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How the COVID-19 Pandemic is Shaping Conflict in Afghanistan

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Key Findings and Implications

Drawing on workshops and interviews with more than 200 participants across 8 districts in 4 provinces, we find:

- COVID-19 and response measures, including early lockdown measures, border closures, pandemic relief programs, and how communities related to the virus, impacted conflict systems in Afghanistan. More specifically, the pandemic has shaped drivers of conflict and violence through four pathways:
  - COVID-19 regulations heightened economic hardship and insecurity.
  - COVID-19 responses shaped resource competition within and between communities and aggravated state-society grievances.
  - Communities' varying knowledge, attitude, and practices related to COVID-19 diminished social cohesion.
  - COVID-19 responses — and the household conditions they created — hampered women's rights and exacerbated gender-based violence.

These findings have important policy implications, particularly the need to prioritize:

- A comprehensive economic support package to counter the negative effects of public health measures and restrictions with a focus on development, in particular a livelihood response as well as a humanitarian one;
- International diplomatic pressure to maintain open borders for trade — i.e. COVID Safe border crossings for goods;
- Diplomatic action for protection of migrant workers, including engagement with key countries such as Iran and Pakistan, to work towards — at a minimum — cooperation to prepare for and mitigate as far as possible the economic and social shocks of migrant returns to their communities;
- Redoubling support for economic development, especially in the agricultural sector, in rural areas to lessen the impact of reverse migration to rural areas;
- International assistance and effective means to provide income protection and a social safety net to stymie crime and AOG recruitment;
- Mechanisms to target and distribute aid to prevent breakdown in social cohesion and to reduce clientelism, which hampers communities' trust in the GOA and worsens conflict risks;
- Greater COVID relief and policy reforms to focus on addressing the economic and social impacts of COVID-19.

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Afghanistan

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Background

The COVID-19 pandemic first emerged in Afghanistan in late February of 2020, when the first confirmed case was identified in Herat city (Ruttig, 2020). As of 27 May, 2021 the World Health Organization had confirmed 68,366 cases and 2,869 deaths from COVID-19 (WHO, 2021). However, the true public health impact of COVID-19 in the country has been difficult to measure, given limitations in testing capacity, a health sector weakened by decades of conflict and instability, and other constraints. Official statistics are thought to considerably underestimate the reality of COVID-19's spread (UNOCHA, 2021), with some estimates indicated that millions of Afghans have been infected, with a likely death toll in the hundreds of thousands — a figure "well exceeding total deaths of both combatants and civilians since 2001," (Byrd, 2020)

Afghanistan's COVID-19 response has varied across the country and over time. In the first quarter of 2020, the Government of Afghanistan (GoA) introduced a series of mitigation measures in response to emerging cases and concerns over the potential impact of the virus. President Ghani issued a decree instructing the population to avoid large crowds, and the Ministry of Interior Affairs banned large gatherings, sporting and entertainment events (Basij Rasikh et al., 2020). In late March 2020, the Government imposed a countrywide lockdown, which was extended twice (IMF, 2021).

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In practice, however, restrictions and enforcement varied by province and in rural versus urban areas, with most of the strictest measures being issued by provincial authorities (Ruttig, 2020). Lockdown measures were progressively eased from May 2020, however, having failed to contain the outbreak while generating significant economic consequences (IMF, 2021). Temporary border closures with Iran and Pakistan were announced in February and March 2020, respectively, and Uzbekistan closed its border with Afghanistan for the movement of persons on 23 March, 2020. Since that time, however, borders with neighboring countries have been closed and re-opened several times, and with differing restrictions in terms of the movements of goods versus people (Ruttig, 2020).

Despite these concerns, the pandemic has been largely eclipsed in the country's political discourse by a parallel escalation in armed conflict and heightened risks of political instability. In the same month that Afghanistan identified its first case of COVID-19, the United States (US) signed a landmark agreement with the Taliban and began to signal plans to draw down US troop presence. The following months were marked by tense preparations and subsequent negotiations within the framework of the Intra-Afghan Peace Talks. Despite these measures, armed conflict and offensives by Armed Opposition Groups (AOGs) increased throughout the majority of the pandemic period (SIGAR, 2021).

The pandemic had limited impact on these macro conflict developments, as it "unfortunately has not resulted in greater political unity in Afghanistan: neither across the Taleban/non-Taleban divide, nor among the various non-Taleban political groupings for whom working together would manifestly be in their collective interest — not least in presenting a united front in peace negotiations," (Byrd, 2020). However, Afghanistan is plagued by multiple dimensions of conflict and violence at many levels. Communities across Afghanistan face numerous manifestations of armed conflict, resource conflict, identity-based conflict, and gender-based and criminal violence, among others. The impacts of the pandemic on conflict and violence as experienced by Afghanistan's communities has not received sufficient focus to date, given the complexities of the context and the dominance of macro political and armed conflict developments in discourse.

This study aims to fill that gap, recognizing both that conflict dynamics are inevitably impacted by the entry of new factors into a conflict system, and that the pandemic has been shown to exacerbate economic, social and governance drivers of conflict in many contexts around the world. Furthermore, Afghanistan is thought to have suffered a "deadly and mostly

silent pandemic wave" through the summer of 2020, and an increasing prevalence of new variants and positive cases in recent weeks threaten to replicate a similar or potentially worse situation through the summer of 2021 (Mehrdad, 2021). Understanding the intersection of the pandemic and conflict dynamics in Afghanistan is therefore an essential foundation for anticipating and mitigating future risks to the country's heath, economy, and stability.

Methodology

The methodology for this study is grounded in systems analysis, an approach which views conflict as a dynamic system of causally interconnected factors (CDA Collaborative Learning Projects, 2017). Systems analysis facilitates an understanding of how myriad factors present within a conflict environment exert influence on the conflict, through both direct and indirect channels of impact.

The COVID-19 pandemic may be understood as having entered a set of new factors into Afghanistan's complex conflict system. The systems analytical framework for this study therefore seeks to investigate the linkages between the pandemic and violence and conflict in Afghanistan and to highlight lower-visibility pathways of impact that may nonetheless be playing a role in shaping conflict outcomes.

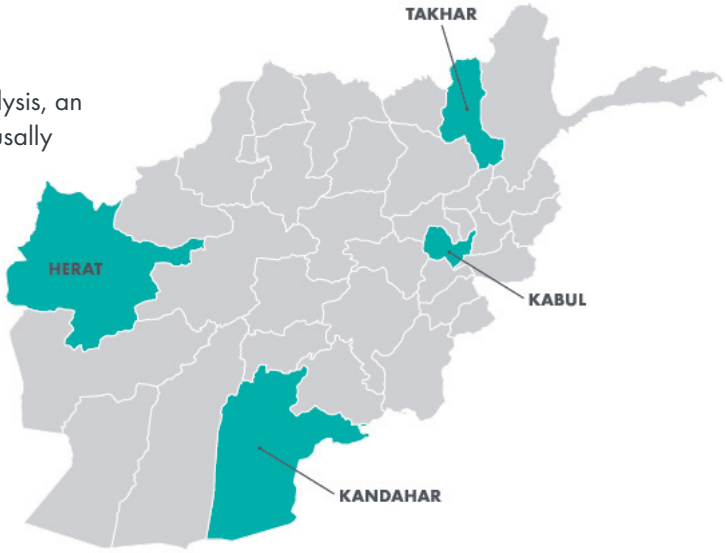

Figure 1. Location of Sampled Provinces in Afghanistan

Data for this study was collected between February and April 2021, roughly one year after the pandemic first emerged within Afghanistan. The timing of the data collection has implications for the findings of the study, as the participants were able to describe the evolution of their community's experiences over time. This enabled participants to discuss impacts during specific stages of the pandemic, for example during lockdown, as well as to highlight which of the pandemic's consequences continue to impact communities today.

Targeting for this study was designed to collect diverse perspectives, and participants spanned a wide range of identity groups including majority and minority ethnic and tribal groups and religious sects. Data was collected across 8 districts in 4 provinces: Kabul, Herat, Takhar and Kandahar, and covered both rural and urban areas in each province. More than 200 people participated in participatory systems mapping workshops or Key Informant Interviews, with participation split equally across men and women.

