

Food security among crisis-affected older people in Afghanistan



This briefing is extracted from the study, *Closing the gaps. Gender Equality: Policies and Practices*, by the Afghan Food Security and Agriculture Cluster and global Food Security Cluster in December 2012-January 2013.¹ This briefing specifically focuses on the ageing aspects of the study, drawing out examples of exclusion and good practice adopted to address the needs of older men and women.

The study, *Closing the gaps. Gender Equality: Policies and Practices*, brings together evidence to create a contextual picture on how gender equality has been integrated across the project cycle – from emergency cash transfers, food assistance and home gardening interventions in Afghanistan. It also used protection, age and disability lenses to determine how far these aspects are integrated into gender equality programming. Eighteen food security cluster partners participated in the study, combined with evidence from communities and front-line staff in Hirat and Badakshan provinces to further deepen the evidence on which the recommendations are made. The full report is available at: <http://foodsecuritycluster.net/document/food-security-and-agriculture-cluster-afghanistan-gender-study>

Introduction

UNDESA's *World Population Prospects* estimates the population of Afghanistan to be 34.5 million in 2013. Using the same data, we can calculate the population aged 50 and over to be 8.2 per cent, and 3.7 per cent for the population aged 60 and over. The sex ratio in Afghanistan is 1.3 male(s)/female,² despite the large number of casualties of Afghan men due to decades of internal conflict. However, the sex ratio for the population over 65 years and over is 0.87 male(s)/female, indicating a feminisation of the older population who are often among the most vulnerable.

For over a decade, the food security situation in Afghanistan has been precarious with major impacts on the population's access to food and water and overall levels of health and nutrition, particularly among the most vulnerable. Although there are reports of bumper crop production in 2012, the UN 2013 Country Humanitarian Action Plan (CHAP) for Afghanistan states, "humanitarian indicators are critically low in Afghanistan, where over one third of the population is food-insecure."³ Thus, the 2013 CHAP makes a case for the "humanitarian community to work in a principled, needs-based fashion to gain access to the most vulnerable communities."⁴ Needs-based targeting relies heavily on appropriate information incorporating gender roles, age, disability, ethnicity and understanding of the needs of various groups within a population to identify specific vulnerabilities and capacities. The Food Security and Agriculture Cluster's *Emergency Food Security and Livelihood Study* draft report for Afghanistan, 2012, indicated that **girls under five years and people over 65 years are the most food-insecure groups.**⁵

This briefing provides an overview of key factors affecting older people's food security, combined with an analysis of the degree to which their needs are included in the policies and activities of food security cluster partners in Afghanistan. Providing evidence of both exclusion of older people and good practice to support more inclusive food security programming, it aims to contribute to the growing body of evidence and guidance on inclusion of older people in humanitarian programming.

Box 1: What is older?

Determining older age is a challenge. The UN defines it as 60 years, however, in Afghanistan, the situation is not so clear. The lack of access to nutritious foods and low health status lead to earlier onset of physiological ageing symptoms, while due to early marriage, many Afghan men and women become grandparents in their 40s, which is a socio-cultural definition for older age.

Understanding older people's food security

Older people are particularly sensitive to disruptions in food availability and access. It is, therefore, crucial that humanitarian partners have a clear understanding of the position of older people within the population and how this affects their access to food, as well as the specific factors which influence food availability, access and utilisation for older people.

According to the *Sphere Handbook*, food security exists "when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life".⁶ This definition contains three elements which are of particular importance for understanding older people's food security, and designing responses that ensure older people's needs are met.

Availability: For older people and other vulnerable groups, the availability of food depends on:

- The availability of food products that suit their nutritional needs and eating habits. Some older people may have difficulty in eating hard foods and may require a different food type that is not available at the market or at food distributing centres.
- A disrupted local (village) market, that is, a market to which traders no longer bring food and goods from larger markets, may adversely affect the availability of food to older people and other vulnerable groups.
- A disaster may affect the production or processing of certain key food products that are particular to the dietary needs of older people.

