

Online Roundtable Discussion  
**Coordination, Reporting and Transparency of the  
International Humanitarian Response in Afghani-  
stan Critically Evaluating Role of the UN**

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**AISS Report**



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**Event Report**  
**Webinar Discussion: Coordination, Reporting and Transparency of the International Humanitarian Response in Afghanistan Critically Evaluating Role of the UN**

After the violent takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban, the sanctions that were imposed on the group and its leaders for their connections with international terrorism were extended to state institutions, including the central bank. Afghanistan's cash reserves were frozen and international budgetary assistance for the government stopped for fear of money transiting from the Taliban to groups like Al Qaeda that are on every terrorism list.

The result has been a confluence of crises involving an economic freefall, a contraction of economic activity and massive unemployment, causing what has been described as the world's largest humanitarian crisis – with half the population, or nearly 20 million people, facing acute hunger and a greater proportion facing other forms of food insecurity.



The UN, which had already launched nearly a \$1 billion humanitarian response plan in 2021, had to increase it more than fivefold, to over \$5 billion in what became the world's largest ever single country aid appeal.

While it has not met that target, the UN Financial Tracking Service data shows that \$2.2 billion has already been delivered or pledged. The vast scale of need and the vast amounts of humanitarian aid has created challenges for the UN: How does it quickly scale up its operations to ensure that it reaches the affected populations quickly and how does it do so in a way that maximizes transparency and minimizes aid leakage to undeserving people and elements.

Both of these dimensions of humanitarian aid – the transparency dimension involving the reporting and expenditure of aid and the equity dimension involving the delivery of aid to those in need have engendered much debate among Afghans.

On the one hand, questions have been raised about whether the UN can minimize the effect of parochial influences such as the Taliban's pressure and the social biases of its staff. The delivery of aid to women-headed households and minorities has also attracted attention.

The Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies held a webinar on the role of the UN titled "*Coordination, Reporting and Transparency of the International Humanitarian Response in Afghanistan: Critically Evaluating the Role of the UN*" on 5th September 2022. The guest included Dr Orzala Nemat, Director of Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU), Mohammad Yasin Samim, activist and Executive Director, Assembly of Hazara Social Associations (AHSA), Fran Equiza, Deputy Humanitarian Coordinator for Afghanistan and Dr Nematullah Bizhan, Lecturer at Australian National University & Senior Research Associate at Oxford University. The session was moderated by Ahmad Shuja Jamal, co-author (with Prof. William Maley) of the forthcoming book titled *The Decline and Fall of Republican Afghanistan*.

### ***Current humanitarian predicaments***

The panellists discussed how the absence of the economy and public services, which occurred after the violent takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban, is adding to the current crisis. Dr Orzala explained that "the system of banking is still dysfunctional, and none of the humanitarian and international or national aid agencies can directly receive funding, even for humanitarian aid". She also asserted that the lack of humanitarian workers is another challenge to address in the humanitarian response. "We face the displacements or the departure of many skilled professionals due to the restricted rules of the current regime, who could help to support the process of provision of humanitarian aid and assistance", she added.

She also alarmed that the worst is yet to come. "What we witness is a combination of disasters and challenges that the Afghan people, or an average Afghan household, is experiencing from climate change to natural disasters... We are already aware, unfortunately, that this coming winter is going to be worse for Afghan households, particularly in the rural areas than before... whatever savings they had over the last year, they used without having more opportunities in access to jobs, food, security, and so forth".

### ***More transparency is required***

All speakers agreed that transparency has been a key concern. Dr Bizhan highlighted the significance of transparency particularly in the current situation is extremely vital. "The delivery of humanitarian aid effectiveness has not been effective and been vulnerable to political manipulation. Distribution is not transparent, and if it's not equitable, can undermine humanitarian efforts and contribute to a lack of trust", he emphasised.

Samim also pointed out the issues of misconduct in selecting local partners. Based on his field research where he consulted 15 national organisations, the respondents of the research confirmed that the process of selecting a partner 'is not sufficiently transparent'.

While Jamal commended the efforts of INGOs and local NGOs in resisting pressure from the Taliban to politicize humanitarian aid, he also suggested that self-transparency by these NGOs will further strengthen the humanitarian response to the ongoing crisis. “There is always room for more transparency and I think NGOs in Afghanistan can lead from the front by being self-transparent and making their financial and other information publicly available”.

However, as for the UN, Equiza maintained that the UN in general has been transparent with the number of people reached and beneficiaries. “All the figures on how many people were reached in which provinces, in which districts, are on the web of UNOCHA, fully accessible to everybody”, he added. Equiza also provided some statistics: “In the last seven months, 21 million people have been provided food, 80 per cent of the people from marginalised groups were provided assistance, 83 per cent of the people were reached for water sanitation, 70 per cent nutrition and 62 per cent of the people received health-related assistance”. He added that every single province, at least 75 per cent people have received at least some of the services we are providing”. He lauded the UN efforts that despite the limitation of the fund, “the amount of people we have reached is impressive”.

However, Dr Orzala cautioned that nearly 70 per cent of the population are in deep poverty and among them, almost 64 per cent live in rural areas. “If I share my personal experience, I think we have not really reached the most vulnerable people if we talk about it in a more sort of like the systematic way”.

The scale of the crisis is huge and even if humanitarian organisations had reached 100 per cent population, it will still be not enough. Equiza reminded that it's a job of a state to address the crisis of this scale as the food requirement will continue to exist and one needs to feed millions of people on regular basis, not just once. Dr Bizhan also agree that “the humanitarian aid is not a substitute to development and investment in Afghanistan. It can help in the short term, but it's not helping in the long run”.

Another key insight that emerged from the discussion is the non-availability of exact figures on overhead and administrative costs. The participants agreed that there is a need for self-transparency within international organisations and they should compile and make public the amount being spent on overhead and administrative costs as it seems the bodies are not able to make this vital information public.

The participants also shared that there are also issues of cases of discrimination and interference from the Taliban. Samim added that “some implementing partners are discriminating against based on ethnicity, language and religion. In Ghazni, our respondents confirmed that some didn't receive any aid and the reason is their ethnicity and religious identity”. He also claimed that “there are repeated complaints about interference and manipulation from the authorities in the public delivery process...starting from the selection of the districts and demanding the portion of the food and cash aid for their own affiliates”.

However, Equiza asserted that he and his organisation have not accepted any interference and manipulation from the Taliban.

***Tough and pragmatic approaches will be vital in the coming months***

There are enormous humanitarian challenges that the country is facing and there is a lot of work that needs to be done urgently to address the needs of the Afghan people. Having said that, the current efforts by humanitarian organisations could not be classified as a failure. As Equiza made the point that “we make mistakes for various reasons. I don’t think that for the majority of children, women and men in Afghanistan, humanitarian assistance as a whole has failed so far”.

Dr Bizhan added that the current situation is quite complex and also the options are quite limited. “Therefore, it requires to be pragmatic approach and be flexible to improve the delivery of humanitarian aid in Afghanistan”. He also suggested to include local experts in humanitarian aid delivery. “We have experts working in different parts of the country, so we can capitalise on their expertise”.

The situation in the country is unprecedented, therefore, it requires unprecedented and tough decisions to make. Dr Orzala urged that the needs should be identified and “we need to go beyond our comfort zones to reach to those who are in actual need”.

\*\*\*The End\*\*\*