Overview

Afghanistan continues to experience marginal improvements in food security since the large degradation in the situation following the political transition of 2021. Nonetheless, over a third of Afghanistan’s population (14.2 million people) are still experiencing high levels of acute food insecurity, classified in IPC Phase 3 or above (Crisis or worse) and in urgent need of humanitarian food assistance. Of particular concern, the 2.9M people in IPC Phase 4 (Emergency), the majority of whom is located in Badakhshan, Baghdis, Ghor, Ghazni, Helmand, Herat (urban and rural), Kunduz, Kandahar and Taliban provinces. The slight improvement in the food security situation can be attributed to humanitarian and livelihood support initiatives, as well as enhanced purchasing power at the household level, among other factors.

Despite the stress placed on the economy and institutional support systems in 2021, which was near total collapse, households have reported improvement in their capacity to meet basic needs since then. However, poverty still impacts one out of every two Afghans. Deflation has been on the rise since April 2023, likely due to decrease in global market prices and a strengthening of the local currency. However, the economy still struggles to generate sufficient demand, purchasing power remaining lower than pre-COVID times. While the continued gradual decrease in food commodity prices has boosted purchasing power, it is also partly a product of lower demand in the economy. Additionally, the labour market continues to struggle to keep up with supply – particularly due to high levels of unemployment and the influx of returnees from Pakistan.

The projected decline in the total number of severely food insecure people (IPC Phase 3 or above) in the post-harvest period (May to October 2024) compared to the same period in the previous years, and especially for Emergency (IPC Phase 4) food insecurity, will likely be driven by the scale of humanitarian food and emergency agricultural assistance and the improvements to the cereal harvest in 2023. Despite these improvements, food insecurity levels remain high compared to long-term averages. While the wheat harvest is expected to be near average, it still falls short of national needs. Difficulties in agriculture brought on by the irregular onset of El Niño and lingering effects of the drought remain. This, coupled with widespread economic fragility and new shocks – the ongoing influx of returnees from Pakistan and the Herat earthquakes – underscore the continued importance of a multifaceted approach to addressing food insecurity. This approach includes sustained humanitarian assistance, emergency agricultural support and investment in agricultural and economic infrastructure across all 34 Afghan provinces. In the past five years, Afghanistan has experienced high levels of acute food insecurity (IPC Phase 3 or above) due to prolonged drought conditions and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, there have been some improvements in recent years, with a decline in the number of people experiencing acute food insecurity.

Current Acute Food Insecurity | March - April 2024

Around 14.2 million Afghans are experiencing high levels of acute food insecurity, classified in Crisis or Emergency (IPC Phase 3 or 4) between March and April 2024. This includes nearly 2.9 million people experiencing Emergency (IPC Phase 4) levels of food insecurity.

Projected Acute Food Insecurity | May - October 2024

Between May and October 2024, a marginal improvement in the food security situation is expected, with around 12.4 million people likely to experience high levels of acute food insecurity (IPC Phase 3 or above).

Key Drivers

- **Climatic shocks**: As a result of El Niño, precipitation levels and average temperatures between March and June 2024 are anticipated to exceed the average. However, La Niña events are likely to occur by July 2024, leading to unexpectedly dry and warm winter conditions from August onwards, which could impact Afghanistan’s food security situation.
- **Economic stagnation**: There is low aggregate demand and growth in the economy, leading to sustained high poverty levels and unemployment. Inflation is expected to continue to decline due to a stable supply of both food and non-food commodities, however, aggregate demand is anticipated to remain low due to limited disposable incomes. While the decrease in prices during this period may provide temporary relief to the most vulnerable households by reducing the cost of living, it is likely to negatively impact the broader macroeconomy.
- **High prices**: Food commodity prices, including wheat flour, have stabilized following a year-long decline. Wheat flour prices are projected to decrease further with the onset of the wheat harvest in June/July. However, high food and energy prices, along with disruptions in international supply chains and reduced incomes, will hinder households’ access to food and purchasing power, especially for those living below the poverty line.
- **Unemployment**: Households will face heightened financial pressure as their income diminishes as a result of high unemployment, decreased economic activities, and reduced remittances. Seasonal labour migration to neighbouring countries is anticipated to be below average. Income from nonagricultural wage labour and labour demand are both expected to be subpar, reflecting a general economic slowdown and intensified competition resulting from sustained high unemployment rates. The anticipated largescale deportations of Afghan migrants from Pakistan are likely to lead to an above-average influx of labourers, thereby driving down average incomes and exacerbating food insecurity within the country.
Livestock populations have faced depletion from distress selling and have been weakened by ongoing climatic variability and increases in animal pests and diseases in recent years, leaving them vulnerable to various threats and risks. Expectations indicate that livestock prices will be below the five-year average for most of the outlook period and below-average body conditions and sustained below-average demand. Pastures throughout Afghanistan are projected to regenerate to average conditions by June 2024 following late winter and early spring rains in 2024.