Access: For older people and other vulnerable groups, access to food depends on:

- The distance to their nearest market. Older people often tend to use local markets rather than travel to towns. Their ability to get to market to buy food and transport it home may be affected by reduced mobility, even if they have money to buy food.
- Food distribution points run by the state or humanitarian agencies may be too far away or too difficult for older people and other vulnerable groups to reach.
- Older people may not be able to access any existing safety net or social protection programmes.
- Cultural norms within the household dictate who has priority access to food.
- Older people may be the last to receive food (or they may be the first).
- Older people may choose to forgo food so that younger members of the family can eat.
- Families may or may not prioritise older family members' needs in decisions about family spending.
- Older people may or may not participate in family decision-making.

Utilisation: For older people and other vulnerable groups, utilisation of food depends on:

- Older people, particularly those with limited mobility, vision and hearing, may require a carer or support with food preparation, collection of such essentials as water and fuel, and the storage of food commodities.
- Older people may have specific nutritional requirements because of chronic disease or malnutrition.
- Older people may be unable to utilise the kinds of food provided in food distributions. For example, those who have lost teeth may find it hard to chew hard foods, or they may find some foods difficult to digest. Access to fuel and cooking utensils may be essential to make food edible for older people.

Inclusion of older people in food security programming in Afghanistan

The following sections of this briefing assesses the degree to which the policies and activities of food security cluster partners in Afghanistan contribute to ensuring the specific availability, access and utilisation needs of older people are being met.

Integration of older people at the policy level

Like gender, age is a universal determinant of vulnerability, and as such, the differential experiences of age and gender groups in emergencies must form the basis for the delivery of quality impartial humanitarian assistance. Understanding how age defines the position women, girls, boys and men occupy in the social, political and economic sphere is an integral part of gender equality programming, and as such, should form a central part of gender policy and resulting gender analysis. Yet, the policy basis for inclusion of older people in food security programming in Afghanistan is weak.

Of the 18 agencies that participated in the review and have a gender policy developed by their headquarters or by a global team, only three reported to have integrated age. A few FSAC agencies mentioned that when working with women, older women and women with disabilities are given priority along with other women with specific needs (young women, widows, female-headed households). In addition, most participating FSAC agencies mentioned that they identify vulnerable households with specific needs, such as those with older people or people with disabilities, during selection of beneficiaries. However, this type of reactive activity is no substitute for the analysis of age and gender relations required to ensure an understanding of the relationship between these universal determinants and the vulnerability of population groups that underpin programme design.

Such a limited integration of older people at the policy level is explained to some extent by the polarisation of gender issues in Afghanistan which, since 2001, has focused heavily on male and female relations. The exclusion of age and disability from the gender policy and trainings, results in limited or no provision for building capacity for humanitarian staff on how to ensure age and gender considerations are effectively integrated into policy, or throughout the phases of project planning and implementation.

Assessment

A needs assessment is one of the most critical steps in a humanitarian agency's response to a crisis. The quality of the assessment determines to a large extent the quality of programming. It is important to recognise that a needs assessment can take different forms, ranging from the analysis of secondary data where access is limited to the analysis of detailed primary and secondary data where contexts allow.

In Afghanistan, community-level needs assessments are largely carried out through consultation with leaders of Community Development Committees (CDCs), *Shura*⁷ and government officials. When household surveys are conducted, the interview is mostly held with the head of the households – both males and females of various ages. Since community leaders and specialist key informants in positions of authority in Afghanistan are generally adult men, this can introduce a significant bias. In such processes, the needs and suggestions of other family members, especially women, children, older people and people with disabilities are not always incorporated in the findings. Such "invisibility" in assessment processes will, therefore, be automatically transferred into the ranking of needs and priorities.

Only a few agencies report collecting Sex and Age Disaggregated Data (SADD) during their assessments and surveys; and others maintain disaggregated records of only the selected beneficiaries. There is also a clear inconsistency in SADD collection which is

viewed as “resource intensive” and “time consuming”. While the *Sphere Handbook* notes that “detailed disaggregation is rarely possible initially” but it goes on to say it “...is of critical importance to identify the different needs and rights of children and adults of all ages.”⁸ As such, the collection and use of SADD should form a central part of the analysis which underpins inclusive programming. The failure to collect and analyse such data severely undermines the ability of agencies to understand the needs of diverse age and gender groups, impacting on the effectiveness and quality of humanitarian programming.

