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# Prioritizing Food Security and Nutrition in Afghanistan

**World Food Programme – Global Office Canada**

submission to

**the Special Committee on Afghanistan**

regarding its

*Study on Humanitarian Assistance  
for the Afghan people*

February 22, 2022

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## **SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS**

These are WFP's recommendations to the Special Committee on Afghanistan which was established with the primary objective of assessing the humanitarian assistance to be put in place by Canada to assist the Afghan people<sup>1</sup>.

- 1. Canada's response should address the food insecurity and malnutrition crisis facing Afghanistan.***
- 2. Canada's response should address girls' education and nutritional needs through school feeding.***
- 3. Canada's response should be time-sensitive to prevent deterioration of the humanitarian situation.***

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<sup>1</sup> "The House appoint a special committee with a mandate to conduct hearings to examine and review the events related to the fall of Afghanistan to the Taliban, including, but not limited to, the government's contingency planning for that event and the subsequent efforts to evacuate, or otherwise authorize entry to Canada of, Canadian citizens, and interpreters, contractors and other Afghans who had assisted the Canadian Armed Forces or other Canadian organizations, and that the special committee conduct its work with the primary objective of assessing the humanitarian assistance to be put in place by Canada to assist the Afghan people." [Journal from the House of Commons](#), December 8, 2021.

## Prioritizing Food Security and Nutrition in Afghanistan

*The United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) welcomes the opportunity to submit this written brief following the testimony of WFP Regional Director for Asia and the Pacific, John Aylieff, to the Special Committee on Afghanistan January 31, 2022, regarding the Committee's study on humanitarian assistance for the Afghan people. WFP is thankful to the Committee for the opportunity to provide further commentary and encourages the Government of Canada to consider the three recommendations proposed below.*

### **HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE CONTEXT**

**In the summer of 2021 the people of Afghanistan faced drought, COVID, economic meltdown and institutional collapse leading to unprecedented food insecurity.** After the Taliban takeover<sup>2</sup>, foreign aid which previously accounted for 40% of the country's GDP was suspended and the country's overseas assets and banking system<sup>3</sup> were frozen. This economic meltdown has suffocated Afghan livelihoods across all social classes. Over half the population, **22.8 million people, face crisis or emergency levels<sup>4</sup> of food insecurity in 2022.** Wheat and bread prices are soaring. Afghans are forced to take drastic measures to support their minimal food needs. In February 2022 almost 100% of female-headed households surveyed were unable to consume sufficient food. Urgent support from Canada and its partners for life-saving food assistance can prevent countless unspeakable tragedies, particularly by addressing the specific needs of women and girls.

### **WFP IN AFGHANISTAN**

**WFP is the largest humanitarian organisation in Afghanistan.** Operational in the country since 1963, WFP is active in all 34 provinces of Afghanistan with a Country Office in Kabul, six area offices with almost 600 staff and over 80 international and local partners.

**WFP provides logistics support to the whole humanitarian community.** WFP operates the United Nations Humanitarian Air Services (UNHAS) which supports the humanitarian community in Afghanistan. To date in 2022, 304 flights have transported 1,750 passengers and essential cargo within the country. UNHAS operates flights to 20 locations, including airbridges that connect Kabul to Islamabad, Dushanbe and Doha.

**WFP maintains operational independence from the Taliban** and is guided by the humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence. WFP has operated in Afghanistan alongside different groups, including the Taliban which controlled large swathes of the country long before August 2021. WFP is well-positioned with the access and capacity to deliver much needed

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<sup>2</sup> UNDP, [Afghanistan Socio-Economic Outlook 2021-2022: Averting a Basic Needs Crisis](#), December 1, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> UNDP, [The Afghan Banking and Financial Systems Situation Report](#), November 22, 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Emergency levels defined as: People are facing extreme food shortages, where acute malnutrition levels are high and the risk of hunger-related deaths is rapidly increasing. Loss of income at this stage is irreversible, and between 15 and 30% of the population is acutely malnourished. People have access to three or fewer food groups like fruits, grains and vegetables, and take in less than 2,100 calories per day. [Integrated Food Security Phase Classification](#).

assistance while remaining independent. As such, WFP is considered a trusted partner for Canada in supporting the most vulnerable Afghans.