The purpose of this study is to highlight the experiences of communities during the pandemic, and therefore gives limited attention to macro-level political developments and dynamics. Additionally, given insecurity and access constraints, it is important to note that data for this study was collected solely in Government-controlled and contested areas. The findings therefore cannot speak to dynamics related to the pandemic, violence and conflict in areas administered by AOGs. Further, given Afghanistan's complexity and the scope of the study, the findings should be interpreted as indicative, and as an impetus for further research and investigation. The study is not intended as a comprehensive national conflict analysis, but rather focuses on illuminating the intersections of the pandemic with violence and conflict as experienced by communities in the target areas.

The Impacts of COVID-19 on Violence and Conflict

Pathway 1: COVID-19 Regulations, Economic Vulnerability and Insecurity

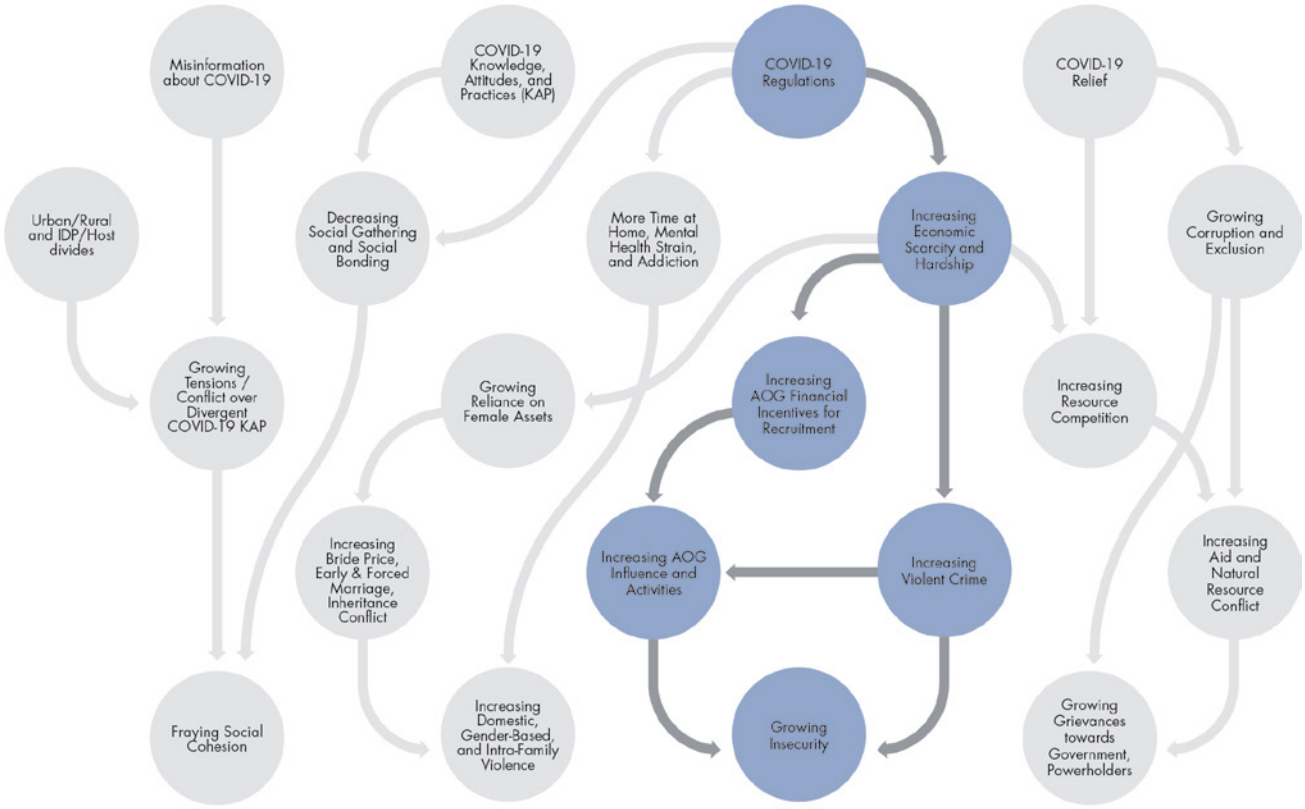

Figure 2. Pathway 1- Economic Vulnerability and Insecurity

Overview

Within Afghanistan's complex conflict landscape, the COVID-19 pandemic entered a set of new factors into the conflict system. The most visible and impactful of these factors we identified include early lockdown measures, border closures, COVID-19 relief programs, and divergent community knowledge, attitudes and practices (KAP) related to the virus. The research findings demonstrate that these primary factors introduced by the pandemic — and responses to it — generated adverse secondary impacts on communities' economic resilience, social cohesion, and state-society relations. These in turn contributed to an array of adverse tertiary impacts on conflict and violence.

The findings are framed in terms of pathways of impact; each pathway consisting of a set of factors that were closely associated in the dataset, and which clearly demonstrate chains of causation between the pandemic and specific pro-violence, pro-conflict outcomes. The pathway structure spotlights important findings and allows for conceptual clarity; however, it is worth noting that in reality these pathways are not discrete, but are rather inextricably intertwined (see Methodology and Village Case Study). Each of these pathways is described in detail below.

Enduring economic consequences stemming from lockdown measures and border closures in 2020 were raised more frequently than any other issue across all demographic and geographic groups participating in the study. Furthermore, these economic consequences were linked to a wide range of tertiary impacts, including shifts in or escalation of local conflict dynamics. Reported increases by study participants in conflict and violence at the local level stemming from pandemic-related economic deprivation manifested primarily in two forms: increases in violent crime, and shifting modalities in AOG recruitment linked to financial incentives. Collectively, these facilitated increasing AOG influence and insecurity at the local level during a time of AOG expansion and escalating armed conflict.The first pathway of impact therefore sets out the linkages between key COVID-19 regulations, their associated economic consequences, and tertiary impacts on conflict and violence.

Economic Consequences of COVID-19 Regulations

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic reversed the Afghan economy's 3% growth from the prior year and contributed to an economic contraction estimated at 5% of GDP (SIGAR, 2021). The lockdowns and border closures adversely impacted the industry and service sectors, which contracted 4.2% and 4.8%, respectively. Agricultural processing and trade were also severely impacted, with trade in goods falling by 23.6% (y-o-y) by the end of June 2020. Exports continued to contract in the second half of 2020, despite the relaxation of lockdown measures and border closures (World Bank Group, 2021). As of September 2020, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) had estimated that the pandemic contributed to a 17% increase in poverty compared to pre-pandemic levels (UNDP, 2021a).

Despite the varied and time-limited application of lockdown and border closures, a number of damaging impacts on local economies quickly came to fruition, many of which have had lasting impacts. These fall generally into three categories: (1) Impacts on income and employment; (2) Impacts on trade, market prices and purchasing power; and (3) Impacts on migration and remittances.

First, respondents from a strong majority of KIIs and workshops conducted cited both increased unemployment and increased poverty as a consequence of the pandemic, largely due to lockdown and border closures. Nearly all cited decreased employment, income and livelihoods opportunities. These factors were present across all 4 provinces and 8 districts covered in the study. Where cited, figures for the increase in the rate of unemployment and decrease in income since the start of the pandemic were significant. While these figures are self-reported and must be assessed with the appropriate caveats, they must also be considered within the context of high levels of pre-existing economic vulnerability across Afghanistan.

> *"Before COVID-19, people could go to the streets and work to earn at least 50 AFN; however, things have changed now and they cannot earn even that amount of money. Every day, the situation is getting worse. Unemployment has reached its peak since the pandemic started. Most of our people are unemployed and this has caused a lot of misery in our society."*[1]

Unemployment and poverty were often described as having reached levels never previously encountered in the target communities. While some communities noted disproportionate adverse impacts on daily wage workers, youth, internally displaced persons (IDPs), returnees, or those who had lived furthest below the poverty line prior to the pandemic, others observed a broad pattern of increased unemployment across socioeconomic classes and education levels. Irrespective of the dynamics of relative deprivation, however, discussions of increased unemployment were often accompanied by narratives of unparalleled desperation. This was perceived as having forced segments of the community to make survival-based decisions that led to harmful coping mechanisms which diverged from prior practice. These coping mechanisms were the driver of many of the tertiary impacts on violence and insecurity discussed later in this section.