The Annex of this briefing outlines a simple and effective methodology developed by HelpAge International that can be used to provide accurate estimations of SADD where nationally produced statistics are not available. While the methodology does not provide exact numbers of different age groups at national or local level, it delivers enough detail to support programme planning and design.

Planning and beneficiary selection

While assessments form an integral part of programme design and the targeting of assistance, there are further opportunities to ensure inclusion of older people. In Afghanistan, one method is the use of “selection committees” designed to draw on community understanding of vulnerability to target assistance to those most in need. However, despite such attempts, older people remain excluded in many instances. In its evaluation report of the drought response for 2012, the European Commission’s Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection (ECHO) noted that even though the “selection committees included representatives of older people, women and people with disabilities, their participation in the selection process was weak. This was particularly true in relation to women and especially in the most conservative communities.” ECHO further noted that despite the very strict criteria for selecting beneficiaries entitled to receive cash un-conditionally, it proved to be a difficult exercise requiring negotiations with communities’ representatives and with the beneficiaries themselves. Such evidence raises a question regarding a reliance on community targeting in Afghanistan to support older people’s access to food security programming.

Finally, during planning and beneficiary selection, partners reported confusion around the selection process in relation to gender, age and disability, with many staff lacking clarity around how to determine vulnerability. However, there are a few good practices of beneficiary selection by FSAC member agencies that addressed this gap by focusing on the intersection between household criteria and socio economic characteristics.

Box 2: Evidence from the field: Age discrimination in cash programming

While many older people are not able to work and are, therefore, considered for unconditional cash or food support, there are many others who are capable and willing to work but are not considered as potential beneficiaries of livelihoods support due to their age. Selection criteria such as “able-bodied men” and “people with high levels of energy” lead to the immediate exclusion of older men and women from both mainstreaming and targeting efforts. In general, there is evidence that humanitarian interventions in Afghanistan discriminate in terms of age that exclude many motivated older men and women from equal access to opportunities. For example, functional literacy classes are only provided for women aged 18-45 so older women cannot participate in the Food for Education activities.

Source: FSAC and gFSC, 2013, p.25

Beneficiary selection: Good practice

A number of agencies have adopted more sophisticated approaches for understanding levels of vulnerability in the community and overcoming some of the pitfalls associated with community targeting.

- Oxfam GB, along with its partner Organization for Humanitarian Welfare measures vulnerability based on the number of dependents in a household versus the household's ability to work and resources. Beneficiaries in the project are selected using this criteria resulting in a number of older men and women being selected as primary beneficiaries. For example, since many older men and women could not participate in cash-for-work interventions, they were assisted with unconditional cash transfers.
- During its 2011 drought response, ActionAid delivered cash by M-PAISA (mobile phone) using Participatory Vulnerability Analysis to support beneficiary selection resulting in 80 per cent of the 1,600 beneficiaries being selected from four categories: widows, older people, people with disabilities and landless farmers.
- In 2012, ACTED adopted a Social Safety Net Methodology for beneficiary selection in its programming which focused on the intersection between household criteria and socio economic characteristics (see table below) as a basis for understanding vulnerability. ACTED trained 52 CDCs to select households with one or more of the characteristics below. An evaluation of the project showed a 100 per cent increase in the understanding of the principles behind beneficiary selection among the targeted CDC members. The process was also well received by the communities with 95 per cent of interviewed beneficiaries stating they thought, "the selection committee selected the poorest/most vulnerable people in the community". When asked to compare the selection methodologies to those used by other agencies, 75 per cent of respondents stated it was "much better".⁹