**With adequate support from the international community, WFP is ready to meet the needs of Afghans.** WFP is actively channeling critical food and nutrition assistance to the most vulnerable and ready to scale up operations to prevent further humanitarian emergency levels of food insecurity, reaching 15 million Afghans in 2021 and 8 million in January 2022 alone. With a strong logistical capacity, operational independence, and demonstrated effective programming, WFP is fully capable of transforming support from Canada and its partners in the international community to concrete, substantive, and essential support to the most vulnerable.

## **FOOD SECURITY AND HUMANITARIAN NEEDS**

**Humanitarian needs were significant prior to August 2021.** For more than four decades, Afghanistan has experienced complex and protracted conflict combined with challenges of climate change, limited job opportunities, pervasive gender inequalities, and COVID-19. Prior to the Taliban takeover, approximately half of the population was living below the poverty line. Afghan women were more likely to be severely food insecure than Afghan men, especially if they were from female-headed households (71.5% v 61.2%). Furthermore, the conflict drove displacement, food insecurity, and hampered humanitarian access.

**The specific needs of women and girls were significant prior to August 2021.** Afghanistan ranked as one of the most gender unequal countries in 2020—169<sup>th</sup> out of 189 countries on a Gender Inequality Index<sup>5</sup>. Approximately 72% of young women had no education at all, compared to 43% of young men. Most Afghan girls were not completing primary school and nearly 80% of Afghan women were illiterate. Afghan boys were nearly twice as likely as girls to complete secondary school. Prior to August 2021, 46% of women reported they had experienced intimate partner violence in the last 12 months. These pre-existing issues continue to deteriorate for women and girls in Afghanistan.

**Afghanistan now faces an unprecedented food and nutritional crisis.** Approximately half of the Afghan population (23 million people) are **acutely food insecure**. Emergency levels of acute food insecurity are seen across all 34 provinces. Specifically, 4.7 million children, and pregnant and lactating women are at risk of **acute malnutrition**. Diets remain poor, the average household reported consuming animal protein and dairy just once in the month of February 2022; prior to August 2021 they reported eating it once per week<sup>6</sup>. The latest WFP surveys show 80% of households are eating less, and 70% are borrowing food to get by.<sup>7</sup> For the first time, urban residents are suffering from food insecurity at similar rates to rural communities. All major urban centres are projected to face emergency levels of food insecurity, including many formerly middle-class households.

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<sup>5</sup> United Nations Development Programme, [Gender Inequality Index](#) 2020.

<sup>6</sup> [Situation Report](#) - Afghanistan World Food Programme, February 2022.

<sup>7</sup> [Food Security Update](#) - Afghanistan World Food Programme, 8 December 2021.

**Women and girls continue to be disproportionately impacted.** In February 2022, nearly 100% of female-headed household reported facing insufficient food consumption. Far more of these households are also turning to drastic measures (85%) than male-headed households (62%)<sup>8</sup>. In September 2021, central authorities announced that girls can continue to attend primary school. However, adolescent girls are not yet uniformly permitted to attend secondary schools, which are operating in a limited number of provinces, though it has been announced that they can in the new school year that starts March/April. Furthermore, economic insecurity, displacement, lack of reporting, lack of recourse, and a weak healthcare system have exacerbated the state of gender-based violence, gender inequalities, and women’s empowerment in Afghanistan.

## **WFP RESPONSE**

WFP’s current assistance includes supplementary food and nutrition for women and children, displaced people and refugees; school feeding programs for boys and girls, and vocational skills training for men and women.

**WFP is scaling up emergency food assistance at an unprecedented rate.** WFP aims to assist 23 million people in 2022. Given the gravity of the situation, WFP will increase the duration and predictability of support (to 8-12 months) for the most vulnerable. WFP is also increasing support to urban populations hit by job losses and economic paralysis.

**WFP is providing nutrition packages to prevent and support malnourished Afghan women and children.** In the face of inaction, more than half of all children under five (3.9 million) and over 800,000 of pregnant and lactating women are at risk of acute malnutrition in 2022. WFP is scaling up to reach 4.8 million people with a malnutrition prevention package, and 1.6 million children under five and pregnant and lactating women with treatment for acute malnutrition. Given the challenges women face reaching functioning health centres, WFP is increasing its mobile health teams four-fold, especially in rural and remote areas.

**WFP is providing food through school-feeding to effectively support girls and adolescent girls.** WFP provides on-site meals at school for primary school boys and girls and added take-home rations for girls. WFP plans to scale up to reach 1 million children in 2022. WFP will also expand a successful cash-based transfer incentive for adolescent girls to attend secondary school. WFP, together with UNICEF, also supports school feeding in community-based education classes in remote and hard-to-reach areas and is working to expand this support.