1 W16 – Male, Kabul.

> *"In the past, people could at least find a job and work to earn some amount of money, like me through teaching. However, last year, we received no salary through which we could help the poor; we could not even solve our own problems. The same thing happened to other people, since they got unemployed, too...Some men were daily wage laborers, but they have been jobless for one year. Also, a number of people received a regular salary, but they are jobless now. Thus, they cannot afford to provide livelihoods for their families, and the reason for their unemployment is the Coronavirus."*[2]

Secondly, disruptions to trade and price stability contributed to this economic condition. Border closures interrupted the flow of imports and exports, resulting in a range of shifts in the availability, quality and relative value of domestic versus imported goods. In combination with market closures and movement restrictions resulting from lockdown, several interviewees also noted issues of unsold stock for farmers and traders, caused by disruptions to cross-border trade, lack of cold storage to preserve agricultural products, market closures and/or price instability. This contributed to specific economic vulnerabilities for these groups stemming from these restrictions. Beyond the increase in unemployment and decrease in income, however, price hikes were the most pressing and widely discussed economic consequence of COVID-19 regulations.

Michal Knitl/Shutterstock

Respondents in more than half of the KIIs and workshops conducted observed price increases for basic commodities such as food and housing, with many citing specific examples which demonstrated a pattern of dramatic shifts. Anecdotal information provided by participants about price changes typically surpassed the World Bank's estimate of a 10% increase in food price on average during the pandemic (World Bank Group, 2021). The same assessment indicated a degree of price normalization in the second half of 2020, while participants indicated that prices remained substantially elevated in 2021, when data for the study was collected. Narratives around price hikes were present in all provinces and in 7 of the 8 districts targeted; however, the issue was most prominently raised among participants in Takhar.

> *"Because the COVID-19 pandemic caused the prices of the items to be doubled, poverty and unemployment in the community eventually caused insecurity in the community. In general, all the items' prices increased. For instance, a bottle of cooking oil was 500 AFN, but right now its price has increased to 1200 AFN."*[3]

2 I25 – Female, Herat.
3 I45 – Male, Takhar.

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It is worth noting that many attributed price increases not only to border closures and trade disruptions, but to opportunism by traders and shop owners who took advantage of market closures and price instability to hoard or otherwise manipulate prices for personal gain. This was a source of grievance not only among communities, but towards the government; a number of respondents in Kabul city and across rural and urban areas of Kandahar and Takhar expressed anger and disappointment over the government's lack of price regulation during the pandemic. Mentions of price hikes, lack of market regulation and inability to afford basic commodities were more likely to be associated with increased grievances towards the government than mentions of increased unemployment or poverty. This may point to a perception that price hikes were a less inevitable consequence of the pandemic which added an unnecessary layer of strain within an already-desperate economic landscape.

> *"There has been an increase in goods prices but because there were not standard quotations for vendors, vendors and all sellers have sold things at higher prices. Unfortunately, the government and Kabul municipality did not take action against this issue. Food and other prices doubled during the pandemic. For instance, the price of a sack of flour before the pandemic was 1700 AFN while during the pandemic it was sold at 3000 AFN. Meanwhile, no action has been taken regarding this issue by the government or municipality."*[4]

Third, increased unemployment and inability to afford basic needs each contributed to changes in migration patterns, both within Afghanistan and across borders with neighboring countries such as Iran and Pakistan. Economic crisis and deportations of Afghan migrant workers from Iran and neighboring countries led to an influx of returnees, who arrived in border areas and dispersed throughout the country. 2020 was the largest return year on record, with 865,793 total returns from Iran and Pakistan (IOM Afghanistan, 2020). This trend has been sustained in early 2021, with an additional 368,415 returning between January and April 2021 alone. IOM has noted dramatic increases in returnee vulnerability due to economic conditions in both Iran and Afghanistan (IOM Afghanistan, 2021).

4 W15 – Female, Kabul.

Colin Spurway/Mercy Corps

Among participants, there were significant geographic divergences regarding observations of increased returnee presence. This issue was highly prominent in Herat, where the vast majority of respondents observed increased returnee presence, followed by Kandahar with just over half. Both of these provinces experienced high increases in returnee presence. Interestingly, despite substantial returnee increases in urban areas of Kabul, during the study there were virtually no mentions of increased returnee presence in rural or urban areas of Kabul. This may be due to lower salience of host-returnee dynamics within the complex socio-economic landscape of the nation's capital; however, further study would be needed to understand these dynamics.

> *"It should also be mentioned that many people have left here and moved to the northern provinces such as Parwan, Kapisa, and Panjshir. First of all, they thought that the disease has not spread in the provinces and there would be no lockdown. The second reason was poverty. Since everything was expensive here, they moved to the provinces so that they could work on the farmlands and earn money. The third reason was the rent of houses. They moved to their homelands because they had their own houses there."*[5]

COVID-19 regulations changed not only the presence of returnees, but also the economic vulnerabilities of returnees, their families, and in some cases the broader host communities. Lockdowns in Iran and Pakistan and the expulsion of Afghan migrant workers compounded the economic downturn in Afghanistan due to the pandemic. The remittances provided by many returnees had been a key income stream for their families in Afghanistan prior to the pandemic and was substantially curtailed by the pandemic, with UNDP estimating a nearly 16% reduction in remittances to Afghanistan from 2019 to 2020 (UNDP, 2021b).

5 19 – Female, Kabul.

Unemployment among Afghan migrant workers and the subsequent cessation of remittances removed a critical source of income for the families of Afghan migrant workers, at the same moment when sharp increases in unemployment were beginning within Afghanistan. Many Afghan migrant workers then returned to their families in Afghanistan, where their role was transformed from that of a provider to a drain on families' rapidly dwindling resources. Beyond returnees, the border closures also removed migrant work as a coping strategy for the broader population, resulting in an increase in unemployed and disillusioned youth in particular.

> *"Before COVID-19, the people of this village were working in foreign countries, including Iran, Turkey, etc., to provide their essential expenses. But upon the spread of COVID-19, everyone has been quarantined, including the people who were working in foreign countries, and the unemployment rates have increased. When the borders closed, the people couldn't go to other countries to work, and border restrictions have increased unemployment in this area."*[6]

Participants in Herat and Kandahar also observed changes in internal migration and displacement, though to a far lesser extent than cross-border migration. Though much of the internal population movements during the pandemic period can be attributed to insecurity stemming from political and armed conflict developments unrelated to the spread of COVID-19, several dynamics specific to the pandemic emerged. The traditional incentive structure for rural to urban migration as an economic coping mechanism appears to have been somewhat reversed, as health and economic divergences emerged early on between rural and urban areas.

Initial COVID-19 outbreaks and stricter lockdowns in cities reportedly led to incidences of urban to rural migration in some areas, where individuals sought to avoid lockdown and seek out work in less restricted areas, take up subsistence work on family lands, or otherwise rely on family support networks for survival in their places of origin. In addition, acknowledgment of COVID-19 as a serious threat was higher in urban versus rural areas, particularly in the early stage of the pandemic. A small number of respondents across all target provinces noted that urban to rural migration had been motivated by fear of the virus and a perception that it was less prevalent in rural areas. Though this dynamic was not discussed extensively, it is likely that the migration of unemployed individuals from cities to rural areas placed some additional economic — and sociocultural — strain on the recipient families and communities.

Miguel Samper/Mercy Corps

6 W52 – Female, Takhar.

> *"Another conflict was the return of people who were living in cities such as Kabul. When the Coronavirus outbreak occurred, they returned to rural areas and started agricultural activities. Though they started farming, natural disasters like heavy rain ruined their products. Since they did not have any other sources of income, they became poorer than before."*[7]

In Afghanistan, it is clear that the COVID-19 lockdown and border closures resulted in multiple dimensions of economic impact which in some areas significantly exacerbated pre-existing economic vulnerabilities. Though factors such as unemployment, price instability and shifts in migration patterns are not new to the context, the early stage of the pandemic in Afghanistan was unique in the concurrent and compounding manifestation of these variables; communities faced both new shocks and greater challenges in accessing traditional coping mechanisms. The result has been a dire economic situation which has reportedly endured in some areas, even following the lifting of lockdown and the reopening of borders.

Participants were not asked explicitly about the trajectory of economic recovery following the end of these policies. Nonetheless, respondents from roughly one-quarter of the KIIs and workshops conducted raised this issue, stating that there had been little to no economic recovery in their community to date. By contrast, very few noted that economic recovery had occurred. While some economic recovery is likely to have occurred in many areas in recent months, as will be demonstrated in the following sections, the tertiary impacts on conflict and violence have in many places contributed to paradigm shifts which are less easily reversed.