Due to the political and economic tensions in Iran and Pakistan, it is anticipated that seasonal labour migration will be significantly below average. Remittance inflows from Pakistan and Iran are expected to be below average and lower than the previous year. Remittances from Gulf countries are anticipated to remain stable or slightly below average, while remittances from Western countries are expected to stay consistent with last year’s levels, albeit higher than average.

Humanitarian Food Assistance

In March 2023, the World Food Programme (WFP) implemented a reduction in rations due to funding constraints, resulting in a maximum provision of 50 percent of daily calorific needs per person, regardless of vulnerability or food security status. This was followed by large cuts in the distribution of humanitarian food assistance, from approximately 12 million people per month at the beginning of the year to as low as 3 million people per month in September and October 2023 in order to reserve resources for the winter. The amount of assistance increased to approximately 6 million people coinciding with the increased needs in the lean season.

Despite a slight scale-up in assistance during winter 2023-2024, Humanitarian food assistance (HFA) is expected to decrease significantly during the projection period, with more than half of current levels to 6 percent national coverage by June 2024. WFP will entirely phase out its normal emergency HFA throughout the projection period, and replace it with a much smaller-scale, reactive ‘hotspots response’ through which only those sub-district locations at highest risk of severe levels of acute food insecurity will be targeted for assistance.

For the months of May and June 2024, only around 300,000 people are expected to be covered by HFA under this approach in identified areas.

Trends

Compared to 2021 and 2022, noticeable improvements have been evident in food security, credited to factors such as the impact of Humanitarian Food Assistance (HFA), advancements in cereal harvests, decreased food prices, and the stabilisation of the Afghan currency. Together, these components have markedly reduced food insecurity nationwide. Particularly, the percentage of individuals categorized in IPC Phase 3 or above has dropped from 40 percent in April 2023 to 32 percent in March 2024 (lean season). Projections for the post-harvest period (May 2024 – October 2024) suggest a decline in acute food insecurity from 35 to 28 percent, compared to the same period in the previous year. Additionally, the prevalence of individuals facing Emergency levels of food insecurity (IPC Phase 4) has slightly decreased from 8 to 7 percent as of March 2024, in comparison to April 2023.

Humanitarian food assistance: Maintain and enhance food assistance, ensuring coverage for all populations categorized in Phase 3 and 4 to prevent them from escalating into more severe levels of food insecurity.

Advocacy and resource mobilization: Prioritize efforts in high-level advocacy and resource mobilization to address the urgent food security requirements of populations classified in Phase 3 and 4. Ensuring the continuous provision of humanitarian aid and promoting the active involvement of female humanitarian personnel in aid distribution are essential components of this endeavor.

Livelihood support: Scale-up emergency agricultural and livelihood assistance for populations in Phase 3 and 4. This assistance is crucial to protect livelihoods, support spring season crop cultivation, prepare for the upcoming winter wheat season, and ensure the welfare of livestock. Prioritize women farmers and aim to prevent asset depletion and the worsening of household food production capacity in rural regions.

Crop pests and disease monitoring: Maintain monitoring and control measures for crop pests and diseases to prevent losses in agricultural production.

Integrated programming: Promote strong collaboration between development programs and humanitarian efforts. This partnership will tackle the underlying causes of food insecurity and bolster resilience and livelihoods of the impacted population, considering their limited resilience and susceptibility to shocks. Implement collaborative integrated programs in partnership with Nutrition, Health, and WASH clusters. These initiatives should focus on disrupting the cycle of food insecurity, especially targeting populations in Phase 3 and 4. Such interventions should be promoted in the Humanitarian Response Plan and should be funded.

Gender sensitive interventions: Implement food assistance initiatives and interventions that are sensitive to gender considerations, specifically tailored to support households led by women, as well as women and children who encounter obstacles in accessing their fundamental necessities. These segments of the population are frequently marginalized in society and necessitate focused assistance.