



CLIMATE-FRAGILITY RISK FACTSHEET

AFGHANISTAN

For the past four decades, Afghanistan has suffered from the devastating impacts of **constant armed conflict**. Many Afghans are highly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change as a result of their exposure to **droughts, floods and other natural disasters**, as well as their reliance on climate-sensitive livelihoods such as **rain-fed agriculture and pastoralism**. **Conflicts** have increased Afghanistan's vulnerability to climate change, the impacts of which may, in turn, help to create the conditions for continued violence.

5 CLIMATE FRAGILITY RISKS IN AFGHANISTAN

Five critical pathways that link climate change to fragility in Afghanistan are:

1 Risk 1: Climate shocks and climate 'headwinds' could worsen poverty, weaken governance and contribute to instability.

The impacts of a warming climate on water security, food production and the intensity of natural disasters could undermine rural livelihoods, **worsen poverty**, and **displace a larger number of rural residents to cities**. This in turn could make the provision of basic services more challenging, potentially **increasing frustration** with the government and **contributing to overall levels of insecurity**.

2 Risk 2: More frequent droughts could encourage the drug economy.

Afghanistan is the biggest producer of **opium** in the world. Given that poppy is a drought-resilient, water-efficient, and profitable crop, the projected climate impacts could make it an even more attractive alternative for many farmers. This in turn could increase revenues to **armed opposition groups**, incentivise efforts to repel government control in drug-producing areas, and **encourage corruption** among government employees.

3 Risk 3: Scarcer water and arable land could increase community-level and inter-ethnic conflict.

Afghanistan already experiences significant amounts of violent conflict at the community and inter-ethnic levels over **access to land, pastoral grazing areas and irrigation water**. These disputes could worsen in the context of increasingly scarce resources brought about by climate change, thus contributing to local violence and ethnic tensions and facilitating the instrumentalisation of these conflicts by armed opposition groups.

4 Risk 4: International tensions over transboundary water resources may encourage peace spoilers.

All five major river basins in Afghanistan discharge their water into neighbouring states. Years of conflict in the country have restricted the construction of water-related infrastructure, **reducing the amount of water that Afghanistan can retain and utilise**, to the benefit of its neighbours. If climate change further reduces critical water supplies in neighbouring states, this could provide incentives for them to play peace spoiler roles so as to **forestall investment in water infrastructure in Afghanistan**.

5 Risk 5: Resource politics around green energy minerals could become more strained.

Afghanistan is known for its large supplies of **lithium**, which, in light of the current shift to green energy storage technologies, could be an asset for the country in terms of providing an important source of government revenue and jobs. However, it could also prove to be a **double-edged sword**: the growing strategic importance of such minerals in Afghanistan may drive competition over the revenues, increasing corruption and environmental problems.

CLIMATE IMPACTS

Climate change is not a future prospect in Afghanistan: the **climate is already changing**.

Since 1950 Afghanistan's mean annual temperature has increased by 1.8°C. Heavy rainfall events have increased by between 10% and 25% over the past 30 years.

Climate change is projected to impact the region in a number of ways, including



Increasing annual mean temperatures



Drier conditions; increased frequency of drought



Changes in rainfall & snowmelt patterns, increased flash flooding

Future projections vary depending on which greenhouse gas emissions scenario is used:

1.5°C additional warming by 2050 under an optimistic scenario (RCP 4.5).

3°C warming by 2050 under a high-emission scenario (RCP 8.5).

For both scenarios, the warming is expected to occur throughout the year and across the country, but to be particularly pronounced in the Central Highlands.



Climate change contributes to more frequent droughts, undermining rural livelihoods, which could worsen poverty, undermine job creation, imperil food and water insecurity, and lead to displacement, with increasing numbers of rural residents moving to cities.

5 ENTRY POINTS TO ADDRESS CLIMATE FRAGILITY RISKS

The Afghan Government has worked to ensure that **climate change is addressed across government** and has played an active role in international climate negotiations. It has identified seven priorities for adaptation, including needs for greater capacity in resilience and disaster risk reduction and more sustainable management of environmental resources.

A number of actions might specifically address climate security concerns:

- 1 **Improve water and land management** to better utilize the country's shrinking and unevenly distributed water resources, focusing on reforestation and better land management to slow land degradation.
- 2 **Develop data monitoring** to understand the complex impacts of climate change and provide data that can inform appropriate responses.
- 3 **Strengthen regional cooperation** around joint action on climate change, particularly on transboundary waters.
- 4 **Bring the environment into peace negotiations** to harness collaboration over environmental issues as a confidence-building measure, e.g. through ensuring that environmental expertise is available to participate in mediation and negotiation efforts.
- 5 **Build climate security into the UN's mandate in Afghanistan** to make sure that all aid and stabilisation interventions take critical climate and natural resources issues into account.

The UN can play the role of an overall facilitator of peace, an integrator of the Sustainable Development Goals and a provider of expertise in Afghanistan. This role is likely to become more prominent in future if there is a further drawdown of international security forces in the country.

The **UN Security Council** has included language related to climate security in 11 UN Security Council resolutions to date. Establishing the link in the **UNAMA mandate** could be influential for the UN's overall work: doing so would recognise that the impacts of climate change have a bearing on Afghanistan's long-term stability, help build climate and natural resources issues into preventive approaches and early warning mechanisms, support the Afghan government and its international partners as they think through and prepare for some of risks (e.g. those related to the drug trade), and set the scene for exploring possible confidence-building measures with neighbouring states.

⁽¹⁾ This factsheet and corresponding risk brief received invaluable inputs and advice from Wali Modaqiq (formerly NEPA), Mohammad Haris Sherzad (UNEP), Ahmadjamshed Khoshbeen (UNDP), Kate Clark (Afghanistan Analysts Network), Orzala Nemat, (Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit), Sher Jan Ahmadzai, (Center for Afghanistan Studies, University of Nebraska), Alec Knuerr (formerly UNEP), Lisa Guppy (UNEP), Asif Zaidi (UNEP).

SOCIO-ECONOMIC FACTS

- The agricultural sector is the foundation of the economy and supports 80% of the population. It is highly climate-sensitive.
- Livestock production contributes more than 50% of the agricultural GDP.
- Afghanistan's urban population is expected to double over the next 15 years.
- Afghanistan's population is one of the youngest in the world, with nearly half the population below age 14.
- While Afghanistan scores very low on the Human Development Index, the past 15 years have seen important improvements in health and literacy.

POLITICS & SECURITY

Afghanistan has been enduring a permanent state of conflict for over 40 years, resulting in tens of thousands of civilian casualties and heavy losses for state security forces. Currently, significant parts of the country are contested or controlled by the Taliban and other opposition groups. Mistrust, violence and division between ethnic groups as well as deep rural-urban divides impede governance.

FURTHER READING

- Brown, Oli (2019). Climate-Fragility Risk Brief: Afghanistan (full version).
- NEPA (2017). Second National Communication under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), Kabul: National Environmental Protection Agency.

LEGAL NOTICE

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The **Climate Security Expert Network**, which comprises some 30 international experts, supports the **Group of Friends on Climate and Security** and the **Climate Security Mechanism of the UN** system by synthesising scientific knowledge and expertise, advising on entry points for building resilience to climate-security risks, and helping to strengthen a shared understanding of the challenges and opportunities of addressing climate-related security risks.

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