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Economic vulnerability and violent crime

> *"After the emergence of COVID and lockdown, people's economic situation worsened, unemployment increased, people could not afford their daily living expenses, and as a result of it, people turned to committing crimes including robbery, kidnapping, and other crimes. People had no other choice to afford their living expenses. Both educated and uneducated people became unemployed after the COVID-19 pandemic emerged, and because of economic hardships, people committed crimes."*[8]

Violent crime is pervasive throughout many areas of Afghanistan, functioning both as a mechanism to support clientelism and a range of state- and non-state power-holders and as a coping mechanism for economic deprivation. Participants across all target areas and in the vast majority of interviews and KIIs noted an increase in criminality in their communities as a consequence of the pandemic, with a particular emphasis on violent crime leading to increased insecurity.

7 111 – Male, Kabul.
8 167 – Female, Kandahar

Some participants referenced violent crime having been an issue previously in the community, which the economic consequences of the pandemic had escalated; others noted that violent crime in particular had not been a significant issue in their community prior to the pandemic. While there are no official statistics on crime rates in Afghanistan, the prevalence and consistency of this observation across diverse geographic and demographic groups within the study merit meaningful consideration.

> *"There were many conflicts over border closures in our area. For instance, previously gangsters and drug addicts used to go to foreign and neighboring countries to sell their drugs. Once the borders were closed due to pandemic, they could not sell their drugs, so to find money they committed robberies, armed robberies, kidnapping, society disorder, and overall, conflicts in the area. Poor people were damaged massively by the border closure due to the pandemic."*[9]

As highlighted above, the increase in violent crime was framed as a consequence of the economic impacts of the lockdown and/or border closures. Narratives about increased violent crime mirrored the narratives about the increased economic vulnerability. Firstly, both are factors which existed prior to the pandemic, but which were described as having reached an unprecedented level as a consequence of the pandemic. In addition, both narratives centered around the condition of desperation, with increased economic vulnerability perceived as the cause of this new level of desperation, and crime — and subsequent insecurity — as its consequence. This narrative, and overarching observations about increased criminality, featured equally in urban and rural areas. Particularly in Kabul, increased criminality was often linked specifically to unemployed youth.

Respondents specified a range of criminal activities which had increased following the emergence of COVID-19. The most commonly cited was violent and/or armed robbery, particularly of tradable assets such as mobile phones. These were frequently discussed in tandem with increased assaults and murders, with victims of robberies often injured or killed during the course of the theft. Some participants also noted a pre-existing prevalence or increase in illegal weapons, which were used by criminal elements and facilitated violent outcomes of criminal acts.

> *"We suffered from insecurity before the outbreak of COVID as well, but not to this extent. People were committing crimes using illegal weapons. In addition, there was robbery, kidnapping, drug use, existence of power brokers, open shots at night, and murders, but not to this extent. However, since the outbreak of COVID, all of them reached their peak. They even steal the cell phones and purses of the people on the streets. These were the conflicts that happened rarely before but increased after the outbreak of COVID, and it still continues."*[10]

9 W32 – Male, Herat.
10 I10 – Male, Kabul.

Mohammad Ismail/Reuters

Violent acts of theft reportedly led to reduced movements within communities, particularly at night. During the early stages of the pandemic, in some areas this meant increased self-imposed movement restrictions as a downstream consequence of the pandemic, even in communities which otherwise had low awareness of COVID-19 and/or adherence to lockdown rules.

Increased kidnapping was also commonly mentioned, as was an increase in illicit drug sale/smuggling. The latter was also framed as having contributed to increased drug addiction, which in turn fed the cycle of violent crime and insecurity as addicts resorted to criminal activity in order to fund their addiction. In some areas, this was seen as exacerbating economic vulnerability, as people were less able to safely move, work, and maintain valuable assets.

Robbery and kidnapping increases were noted with equal prevalence in urban and rural areas, while increased drug sales/smuggling was more frequently noted in rural areas. The highest geographic prevalence for increased robbery, kidnapping and drug sales/smuggling appeared in Kabul and Takhar provinces and least commonly in Kandahar. Increased kidnapping was highlighted most commonly in Takhar and Kandahar, with least prevalence in Kabul. Herat fell in the middle range for most of the above-mentioned crimes, though comprised the majority of the relatively few observations of increased organ selling (voluntary and involuntary) and human/child trafficking, potentially suggesting a more localized pattern in those target communities.

Crime, insecurity and AOG influence

Dynamics linked to economic deprivation and violent crime following the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic were also linked to observations regarding AOG influence. Within the broader political context, the pandemic period coincided with an expansion of AOG activity and presence within Afghanistan, largely driven by announcements of US troop withdrawal and the developments within the peace process. While these macro-level factors were in some cases acknowledged by the study participants, at the local level, increased presence and influence of AOGs, was more commonly framed as having been at minimum enabled by (1) increased economic vulnerability due to COVID-19 regulations; and (2) consequent increases in violent crime and insecurity.

> *"Due to the pandemic, many opponent groups and unauthorized gunmen emerged. They had been robbing the people during the night. These issues were very prominent during the pandemic. [Opponent groups] used the opportunity to their benefit because lockdown caused unemployment for most young people and adults. As a result, people voluntarily joined Taliban groups to make money and earn bread for their families. On the other hand, some became unauthorized gunmen or joined other unauthorized AOGs to burglarize people and houses to make money. In response to your question, I would say that people referred to different kinds of illegal activities to earn bread. When opponent groups became aware of people's prostration, they took advantage of it and enlisted many of them. They used their power to enlist many people who had lived in areas where they have authority."*[11]

Markus Stappen/Shutterstock

A key finding of the study linked increased economic vulnerability stemming from COVID-19 regulations to increased AOG recruitment. AOG recruitment in Afghanistan has been observed as largely ideologically-driven, with financial incentives playing a more minor role. Of the participants who noted increased AOG recruitment during the pandemic, however, the far more common narrative that emerged was heightened economic desperation and the provision of financial incentives driving recruitment. Ideological motivations were rarely mentioned; by contrast, the economic motivation narrative typically framed joining AOGs as a survival rather than ideological mechanism. Of course, these findings should be considered in the light of this study's limitations, in particular that research was only conducted in government-controlled and contested areas.

A number of respondents discussed not only the motivation of new recruits, but also of the AOGs themselves in providing financial incentives. This was framed as a strategic and opportunistic tactic employed by AOGs to take advantage of increased survival incentives within a landscape of decreased economic opportunities and coping mechanisms (lockdown, border closers, and unemployment) and an increase in economic vulnerabilities (price hikes, depleted savings and assets, and poverty). This tactic may have been particularly pragmatic given the simultaneous escalation of AOG offensives and expansion into new areas during the same period.

Local increases in AOG presence, influence and/or activity were cited by participants in a strong majority of interviews and KIIs conducted in Takhar, and in roughly half of the interviews and workshops conducted within Herat, Kabul and Kandahar. Increased AOG recruitment followed largely the same pattern, with the notable exception of Herat, where observations of increased AOG recruitment were relatively few. Both trends were predominantly, but not exclusively, observed in rural areas. Some participants perceived unemployed youth or, in a few cases, unemployed IDPs or returnees, as being particularly likely to join AOGs for financial gain.

11 I48 – Male, Takhar.

The increase in AOG recruitment among community members appears to have created two feedback loops; the first is by further solidifying AOG influence and presence in the community. This in turn was associated with enabling other AOG activities, most notably increased taxation, sometimes framed as zakat or *ushur*.[12] Noted increases in AOG taxation by participants also reflect other, non-COVID-19 related realities, though, particularly regarding AOG practices of taxing areas that they newly control or influence and how AOG territorial control expanded over the course of 2020. Some participants living in areas with AOG presence prior to the pandemic also noted increases in the amount of tax demanded compared to the past, though this could also have been impacted by AOG offensives in the country, given that hikes in taxation are often implemented in the build-up to them. Several participants also noted intrusive and violent means of collecting tax, such as through home invasion at night, and by violent coercion including reprisal killings for failure to pay. Several participants noted that families in their community had left the area as a result of their inability to pay.

> *"Opponent groups' presence has caused people to feel uncomfortable. In detail, after the Coronavirus outbreak, many opponent groups started their operations in this community. They attack people's houses during the nights to collect Zakat, Ushur (Islamic tax), and money. The opponent group will attack those families who had good harvest just to get more money from them."*[13]

While many participants framed increased AOG recruitment as pandemic opportunism, the same rationale was not provided for patterns of increased taxation — though participants did frame increased recruitment as having facilitated AOG influence and activities in the community, including taxation. Taxation by the country's most prominent AOG, the Taliban, has become increasingly structured and systematic in recent years, and also has often increased in advance of escalations in offensives.