Table 1: Breakdown of ACTED selected beneficiaries

| Household criteria | Socio-economic characteristic |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| Female Headed HHD: 10% | Extremely low income (<AFS 50 a day): 53% |
| Child Headed HHD (under 18): 12% | No wage or work (including wage and day labour): 6% |
| Disabled Headed HHD: 12% | No income: 14% |
| Elderly Headed HHDs (over 60): 45% | Primary Income Source |
| One or more elderly members: 36% | Agricultural Labour: 46% |
| Pregnant of Lactating mothers: 29% | Crop Sales: 22% |
| Three or more children under: 5: 34% | Non-farm wage labour: 13% |
| Number of Residents- | Significant Debt 42% |
| 2-5 residents: 10% | Landless: 30% |
| 6-10 residents: 60% | No livestock holdings (at all): 42% |
| 11-15 residents: 23% | Household does not have hard walls: 42% |

Source: FSAC and gFSC, 2013, p. 26

Delivery

Access to distributions: A major challenge for the implementation of large-scale interventions in Afghanistan is the lack of identification. The primary source of identification for Afghan citizens is *Tazkera* or National Identity Cards (NIC), however, at present only 60 per cent of Afghan nationals have identity cards, posing major challenges for verifying the identity of beneficiaries. The issue becomes critical for older people, those who are infirm and people with disabilities, or those who are otherwise housebound. They are often forced to send representatives to collect the food ration or cash to which they are entitled. In the absence of proper identification, it is very challenging to establish the identity of the beneficiary and their representative, implying protection risks for older or disabled people who may ultimately never receive the assistance.

Evidence from Afghanistan found in most cases no specific provision was made to ensure food items reached beneficiaries who cannot access distributions site. As per local cultural practices, able-bodied men from within the communities assist those with mobility problems to transport food, however, this is not a standardised practice, and there is no monitoring of whether assistance reaches its intended beneficiary.

Box 3: Evidence from the field: Challenges accessing food assistance

In Rebat village in Badakshan province, food was distributed to 28 households following a landslide in early 2012. The village is spread out across a number of hills and most of the families who were affected by the landslide remained tucked in a remote corner of the village. The community members interviewed for the assessment mentioned they received timely support with food rations from Oxfam GB and UN World Food Programme (WFP). However, a few widows and older members of the community found it difficult to travel to the distribution point to bring their ration back home. There were problems with the distribution time, as well as most able-bodied men go to work in Faizabad as daily labourers and so were unable to provide support to those who needed assistance. One community member suggested that the CDCs the aid agencies should have hired donkeys to provide door-to-door delivery to those families that did not have adult and able-bodied men to transport food items.

Source: FSAC and gFSC, 2013, p.29

Determining ration size: Based on WFP's food ration basket, the quantity of food per household is determined by an average household size of six members. In Afghan culture, those family members who eat from the same kitchen are considered to be from the same household, but due to lack of identity cards it is highly challenging to verify the number of people in each household. Where the food ration provided is not enough for a larger family, there is a common risk seen in many contexts, including in Afghanistan, that women, children, and older people go hungry or eat less to ensure food is available for other family members.

Determining the value of labour: In Cash or Food for Work programmes, men of different ages and abilities (skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled) are provided with different jobs. Those male beneficiaries who are unable to engage in intensive labour because of their age or having a disability are hired for lighter duties such as transporting drinking water. Evidence from Afghanistan shows, however, that these beneficiaries are paid less than those engaged in skilled and semi-skilled jobs. Given their limited ability to work, households headed by older men or men with disabilities often earn their income from such cash for work interventions. This raises the question of the inequality of outcomes at household level for such activities.

Determining the size of unconditional cash grants: Where family members are unable to work, unconditional grants may be provided. Yet, in Afghanistan, evidence suggests that family size is not always considered to determine the amount of cash

provided to each household. Given the overall complexity of estimating family size in Afghanistan, this fact raises further questions about the ability of agencies to assess and monitor the impact of such assistance.

Access to distributions: Good practice

While access to service delivery is a challenge for older people and people with disabilities, a number of agencies in Afghanistan have adopted innovative and replicable approaches to ensure assistance reaches those that need it.

