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FAQ: Hunger Crisis in Afghanistan

Was Afghanistan facing a hunger crisis before the events of August 2021?

Afghanistan is a low-income country, and residents affected by the civil war were at particularly high risk of hunger. Earlier in the 2000s, for about a decade, Afghanistan made good progress against hunger and malnutrition. Hunger fell by half and child mortality fell by nearly one-third. Two common measures of childhood malnutrition, stunting and wasting rates, were also falling. Over the first two decades of this century, Afghan women and girls had gained some respect for their rights. Girls' enrollment in secondary education had grown to more than six times its 2003 rate by 2017, when 39 percent of secondary-school-age girls were in school. Of the members of Afghanistan's Parliament, 27 percent were women.

Hunger: What's happening now?

Afghanistan would be considered likely to have high rates of hunger because at least two of the major causes of global hunger affect it—armed conflict and fragile governmental institutions. The hunger situation is now dire. As food prices rise, people are increasingly unable to buy the basic foods they need. It is a hunger emergency. The Voice of America reports that one in every three Afghans, 14 million people, are unable to get enough food each day. Two million children need immediate lifesaving treatment for malnutrition. More than 18 million people are currently in need of humanitarian assistance, including 10 million children. They make up nearly half the



population. According to UNICEF, half a million people are displaced within Afghanistan, a number that has doubled since May of this year. It is typical for conflict to produce large displaced populations.

The human rights and well-being of half the population—women—are of course important in and of themselves. Women's empowerment has also been identified as a critical factor in ending hunger, meaning that the latter cannot happen until significant progress has been made on gender equity. At this juncture, the status of women in a new Taliban regime is uncertain, but reports so far are discouraging.

Hunger is on the increase as the United States withdraws military forces and evacuates citizens. What does this mean for food and nutrition programs?

Organizations such as the World Food Programme, CARE, the International Rescue Committee, and World Vision have said in their statements that they are committed to maintaining a presence in the country and continuing humanitarian operations to meet the vast needs, even though many are evacuating their international staff to neighboring countries. It is important to note that generally, most staff of organizations like these are citizens of the country where they work. They do not usually seek to leave when international staff are withdrawn.

What about humanitarian funding from the U.S. government?

On August 16, President Biden said that our humanitarian aid to meet needs such as increased hunger will continue: "We will continue to support the Afghan people. We will lead with our

diplomacy, our international influence, and our humanitarian aid.” However, much is still unknown.

Bread for the World will be on the lookout for signs of problems with emergency aid:

- Because the United States has imposed sanctions on the Taliban, aid groups may face difficulty operating in Afghanistan. This is true even though the United States could and arguably should make specific exceptions on humanitarian grounds.
- A key principle of humanitarian aid is neutrality, but aid groups will nevertheless need the Taliban’s permission to operate and deliver humanitarian assistance in the territory it controls. Thus far, reports are that the Taliban has assured aid groups such as the World Food Programme that they will be allowed to continue to provide humanitarian assistance.

Humanitarian assistance is certainly needed. What about other important, longer-term development investments to end hunger in Afghanistan?

The short answer right now is that we just don’t know what the future holds. The answer will be a product of how the United States and other industrialized countries decide to interact with the new Taliban-led Afghanistan –leaders of these governments have said it is premature to predict what will happen. A great deal depends on how the Taliban acts as it takes steps to establish a government and to what extent the

group will allow foreign presence and investment. How well women’s rights are respected will be an important factor in the view many other countries develop of the Taliban in its role as the government of Afghanistan.

In the immediate term, many countries and international institutions are pausing their development funding and other economic support to the country. The European Union, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and Germany are among the donors that have currently frozen their funding to the government for development assistance, but no one is blocking humanitarian funding. The United States has refused at this point to allow the Taliban access to Afghanistan’s foreign reserves held in the United States.

Bread for the World is concerned that many of these isolation measures will result in increased economic hardship, rising food prices, and further rapid increases in hunger, poverty, and malnutrition in Afghanistan. We are also deeply concerned about the Taliban’s dismal track record on women’s rights. As explained above, the evidence shows that women’s economic participation, even beyond its importance as a human right for women themselves, is essential to improving child nutrition, increasing child survival rates, and ending hunger.

We hope the U.S. government will use all the tools in its foreign policy toolbox to find the balance between achieving U.S. foreign policy objectives and national security, and safeguarding the lives, well-being, and dignity of the Afghan people. People in the United

States must not forgo the duty we bear as fellow humans to support the Afghan people—no matter who is in charge of the country.

What is Bread for the World doing to help respond to the increasing hunger and malnutrition among Afghans, both those still in Afghanistan and those who have fled the country?

Bread for the World has long advocated for several streams of humanitarian funding that are used to respond in times of crisis such as this one. Food for Peace, for whose increased funding Bread continues to advocate, provides financial support to the World Food Programme to provide emergency food assistance in Afghanistan. Other government accounts that Bread has long supported are International Disaster Assistance, Migration & Refugee Assistance, and Emergency Migration & Refugee Assistance. All are key funding accounts at USAID and the State Department that provide emergency and life-sustaining support to populations in humanitarian crises, including those who have been displaced within a country such as Afghanistan or who have fled to other countries. Bread’s advocacy around long-term investments in global food security and nutrition can help to build the resilience of food and health systems, so that when crises like these arise they are able to continue functioning or can bounce back more quickly.