Secondly, some participants framed recruitment into AOGs as further contributing to violent crime, observing that individuals who joined AOGs subsequently began — or were given the cover to commit — a range of crimes, many resulting in assault or murder of victims. No participants mentioned cases of justice or other services being administered by AOGs. This suggests that AOGs at minimum did not seek to deter crime in these communities, and in some cases acted more as a participant in or driver of criminal activity.

12 Zakat is an Islamic tenet requiring a percent of income be given in donations to the poor; ushur is a tax on harvested goods.
13 W19 – Female, Kabul.

> *"Previously our village was secure but since the pandemic started, most of our village youth have joined the Taliban and created panic in the villages and even in Herat city...The main reason for their joining is directly related to the lack of job resources and unemployment. In short, there have been changes in criminality due to economic hardship since the pandemic started. You know that joining the Taliban itself means criminality has changed. The people who joined the Taliban killed, wounded and robbed the villagers."*[14]

It is worth highlighting that data for the study was collected only in government-controlled and contested areas, and therefore can only reflect AOG tactics outside of their areas of administrative control. The sample of the study is insufficient to draw broad or concrete conclusions regarding changing patterns in AOG incentive structures or the war economy. However, there does appear to be some evidence to merit further exploration of changes in AOG institutional financial needs and financing modalities in light of the combined factors above: increased presence and activity; increased recruitment based on financial incentives; increased taxation; and prioritization of engagement in crime for profit rather than justice for crime in contested areas.

It is beyond the scope of this study to determine whether AOGs experienced increased financial strain as a consequence of COVID-19 regulations. What is clear, however, is that the economic fallout experienced by communities created an opportunity which certain AOGs and criminal actors were able to exploit for their own ends. While this is unlikely to have altered the broader evolution of armed conflict since the start of the pandemic it is likely to have facilitated in limited and indirect ways certain AOG efforts to expand or consolidate their control in specific communities.

Pathway 2: COVID-19 Response, Resource Competition and State-Society Grievances

Overview

Participants highlighted two broad facets of the Government of Afghanistan's COVID-19 response: COVID-19 mitigation measures such as lockdown and border closures, and government managed COVID-19 relief programs. To date, international donors have pledged more than 1.5 billion USD in assistance to the GoA to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, which was largely mobilized through the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and implemented through a range of mechanisms (Byrd, 2020). Several Government-led projects have been designed to provide direct relief to households; perhaps the most high-profile of these has been the Dastarkhwan-e Meli program, intended to provide the vulnerable with food and non-food items, distributed through local intermediaries across the country (Citizen Charter, 2020).

The execution of these programs has been highly contentious. A vast majority of participants in the study highlighted concerns about the economic impacts of Government lockdown rules, and grievances regarding the mismanagement of government COVID-19 relief programming. Each of these response measures generated increased resource competition within and between communities and eroded the already-tenuous state-society relationship. Pathway 2 highlights the relationship between the government's COVID-19 response measures, resource competition, and tertiary impacts on conflict, violence and the state-society relationship.

COVID-19 regulations, economic vulnerability and resource competition

As highlighted in Pathway 1, the government's lockdown policy and the closure of borders between Afghanistan and neighboring states had significant adverse effects on the livelihoods and wellbeing of populations across the country. Despite the stricter enforcement of lockdown measures in urban areas, lockdown was raised as an issue of key concern in nearly all interviews and workshops conducted in both rural and urban areas; it was also raised as a far more significant concern than other COVID-19 response measures, such as the inadequate health sector response.

14 W30 – Female, Herat.

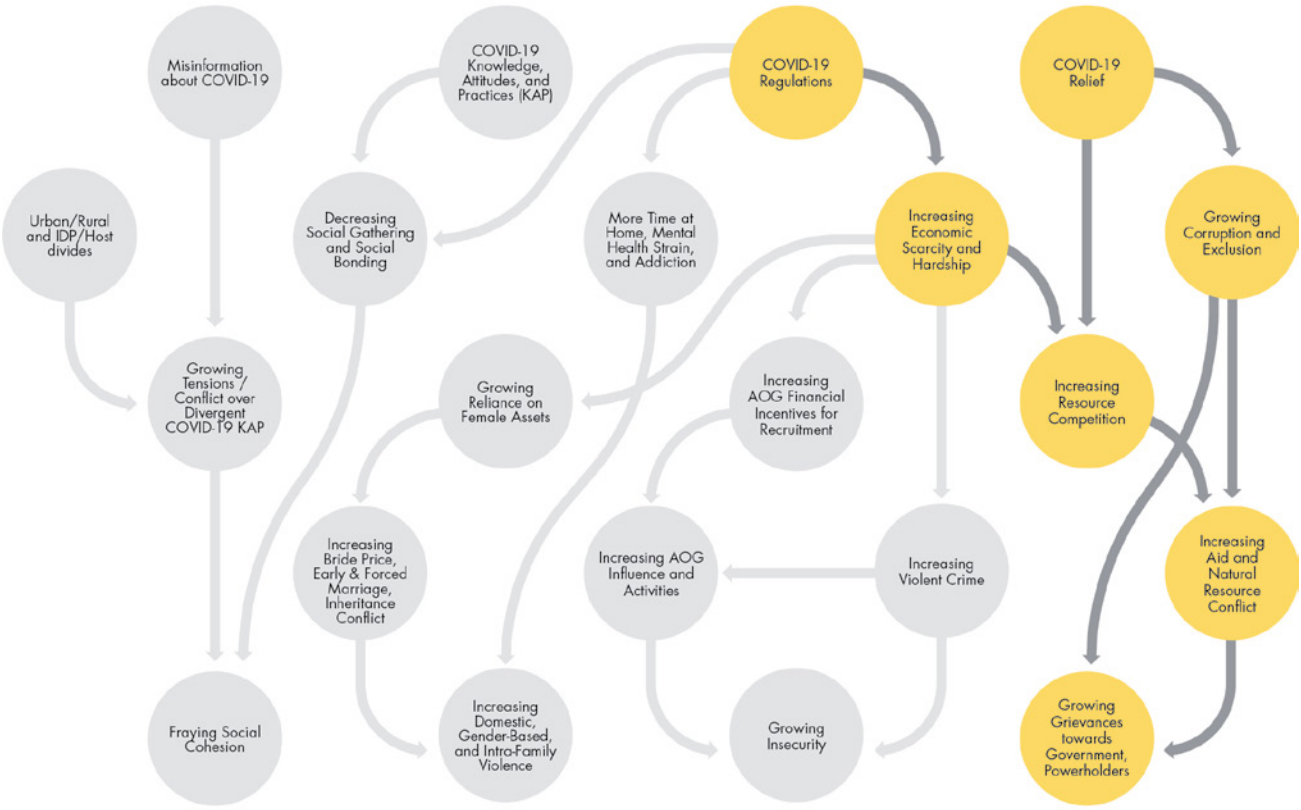

Figure 3. Pathway 2- Resource Competition and State-Society Grievances

In addition to long-standing and widespread patterns of economic deprivation prior to the pandemic, the pandemic period coincided with other economic stressors which further strained household resources and limited coping mechanisms in many areas. These included price hikes, migration changes, escalating insecurity, and environmental shocks such as drought and flooding, among others.

> *"The outbreak of Coronavirus and the increase in unemployment coincided with the time of drought, where people lost their agriculture, due to lack of rain, which was the only source of income left. During these difficult times, if the aid is distributed among the relatives and based on the relationships, of course, there will be huge conflict among people. The increasing number of vulnerable people has caused conflicts to increase."*[15]

Within this environment, competition for already-scarce resources intensified, generating or exacerbating a range of resource conflicts. COVID-19 relief assistance emerged overwhelmingly as the primary resource-based conflict driven by the pandemic; this will be discussed in further detail below. Beyond COVID-19 relief, however, participants highlighted several other dimensions of resource competition and/or conflict which the pandemic exacerbated.

First, unemployment and income loss stemming from COVID-19 regulations as one of the most damaging consequences of the pandemic, resulting in increased competition for jobs in some areas. Some participants noted that this reinforced pre-existing grievances around Afghanistan's pervasively clientelistic and identity-based hiring norms. Participants described educated as well as uneducated individuals as being unable to afford bribes in order to secure government positions during the pandemic, due to

15 W41 – Male, Kandahar.

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increased economic deprivation. This was in some cases linked to the increase in AOG recruitment as the only viable alternative to secure an income. Among the participants who raised this issue, this was a source of grievance towards the Government; one individual claimed that a relative's grievances over this issue specifically had led to his decision to join an AOG.