- Where women, older people and people with disabilities were unable to transport goods home, Islamic Relief assigned responsibility to a few volunteers from the community to help in loading and transporting food rations. In other contexts, HelpAge and other partners have set up a proxy collection system. Information on the proxy person was noted either on the registration card or with the distributing agency to make sure the proxy person could access the distribution and to avoid fraudulent collection of assistance. For this to be effective, the only requirement is that registration lists must be accurate and up to date.
- In 2012, ACTED, ActionAid and AfghanAid transferred cash to over 5,000 food-insecure households headed by vulnerable members of the community in Frayab and Jawzan provinces using Roshan Telephone Company's M-PAISA system. To address some of the specific gender needs, ActionAid provided 450 NOKIA mobile sets to the poorest beneficiaries who did not have mobile phones, most of which were women. Furthermore, all three agencies said, "although collection points were set up for converting e-money to cash, Roshan agents accompanied by agency staffs visited sick and old beneficiaries in their houses and changed their e-money to cash."

Conclusions and recommendations for the Food Security and Agriculture Cluster in Afghanistan

For individual agencies:

- Raise the profile of protection, age and disability within gender equality programming to support both capacity building of staff and the quality and inclusiveness of programming.
- Promote alternative ways for collecting indicative Sex and Age Disaggregated Data and simple avenues to improve gender and protection analysis (see Annex).
- Invest in the capacity of CDCs to deliver emergency food security response and recovery programmes in a gender-, protection-, age- or disability-sensitive manner. This can be achieved in part through advocacy with the Ministry of Rural Reconstruction and Development's National Solidarity Programme.
- Design integrated programmes to balance out inequitable assistance and budgeting in relation to ration size, value of cash grants and value of labour. For instance, a household headed by an older person receiving a monthly food basket for six members of the family could be linked with school feeding for children, voucher or cash support for older or disabled members and other additional support to make assistance equitable at the household level.
- Ensure unconditional cash or food transfers and provision of material assistance reach the most vulnerable members of the community through the provision of

accessible distributions and access to transport, and sensitisation and training on distribution mechanisms.

- In cash-for-work activity ensure that vulnerable groups are not channelled into lower-paid or less desirable forms of work, based on their sex, age, ethnicity or other identity group.
- Contribute to FSAC's work on gender and protection mainstreaming by sharing expertise and learning how different partners are ensuring the integration of vulnerable groups into programming.

For FSAC at a Cluster level

- Promote awareness of the shared areas of concern for gender, protection, age and disability, such as: inclusive needs assessments, SADD collection and analysis, targeting methodology and beneficiary selection criteria, needs-based interventions, Do No Harm analysis, Accountability to Affected Populations including feedback and complaint mechanisms, referral pathway for cases identified for protection risks and humanitarian standards.
- Encourage the submission of evidence to the FSAC newsletter and other publications or websites of approaches taken to ensure inclusive gender equality programming which addresses age, disability and protection concerns.
- Engage FSAC agencies that implement various identified good practices to take leadership within FSAC in promoting, advocating or training on those good practices and skills.
- Integrate gender and protection inclusive of age and disability into the terms of reference and activities of Cash and Voucher Working Group.
- Foster linkages with Afghanistan Protection Cluster and utilise the cluster's capacities for protection and risk analysis and other overlapping issues between protection, gender, age and disability.

Annex: HelpAge International's sex- and age-disaggregated data methodology

The use of sex- and age-disaggregated data (SADD) is essential for humanitarian programmes, advocacy and learning. The application of the following SADD methodology will enable response teams to understand the demographic composition, profile and number of the older population that may be affected by conflict or natural disaster.

How and where to collect SADD

It is unlikely that you will find accurate nationally produced SADD in many countries or regions, so you must make demographic projections through estimates that will be close to real figures.

You can use data produced by the National Institute or Bureau of Statistics if the census provides detailed information by sex, age and administrative boundaries, and is no more than five years old. Unfortunately a lot of national statistical information is neither updated nor accurate, and in some contexts can even be influenced by political considerations. In an emergency, when time may be very limited, two alternative sources of information may be used to produce quality demographic projections.

