the Taliban ban on Afghan women working for NGOs and INGOs. Donors and humanitarian organisations commend the fact that they managed to keep a strong united position and continue to speak with one voice.
4. Participants remained extremely concerned about the humanitarian situation in Afghanistan. 29.2 million people, representing two-thirds of the population, are in urgent need of humanitarian assistance. According to the latest Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC- April – October 2023), around 17.2 million Afghans are experiencing high levels of acute food insecurity, classified in Crisis or Emergency (IPC Phase 3 or 4) in April 2023, including nearly 3.4 million people experiencing Emergency (IPC Phase 4) levels of food insecurity. As a result of low funding, WFP had to reduce the number of food aid beneficiaries from 18 to 3 million, which is expected to dramatically worsen the humanitarian situation.
5. Participants recognised an overall improvement in the security situation. The entire country is now more accessible, allowing people in need of humanitarian aid living in previously hard to reach areas to benefit from aid or to access basic services.

¹ The foreign ministers of the European Union (EU) agreed on Monday (21 February 2023) to give a “trial period” of six months to Afghanistan in which it must be ensured that the humanitarian aid it sends reaches the population in a non-discriminatory manner, after the Taliban announced they will ban women from working in NGOs.

² Complemented in April 2023 with the « Complementary principles and considerations for Afghanistan Coordination Group (ACG) donors “support to Basic Needs and Livelihoods” in Afghanistan

6. The vulnerability of the population is further compounded by the country's exposure to natural disasters, the systemic violations of women's and girls' rights and other repressive measures taken by the Taliban, exacerbated by the economic and financial crisis. Participants called for support to actions mitigating the risk of climate change, one of the drivers of the food crisis.

The operating environment

7. Participants acknowledged the ongoing challenges faced by humanitarian organisations to deliver principled humanitarian aid. Despite an increasingly restrictive operational environment and systemic violations of women's and girls' rights, donors acknowledged that humanitarian organisations manage to deliver humanitarian aid in a principled manner, although it requires painstaking recurrent labour- and time-intensive negotiations and associated financial costs.
8. Participants commended the role of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) as fundamental. At the SOM, participants agreed to engage in more qualitative reporting. Participants acknowledged the need for robust monitoring providing transparency and accountability in a flexible approach. A transparent dialogue between humanitarian actors and donors is recommended on the manner, in which the aid is implemented, and interferences should not be hidden.
9. Participants welcomed the significant efforts of the humanitarian community under UN leadership in engaging with the Taliban on revoking the ban on women working. The engagement of Muslim-majority countries is key in this respect. The SOM reemphasised that the Taliban are to be held accountable towards the Afghan people, in particular on safeguarding women's rights, as well as in supporting humanitarian operations in terms of access and equity. On engaging with the Taliban at an operational level, participants opened the dialogue on the need to have a pragmatic approach through exchanges on implementation that do not lead to recognition.
10. Participants called upon the Taliban to respect the independence of humanitarian operations and guarantee for all humanitarian staff, including all female staff, safe and unhindered access to the entire territory, and their participation in humanitarian work. Safety of beneficiaries of humanitarian aid must be ascertained and all of them must have free and unhindered access to aid services.
11. Participants called on the UN and the Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief and Development (ACBAR) to ensure the steering of a principled approach in implementation and not to agree on short-term solution that would create a negative precedent. The unity of the humanitarian community, speaking with one voice, is key.

Nexus

12. Participants agreed that humanitarian aid is not sufficient to cover all needs, and that only by strengthening the links between humanitarian aid and basic needs support can further systemic collapse be prevented and long-term resilience be built.
13. Participants agreed to support community capacities empowering individuals, with a focus on job creation, especially in the agriculture/livelihood sector, and ensuring inclusive participation of women.

14. Participants agreed that humanitarian actors and the providers of basic assistance are able to deliver and that the 'principled approach' will be even more relevant as we are moving towards a nexus approach.
15. Participants agreed to continue building on local capacities and exploring further possibilities for increased localisation.

Funding trends and advocacy

16. Afghanistan is one of the crises with the highest needs and the highest Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) for an initial amount of USD 4.4 billion. Since August 2021, there has been a significant decrease in development funding. In 2023, there has been a significant reduction in humanitarian aid funding, and a reduction in the number of donors.
17. The updated Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) is currently funded at 27%, with USD 2.34 billion still required to cover humanitarian needs until the end of 2023. Several participants expressed their concerns that humanitarian needs will not be fully addressed with this limited funding. There is a need to further prioritise the programmes funded, and identify the most vulnerable groups. It will be a difficult decision to decide what sectors and locations will be included in the next HRP. In addition, donors heard the call for mid-term programming on basic needs. A challenge faced by humanitarian organisations is to demonstrate what they do, within the existing exemptions and negotiations, while not putting at risk their staff and activities, or the recipients.
18. Participants advocated for donor commitments to be translated in funding for humanitarian and basic needs actions, in a nexus approach. Humanitarian aid and basic needs are guided by principles, and do not afford the de-facto authorities with recognition. International Financial Institutions have also demonstrated their capacity to work in the absence of a recognised government.
19. Participants highlighted the need for preserving the space for donor and humanitarian actors to engage in dialogue, while ensuring that monitoring work informs advocacy.
20. Participants agreed to pursue advocacy through stakeholder engagement, explaining why donors are staying engaged in Afghanistan.
21. Participants concluded with an agreement to stay engaged in Afghanistan for the Afghan people.

Future steps

22. Participants agreed to meet in early 2024 to take stock of the humanitarian situation and humanitarian response supporting the people of Afghanistan.
23. Participants concurred that the September 2023 Afghanistan Coordination Group (ACG) quarterly meeting would be an important opportunity to follow up on outcomes of the SOM, further clarifying the roll out of the nexus approach.