In addition, some rural communities reported increased competition over natural resources, or a shift in dynamics surrounding pre-existing natural resource tensions linked to the pandemic. Several participants mentioned increased reliance on agriculture as a coping mechanism for other job loss, for example among returnees and urban residents who migrated to their rural villages of origin in the early stages of the pandemic. In some areas, this led to increased competition over land or over water for irrigation. In a few cases, lockdown specifically was cited as having intensified land conflicts. In one community, lockdown prevented farmworkers from cultivating land, increasing conflicts between landowners who rent cultivation rights and the farmworkers who pay for those rights through a share of the crop yield. In another case, lockdown and the neglect of farmland was cited as having left local land more exposed to land grabbing by powerholders.

Shifts in migration, due both to the COVID-19 regulations and unemployment (in the case of returnees), and increased insecurity, drought and economic deprivation (in the case of IDPs) also reportedly increased conflict due to land grabbing. Local power holders in some areas were further incentivized to seize public or private lands in order to build shelters to rent to new returnees and/or IDPs. In other cases, returnees or IDPs would squat on host community land, leading to increased tensions between the two groups. In other cases, pre-existing identity-group tensions over land equity were exacerbated, leading to intensification of intercommunal land conflict.

> *"There have been many conflicts due to the presence of IDPs in this area. The reason is that they do not have any information about urban laws, so they unintentionally create lots of conflicts in this area. Since the start of the pandemic, conflicts around this issue have also increased. When the migrants came to this area, they grabbed the government lands. And the government couldn't prevent them."*[16]

16 W29 – Male, Herat.

Some rural communities also discussed increases or shifts in conflicts over access to water. This included increased demand for water stemming from drought, health concerns and increased reliance on agriculture and water irrigation; exacerbated tensions over the inequitable location of shared water access points between villages and/or identity groups; and increased fighting at water points, due to concerns over social distancing.

The COVID-19 pandemic may be interpreted as one factor amongst many which contributed to mild to moderate shifts in these resource-based conflicts. The most significant direct impact of the pandemic was in generating multiple and concurrent economic strains, which exacerbated pre-existing vulnerabilities, heightened resource scarcity and necessitated increased resource competition. While the range of conflicts noted above is worth highlighting, by far the most significant manifestation of increased resource competition was in the distribution of COVID-19 relief assistance.

COVID-19 relief, corruption, and grievances

One of the most prevalent grievances reported across all provinces and in both rural and urban areas was corruption and exclusion in the COVID-19 relief distribution process. When questioned about pandemic relief, nearly all interviewees claimed to have had all or part of their allotted assistance misappropriated by powerholders. A minority of participants focused their grievances on state capture of pandemic resources, including high-ranking officials who embezzled international donor funding or committed other acts of fraud, and allocation of assistance by the political elite based on nepotism and clientelism. As of February 2021, the Inspector General's Office of Afghanistan and Afghan Supreme Audit Office had reportedly referred hundreds of government officials to the Attorney General's Office for investigation related to COVID-19 relief embezzlement or fraud, among other investigations (AVA Press, 2021).

Miguel Samper/Mercy Corps

> *"In the aid distribution, people were selected through favoritism. Individuals from high influence tribes and languages only were assisted by the government, and the other tribes with less influence were not really assisted by the government. People were asked which ethnic group they were from during aid distribution, and help was provided on an ethnic basis. Those people got aid who did not need aid at all. So what is this? This is the recklessness of the government."*[17]

More commonly, however, grievances focused on lower-ranking officials and informal leaders, such as Community Development Council (CDC) leaders, whom the government appointed as aid distribution intermediaries. In both cases, the government as an institution was viewed as responsible for COVID-19 relief mismanagement; many expressed their frustration that the government had involved local intermediaries in the distribution process without providing oversight or avenues for complaints.

17 166 – Female, Kandahar.

Mismanagement of assistance is a common occurrence in the context of Afghanistan, and deeply entrenched grievances and mistrust towards the government are not a new phenomenon caused by the pandemic. However, several factors appear to have raised expectations that relief either would or should be allocated equitably. Some participants noted hearing information or public relations campaigns about the COVID-19 relief programs on television or on the radio. In addition, the modality for intermediaries to receive their community's aid allocation involved the collection of each individual's national ID number and phone number. Both of these factors increased participants' awareness of the assistance program and their eligibility for it.

> *"The unfair distribution of aid in this area has increased the people's distrust in the government. They have collected Tazkira and phone numbers of the people. Still, they haven't distributed assistance to them, because the CDC leader is not from this community, and he distributed the aid to his relatives and his people at night. He did not distribute them to the people of this area."*[18]

This created a personalized sense of being stolen from when relief items or aid collection cards were later misappropriated. CDC leaders, community elders, Maliks, *Wakil-e-Gozars*[19] local warlords and other powerholders were cited almost universally as having given relief items and/or aid collection cards to their relatives and friends. In some cases, these individuals also allocated COVID-19 relief resources based on identity group, with members of one tribe, ethnic group or village being granted the assistance allocated for another.

Conflicts over corruption and exclusion in the COVID-19 relief distribution process were pervasive. While many communities noted pre-existing patterns of corruption in aid distribution, in others this was a new or intensified dynamic. There were several reasons cited in the latter case. For some communities, the government's COVID-19 relief program was their first experience receiving aid of any kind. In others, prior assistance had been distributed through different modalities or different intermediaries. The most common reason for increased grievances over a previously experienced pattern of misappropriation, however, was the increase in economic deprivation caused by COVID-19 regulations.

> *"Coronavirus was introduced as a dangerous and deadly disease to us. Unfortunately, the government did not assist the people of this area during those hard days and it lost its trust among the people. Our villagers do not trust the government anymore because they did not even receive a single face mask from the government."*[20]

It is important to also consider the unique nature of the pandemic, and how this may have shifted interpretations of citizen rights and state responsibility even in contexts like Afghanistan with a nominal social contract. The pandemic is global in scale, unparalleled in the gravity of its consequences, and has likely achieved greater global information penetration than any prior event. Many participants linked the severe level of need and absence of or corruption in government assistance to reduced trust and increased grievances in the government. Despite the context of weak state-society relations in Afghanistan, perceived mismanagement and corruption in the government relating to COVID-19 still appeared to damage participants' views of and trust in the government.

Several participants compared the response of Afghanistan's government relief provision to that of other countries, acknowledging the necessity of lockdown measures, but noting that they had consumed media or had otherwise heard about the comparative better support provided by other governments. There was also a relatively high level of awareness about government COVID-19 relief programs, specific allocations that people were owed under the program, and that

18 W52 – Female, Takhar.
19 Wakil-e-Gozars are local representatives in Afghanistan who act as the intermediaries between the government and local communities for a range of activities and services.
20 I12 – Male, Kabul.

international funding had been given specifically for COVID-19 relief. Awareness of the COVID-19 relief programming existed even in the minority of cases where the target community had been entirely excluded.

> *"During the COVID-19, most foreign countries and especially the World Bank have sent aid to Afghanistan. But the government didn't distribute them to the people as they broadcasted on TV. This caused the people to lose their trust in the government."*[21]

These factors may indicate that the pandemic was seen as an exception to the status quo of low expectations that the Government can or should uphold its end of the social contract. Participants in roughly three quarters of the interviews and workshops conducted indicated that their level of grievance and mistrust in the government had increased due to the pandemic. Additionally, in the dataset, the topics most frequently concurring with the increased grievances and mistrust in government since the pandemic started were: COVID-19 aid exclusion, COVID-19 relief, absence of government intervention or assistance, and government mismanagement of COVID-19 relief. It is noteworthy that these were the top correlations, rather than lockdown, unemployment, gaps in health service delivery, or increased insecurity or crime.

During the pandemic, dynamics of increasing economic vulnerability, violent crime, AOG influence, population movements, and other factors provided communities with minimal scope to act upon any increased grievances towards the government. This outcome contrasts with some other contexts, such as Nigeria, where similar patterns of grievances about COVID-19 relief exacerbated mistrust in the government and catalysed a surge in citizen activism and protest, most notably the nationwide #EndSARS movement (Sheely and Hakiman, 2021). To date, increased grievances towards the government in Afghanistan do not appear to have generated specific manifestations of mass protest or social unrest.

However, there are significant challenges ahead for the GoA within the broader political context, given AOG expansionism, increasing armed conflict and upcoming US troop withdrawal. As competition for legitimacy between the GoA and non-state authorities increases in the coming months, further study would be merited on the potential contributions of pandemic-related grievances towards the GoA in shifting attitudes towards the social contract — and which actor(s) may be better able to uphold it.