Data provided by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), Population Division

How to use UNDESA data to produce national SADD estimates

Follow this link: <http://esa.un.org/unpd/wpp/Excel-Data/population.htm>

It will lead you to the UNDESA World Population Prospects where you will find updated population estimates disaggregated by country, sex, age, population density and dependency ratios. Open the Excel files, search for the relevant country and find the estimates on older age groups.

How to estimate SADD

Having found the relevant country and the most recent year's data, you can calculate the percentage of older people from the total population and fill in the table below.

You will see that some countries in the UNDESA database have estimates for the 80+ and 90+ age ranges. In these cases, we recommend using 80+ as the cut-off.

How to estimate SADD for specific geographical or administrative areas

Once you have a nationwide estimate, you can estimate the percentage of older people in the population in specific areas of the country. All you need is an estimate of the total population for the area of interest, and to apply the national percentages of older people to that area.

Data provided by The World Gazetteer

If you cannot obtain reliable population estimates from country-based information sources, you can use *The World Gazetteer*, by following this link: www.world-gazetteer.com

The World Gazetteer provides a breakdown of population data for countries and offers related statistics for different administrative divisions, areas, cities, towns and maps in English, French, Spanish and German. It will provide you with quality estimates that you can disaggregate later.

Always remember

You should make both a lower and higher estimate of the numbers of older people (60+) potentially affected by the crisis.

You can establish estimates based on the initial reports issued by the media, UN, INGOs etc of the numbers of people affected by the crisis. Estimates will vary depending on the crisis; for example your lower estimate may show 30-50 per cent of the older population has been affected by a crisis and 60-80 per cent affected as the higher estimate. In some cases these estimates may equal 100 per cent, for example when assessing refugee or IDP camps with defined populations.

Estimating the size of the older population affected by a crisis is not an exact science. However, it can form very important messages to share with humanitarian actors and decision makers in the initial stages of an emergency response.

How to estimate the percentage of the older people in the total population

| Age | Male | Female | Total male and female population |
|-------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 50-59 years | Total sum (% of total population) | Total sum (% of total population) | Total sum |
| 60-69 years | Total sum (% of total population) | Total sum (% of total population) | Total sum |
| 70-79 years | Total sum (% of total population) | Total sum (% of total population) | Total sum |
| 80+ years | Total sum (% of total population) | Total sum (% of total population) | Total sum |
| Total | Total sum (% of total population) | Total sum (% of total population) | Total sum |

Notes and references

¹ Food Security and Agriculture Cluster (FSAC) and global Food Security Cluster (gFSC), *Closing the gaps. Gender Equality: Policies and Practices*, Food Security Cluster, 2013, <http://foodsecuritycluster.net/document/food-security-and-agriculture-cluster-afghanistan-gender-study>

² See www.indexmundi.com/afghanistan/sex_ratio.html

³ United Nations, *Afghanistan Common Humanitarian Action Plan 2013*, Geneva, Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2013, p.2

⁴ United Nations, *Afghanistan Common Humanitarian Action Plan 2013*, Geneva, Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2013

⁵ Food Security and Agriculture Cluster, *Emergency Food Security and Livelihoods Study, Draft*, 2012

⁶ The Sphere Project, *Humanitarian charter and minimum standards in humanitarian response*, The Sphere Project 2011, p.145

⁷ In Islamic societies, a *shura* is a decision making body such as a Community Development Committee

⁸ At the earliest opportunity, further disaggregate by sex and age for children 0-5 male/female; 6-12 male/female; 13-17 male/female, and then in 10-year age brackets, eg 50-59 male/female; 60-69 male/female; 70-79 male/female; 80+ male/female. The Sphere Project, *Humanitarian charter and minimum standards in humanitarian response*, The Sphere Project 2011, p.63

⁹ Food Security and Agriculture Cluster (FSAC) and global Food Security Cluster (gFSC), *Closing the gaps. Gender Equality: Policies and Practices*, Food Security Cluster, 2013, p.26

For more HelpAge resources on emergencies:

www.helpage.org/emergencies

HelpAge International helps older people claim their rights, challenge discrimination and overcome poverty, so that they can lead dignified, secure, active and healthy lives.

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