



NOTE

This is an excerpt from IDMC's 2019 Global Report on Internal Displacement (GRID).

SPOTLIGHT

AFGHANISTAN

Drought displaced as many as conflict

Afghanistan has been plagued by four decades of armed conflict, undermining development efforts across the country and triggering displacement every year. In 2018, drought added to the existing crisis and triggered more than 371,000 new displacements, a similar number to those associated with conflict. After four years of below average rainfall in the north-western provinces of Badghis, Ghor and Herat, the situation became critical as a lack of rain and snow melt caused crops to fail and livestock to perish. Large numbers of people began to move from rural to urban areas in April, in search of livelihood opportunities, basic services and humanitarian aid.

In reality, the drivers of displacement in Afghanistan are intertwined. The impact of the drought was the final straw for many families who had been living in rural areas underserved after years of armed conflict. Their resources and coping mechanisms had been eroded over time, and 2018 marked a tipping point when conditions became unbearable, leading to the country's largest disaster-related displacement in at least a decade.

North-west Afghanistan is primarily rural, and the drought has decimated the livelihoods of tens of thousands of households dependent on livestock and rain-fed agriculture.¹⁷⁵ Eighty-four per cent of landowners surveyed in IDPs' areas of origin said production was down by half compared with 2017. Those who owned livestock said they had lost almost all of their poultry, camels and horses and 90 per cent of their large and small ruminants. Respondents also said the lack of water for domestic use was a significant concern. Rain-filled reservoirs are used not only for irrigation but also for drinking water, because groundwater from hand pumps and wells is unpotable.

As of September 2018, more than 250,000 IDPs were living in scattered informal camps on the outskirts of Qala-e-Naw and Herat, the capitals of Badghis and



Herat provinces, respectively.¹⁷⁶ Conditions in the camps are deplorable and protection issues rife. Shelters are overcrowded and provide little privacy, and with the onset of winter and sub-zero temperatures members of different families were huddled together in one tent in an effort to keep warm. People are destitute and have resorted to harmful coping mechanisms, including child labour and early marriage. There were 161 reported cases of child marriage in Herat and Badghis provinces between July and October 2018.¹⁷⁷

There is a misconception that people who flee slow-onset disasters have time to pack their belongings and organise their departure, putting them in a better position than those displaced by sudden-onset disasters or conflict. The situation in Afghanistan disproves this. People fleeing the drought had already sold many of their assets and left their areas of origin with almost nothing.

Humanitarian response teams in the country have extensive experience in dealing with displacement triggered by conflict, which affects the entire country but tends to be localised and relatively small-scale. Their usual response mechanisms have not been able to cope with the mass movements concentrated in the north-west of the country associated with the drought. Some humanitarians may also have been influenced by the reluctance of host communities and authorities to allow IDPs to settle in their areas, due in part to ethnic and tribal differences, but also security concerns; this caused delays in the initial response to the displaced. Given that the drought has predominantly affected areas that are contested or beyond government control, authorities fear the new arrivals may include members of non-state armed groups.

The response has been further complicated by the fact that people living in protracted displacement

As winter approached in Afghanistan, many families displaced by drought and conflict were still living in makeshift tents. Photo: NRC/Enayatullah Azad, November 2018



and vulnerable host community members have set up makeshift shelters among the new IDPs in an attempt to secure humanitarian assistance, making it challenging for humanitarians to target the most vulnerable recently displaced households. As drought is a slow-onset phenomenon, it is also unclear who has the responsibility to respond: at the outset of the drought-induced displacement crisis, there was much debate about which agencies had the mandate to respond, with many humanitarian agencies suggesting that the emphasis of the response should be on development in the places of origin, and thereby fall to development agencies rather than humanitarians.

Despite the reticence of local authorities and hosts to let IDPs settle, many intend to stay. Only about one per cent of IDPs interviewed in Herat and eight per cent in Badghis said they would consider an assisted voluntary return, and 71 per cent in Herat said they would not consider returning regardless of the assistance on offer.¹⁷⁸ They cite factors such as insecurity, lack of food and livelihoods, and poor access to water and basic services as reasons for not wanting to return to their places of origin.¹⁷⁹

This raises the question of how to secure suitable, long-term housing, land and livelihoods for people displaced by the drought.¹⁸⁰ Most have pitched their shelters on private land where landlords only grudgingly accept their presence, which leaves them vulnerable to eviction. The Afghan Land Authority has signed a memorandum of understanding with the Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation to allocate state-owned land to IDPs for five years, but this is on the assumption that they will eventually return to their areas of origin so does not constitute a durable solution.

The Afghan government is already struggling to facilitate durable solutions for the 2.6 million people displaced by conflict in the country. Strong political will and substantial support from the international community will be needed to make real progress towards durable solutions for those displaced by conflict and drought in the country.¹⁸¹

| Notes

175. OCHA, "Afghanistan Drought Impact & Needs Assessment, Part I: Internally Displaced People in Badghis, Ghor and Hirat Provinces", August 2018.
176. OCHA, "Afghanistan: Drought Response Situation Report No. 2", September 16, 2018.
177. Reuters, "Drought drives desperate Afghans to marry off children for money", November 27, 2018.
178. Interim results of IOM Return Intentions Survey, January 2019: DTM Afghanistan, "Drought Response Situation Report, Herat, Badghis", February 1, 2019.
179. Abdoh, Hirsch-Holland, "Stuck in the Mud, Urban Displacement and Tenure Security in Kabul's Informal Settlements", 2019.
180. *Ibid.*
181. This spotlight was built based on inputs provided by the NRC country office in Afghanistan.