COVID-19 relief, intra- and intercommunal conflict

Participants largely expressed grievances over COVID-19 aid distribution towards the government as an institution, or towards specific corrupt individuals whom the government had designated as local aid distribution intermediaries. However, in many cases

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21 W27- Male, Herat.

the participants noted that COVID-19 relief resources were distributed along identity group lines, sometimes leading to exacerbated tensions or even violent reprisal conflicts between broader identity groups. As noted above, tensions over aid distribution are not a new dynamic in many of the communities participating in the study. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that COVID-19 relief exclusion emerged as one of the most prevalent drivers of conflict, likely due to the dynamics of increased deprivation and resource competition highlighted above.

> *"Although they registered us in the list and received the assistance with our identity, we are not given any aid. In detail, we have not been given even a bar of soap. So, this is due to the dissension and carelessness of the CDC head. If we had a CDC head, it would not happen and the poor in our village would have received the aid as well...The Coronavirus assistance is obtained for three communities, but it is distributed only in one community. It even caused injuring some people with knives as people want their rights and what they deserve."*[22]

CDC leaders were most frequently identified as having been responsible for allocating COVID-19 relief in communities. These individuals and the councils they manage are informal leaders, in most cases representing a single village and selected via community election. In practice, however, some participants presented divergences from this mandate, noting that their CDC leader had been appointed by influential power-holders in a clientelistic manner, or that their village did not have its own CDC, and was managed by the CDC of another village. In these cases, participants often described an underlying dynamic of domination versus deprivation between the CDC leader's village and their own. In some cases, the allotment of COVID-19 relief for one village was reportedly co-opted by the CDC leader and distributed among his[23] own village.

This pattern of misappropriation exacerbated pre-existing grievances of exclusion and intensified tensions, in some cases leading to violent confrontations or new contestation of the CDC leadership. In one example, conflicts over COVID-19 aid distribution led to ad hoc elections and the replacement of the CDC leader. In another, a community sued their CDC leader, but failed to obtain restitution due to his relationships with local authorities; the CDC leader later "punished" those who brought the case by withholding further aid. Another CDC leader was forced to flee the area for his safety. Stories like these were provided frequently as examples of the negative impacts of the COVID-19 relief distribution on a given community.

22 I25 – Female, Herat
23 There were no mentions of female CDC leaders in the study.

Jono Photography/Shutterstock

> *"Our community elders allocate aid for themselves while they take the poor and needy people's share. Also, targeted killings have increased. These targeted killings are related to COVID-19 aid. Those people who did not receive the aid, they targeted the CDC's relatives and they are killing those people. They said the CDC leader distributed the aid to his relatives and friends not to the people....They do ethnic discrimination and because of discrimination, unemployment, crime, and corruption take place."*[24]

Misappropriated COVID-19 relief resources were almost universally reported as having been redirected in part or in full to local power-holders' relatives and friends. However, many participants also shared instances of COVID-19 relief exclusion along identity lines, exacerbating intercommunal grievances and sometimes directly contributing to increased intercommunal violence at the local level. In the dataset, the topics most frequently concurring with both increased inter-tribal and inter-ethnic conflict, respectively, were: aid distribution exclusion, COVID-19 relief, nepotism, CDC leaders, and increased aid conflict. Given the many other economic, security, and sociocultural stressors present during the pandemic period, the prominence of COVID-19 relief mismanagement as a primary driver of intercommunal conflict is notable, and perhaps lends credence to participants' claims of new levels of economic deprivation and the necessity of increased resource competition.

Finally, COVID-19 relief conflicts also emerged between other identity groups. A number of participants framed COVID-19 relief exclusion as delineated along economic status, with wealthier segments of the community appropriating aid intended for low-income members of the community. In these cases, participants drew implicit linkages between wealth and power, and inversely, poverty and marginalization. These cases of COVID-19 relief appropriation thus generated conflicts that exacerbated economic dimensions of marginalization irrespective of identity — though in some cases economic and identity groupings converged.

24 167 – Female, Kandahar.

Similar examples were provided in terms of increased tensions between host communities and IDPs or returnees regarding the allocation of assistance, exclusion, and perceptions of which groups were more or less deserving of COVID-19 assistance. Resource competition between host communities and IDPs or returnees, particularly over provision of assistance, is not a new development in the context of Afghanistan.[25] However, the pandemic contributed concurrently to increased population movements, increased economic deprivation, and increased entitlements to and awareness of specific assistance. These factors collectively appear to have further exacerbated underlying host-IDP and host-returnee tensions. Finally, in some cases these divisions also corresponded with divergent ethnic or tribal identities, generating grievances linked to multiple dimensions of exclusion.

Pathway 3: COVID-19 Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices (KAP) and Social Cohesion

Overview

Beyond the ways in which social cohesion was adversely affected by the factors detailed in Pathways 1 and 2, many participants remarked on a broader breakdown in social cohesion stemming from the reduction in social bonding activities due to pandemic regulations, combined with divergent and shifting knowledge, attitudes and practices around COVID-19. These dynamics will be discussed in Pathway 3.

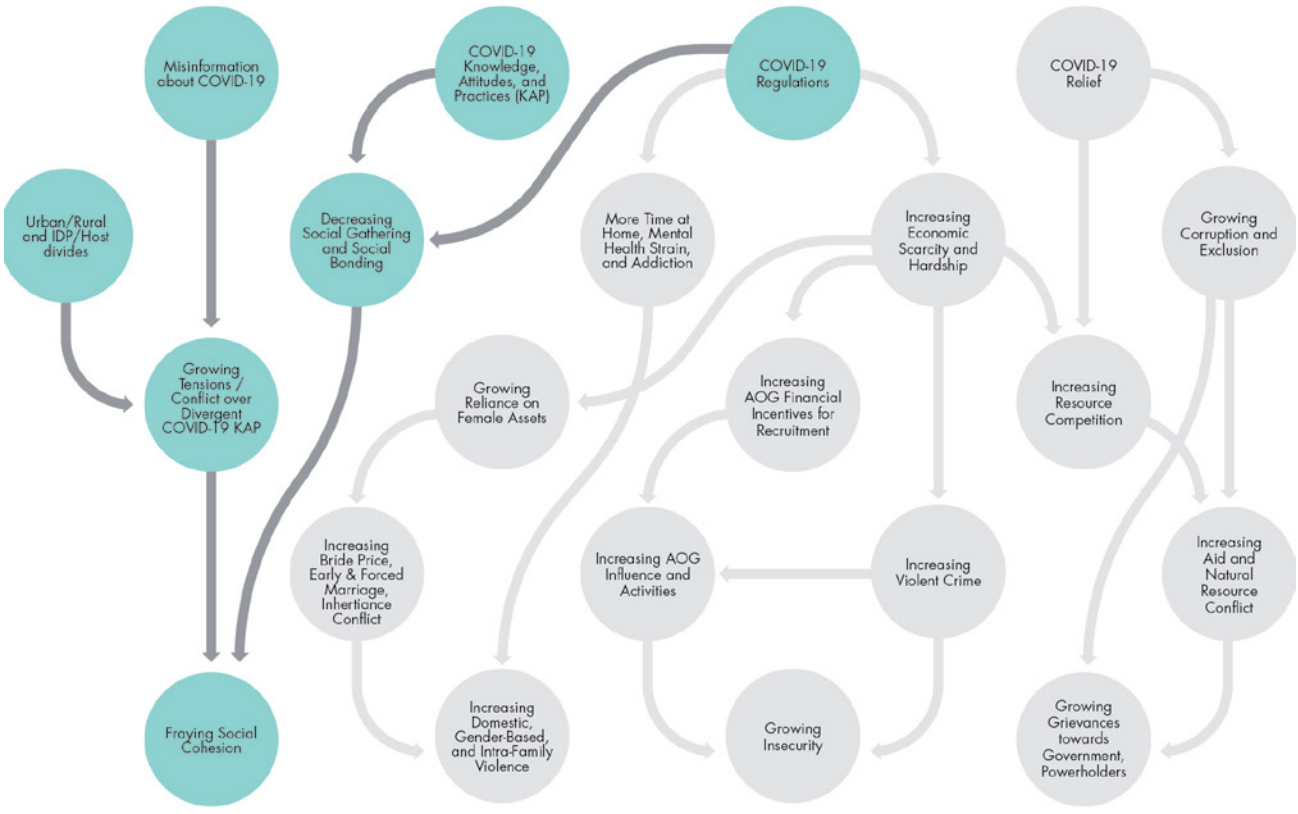

Figure 4. Pathway 3- Social Cohesion and COVID-19 Knowledge, Attitudes, and Practices

25 For example, see: ADSP. (2019). Action Plan for Integration: Herat. Asia Displacement Solutions Platform (ADSP). https://adsp.ngo/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/ADSP_2019_Herat_Integration_Plan_Final.pdf

Mohammad Ismail/Reuters

Identity, information and divergent COVID-19 KAP

The first COVID-19 outbreak in Afghanistan appeared in Herat city (Ruttig, 2020). In the early stages of the pandemic, both cases of and information about COVID-19 remained concentrated in urban areas. A number of participants in rural communities noted that they had received no awareness campaigns by the government; for some, this was a source of grievance. Data for the study was collected between February-April 2021, roughly one year after the virus emerged in Afghanistan; during this period, all participating communities were aware of the virus, and almost all believed it to be a real and serious public health concern. However, it is apparent that particularly in rural areas, this broad acknowledgement was a slow process which had notable negative impacts on social cohesion as knowledge and attitudes regarding the virus evolved over time.