**WFP is providing vocational training.** WFP started several new vocational skill training activities across 12 provinces. In January, WFP assisted 31,955 people through asset creation and livelihoods activities, while 42,042 people have already received assistance so far in February. Scaling up in the spring, WFP plans to support over a million beneficiaries in 2022 with assets and livelihoods activities to effectively

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<sup>8</sup> [Situation Report](#) - Afghanistan World Food Programme, February 2022.

build community resilience against shocks and to meet immediate needs.

**WFP is providing logistical support and coordination.** UNHAS will continue to provide flights to 20 locations for the humanitarian community's necessity to move humanitarian workers and cargo. To increase deliveries, WFP has contracted additional commercial transport companies and increased its dedicated fleet to almost 300 trucks and trailers.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

WFP encourages Canada to continue to prioritize food security and nutrition as it determines its response to the humanitarian situation in Afghanistan. Specifically, WFP proposes the following three recommendations for consideration:

***1. Canada's response should focus on addressing the food insecurity and malnutrition crisis facing Afghanistan.***

Canada has been globally recognized for its leadership in food security and nutrition and was among one of the first of WFP's donors to prioritize nutrition programming. Canada has a history of supporting WFP's operations in Afghanistan and has funded WFP's partnership with the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN) program that provided local solutions for child malnutrition. Canada's support for the project allowed WFP to utilize locally grown almonds to produce nutrient-rich almond paste for children experiencing malnutrition.

***2. Canada's response should address girls' education and nutrition needs through school feeding.***

The world is watching whether or not the Taliban will permit all girls and boys to study. By supporting WFP provision of school meals to both girls and boys, and additional incentives to girls attending secondary school, Canada would demonstrate its principled and pragmatic support to this human right. It would simultaneously be alleviating hunger among families by providing nutritious meals at a time when parents are foregoing food to allow their children to eat. Supporting school-based programmes will ensure that a generation of young women and adolescent girls are not lost as future leaders and civic participants in Afghanistan.

Historically, Canada has demonstrated itself to be an important partner of WFP's School Feeding Programs. This support has facilitated WFP's global operations of providing nutritious and fortified meals, take-home rations, and school health packages. School-based programming and school feeding directly connect to food security, livelihoods, and the status of women and girls. WFP's School Feeding Strategy and Gender Policy, upon which programming is built, recognizes the importance of adapting to the different needs of women, men, girls, and boys, and places particular emphasis on enhancing nutrition and micronutrient delivery to adolescent girls. In addition, school-based programming involving cash and food-based incentives is critical to allowing parents the option of sending their daughters and sons to school, preventing child marriage and labour, and empowers the next generation of women in the workforce.

### ***3. Canada's response should be time-sensitive in preventing further deterioration of the humanitarian situation.***

The humanitarian needs of Afghanistan are laid out in the Coordinated Humanitarian Response Plan for 2022.<sup>9</sup> WFP now faces a shortage of funding starting in April 2022 for its efforts to save lives and boost the resilience of Afghan communities; it requires approximately US \$200 million per month.

Without urgent humanitarian assistance to provide a lifeline for people in Afghanistan, many people have resorted to unhealthy coping mechanisms to safeguard their livelihoods (i.e. early childhood marriage, farmers moving away from traditional crops to crops that need far less irrigation). These mechanisms contribute to further destabilizing the region and further deteriorating the humanitarian situation.

A delayed response to these humanitarian needs drives more individuals over the precipice. History shows that destitute people are driven to leave their homes to survive, seeking aid and asylum across borders.

## **CONCLUSION**

If current trends continue, the number of acutely food insecure people will reach nearly 23 million, half the population. By responding to the recommendations proposed in this brief, Canada stands to make the greatest gains and ensure that women and girls have adequate food consumption and nutritional packages, especially women-headed households. Without urgent humanitarian assistance to provide a lifeline for people in Afghanistan, there will be further catastrophic levels of food insecurity and destabilizing spill-over effects globally.

*The United Nations World Food Programme is the 2020 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate. We are the world's largest humanitarian organization, saving lives in emergencies and using food assistance to build a pathway to peace, stability and prosperity for people recovering from conflict, disasters, and the impact of climate change.*

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<sup>9</sup> [Afghanistan: Humanitarian Response Plan \(2022\) | United Nations Office of Coordination for Humanitarian Affairs](#)