> *"Actually, I am an Imam and people were asking me a lot of questions. One group of people believed that it is not necessary to use a face mask, and there is no such disease at all; however, the other group believed that the disease is real. It has caused tensions and conflicts among the elders of our village, and they even fought each other. I was also scared of the disease and I was confused about whether it is real or not, but we believed that the disease had come from God and we had to prevent it."*[26]

Beyond relatively lower knowledge of COVID-19 in rural areas, attitudes towards the virus were also influenced by a relatively higher prevalence of religious conservatism and stronger influence of local religious leaders. Some participants noted that religious leaders played a prominent role in encouraging disbelief in the virus and nonadherence to mitigation measures. It is likely that some of these leaders were resistant to lockdown measures or personal health concerns which reduced attendance at prayers.

26 I12 – Male, Kabul.

In response, religious leaders and, in some cases, madrassa students, and extremist groups, promoted one of several common narratives. These narratives included denial of the virus' existence, claims that the virus would only infect non-Muslims and infidels, and/or the fatalistic narrative that as the virus was created by Allah, people's fate would be controlled by Allah and not by any individual mitigation measures.

Some participants noted that attitudes towards COVID-19 were also impacted by pre-existing mistrust in the Government which was then reinforced by the divergence in the guidance and information provided by authorities versus trusted religious leaders. This discrepancy both reduced the effectiveness of government messaging and contributed to further pandemic-related grievances against the government. Additionally, lockdown restrictions across the country varied both in their specific rules and in their enforcement. This lack of clarity may have further undermined government messaging; several participants, for example, described frustration and grievances towards a local policy that permitted market access only at night — the most insecure time of the day to be traveling and purchasing items.

Cassandra Nelson/Mercy Corps

> *"You know how much social cohesion was reduced due to Coronavirus. First of all, they said that people should not go to mosques to prevent the spread of the coronavirus...On the one hand, the imams of the mosques said over loudspeakers that people should come to the mosques, and if anyone did not show up, he would be one of the infidels. Think for yourself. They call those who do not attend the mosque infidels. How do you say they become infidels? They do not go to the mosques to save their lives, and they are called infidels. And this caused conflicts among the people; a group of people supported the imams of the mosques and others did not go to the mosques to save their lives. And that caused a gap among the people. I wish there was no Coronavirus. May God destroy the Coronavirus."*[27]

Attitudes towards the virus were also informed by a range of other rumors which were not religious in nature, and which were not seemingly perpetuated by specific community leaders. These included rumors that the pandemic was a political hoax for the purpose of misappropriating international donor funding, that the pandemic was a weapon or hoax created by the West, and that COVID-19 treatment was a ruse to enable lethal injections of patients.

Population movements also impacted knowledge and attitudes towards the pandemic, and in some cases contributed to tensions over differing COVID-19 mitigation practices. Several participants noted that residents returning to the village from the city (see Pathway 1) brought with them vastly different knowledge, attitudes and practices. This discrepancy created either fear, tensions, or both among members of the village; one participant even claimed that the newly-instilled fear of COVID-19 caused the death of several community members.

27 135 – Female, Kandahar.

At the same time, increased insecurity coinciding with the pandemic period, largely due to political developments and the escalation in armed conflict led to increased displacement of some rural populations into urban areas. By contrast, social cohesion among IDPs and urban host communities was strained by IDPs' skepticism of the virus (according to those interviewed), low adherence to mitigation measures, and mockery of those who did take COVID-19 precautions.

> *"There were many disturbances among people during the pandemic among the Pashtun tribe as they have very strict culture so they were having arguments with each other in order to protect themselves from spread of this virus. Since there is no other water source except this deep well in the village, they wanted other people to avoid standing in line and respect social distancing, but other villagers were not listening to the Pashtuns and using bad words against each other. Such issues caused physical disputes among people."*[28]

In rare cases, divergent COVID-19 KAP also fell along ethnic or tribal lines. In these cases, participants noted that inter-ethnic or inter-tribal tensions had been inflamed by arguments over social distancing and other mitigation measures. In one workshop in a neighborhood of Kabul city, participants claimed that tribal relationships had noticeably changed as a result of the belief that only some tribes were susceptible to the virus, while others were immune, leading to inter-tribal conflict and deteriorated relations.

It is worth noting that COVID-19 KAP clearly evolved over time, particularly in rural areas. This most commonly occurred as community members witnessed or heard about COVID-19 infections and deaths among their friendship and kinship networks. In some cases, participants also referenced traditional or social media, indicating that there may have been increasing information penetration over time. However, it is worth noting that this progression did not occur at the same pace in all areas or among all segments of a given community. As further discussed in the following section, this divergence had meaningful negative impacts on social cohesion in many communities as fear of the virus among some clashed with others' skepticism, exacerbated by religious and cultural norms.

> *"Some people were ashamed of wearing masks because they believed that Allah will keep them safe, not a piece of cloth. It was very tough to discuss with people and convince them, but their mind changed gradually when they witnessed many fatalities. There was a rumor that this virus is only for non-Muslim people and will not affect true Muslims. Then, later, people understood that the COVID does not differentiate between Muslims and non-Muslims. People had the idea that this virus is not as dangerous as an explosion or bombing, but their minds changed when they witnessed the disasters that were caused by the virus to society."*[29]

COVID-19 regulations, social bonding and social cohesion

The most prevalent narrative regarding the pandemic's impact on social cohesion linked the reduction in social gatherings to weakened social relationships. Participants in roughly half of the interviews and workshops conducted observed that social cohesion had declined due to reduced visits among relatives, reduced participation in cultural and religious events, and increased disagreements over attendance at important family events such as weddings and funerals. The former two patterns were framed largely as weakening social bonds; participants appeared to view these activities as fundamental to maintaining social relationships, with tensions and "gaps" as an inevitable result of lower engagement in social gatherings.

28 W30 – Female, Herat.
29 W16 – Male, Kabul.

By contrast, reduced attendance of events such as funerals and weddings were framed as a source of conflict. Tensions emerged between those who were concerned about COVID-19 transmission or who otherwise chose to follow lockdown guidance, and those hosting the events with more skeptical attitudes towards the virus. Non-attendance was seen as highly offensive, and as a cause for complete ruptures in relationships. This pattern was often linked to family networks, but was also in some cases linked to fractures within wider community relationships.

Non-attendance at funerals was framed as particularly damaging. This was likely exacerbated by misinformation which led communities to believe that COVID-19 could be transmitted by proximity to the body of the deceased, if that individual was suspected of having had COVID-19. One woman described a body sitting unattended and beginning to rot until she volunteered to wash and prepare it for burial, as no one was willing to handle the corpse.

Mercy Corps

> *"There were huge advertisements about the pandemic, and many precautionary points were mentioned in the advertisements. People were afraid. I got infected in the last Ramadan month, and I did not allow my family to come closer to me. Meanwhile, we did not attend the funeral/mourning/charity ceremony of dead people who were infected with the pandemic. Because we live in a religious community, people are upset because of not attending the funeral/mourning ceremonies of their dead family members. This issue still exists in the area, and some people have broken down their relationships with each other."*[30]

By contrast, a couple of participants observed that lockdown and self-imposed movement restrictions due to fear of COVID-19 had actually improved social cohesion; in these communities, reduced interactions led to reduced local disputes, including violent disputes. However, the majority of respondents who noted pandemic-related impacts on social cohesion viewed reduced social interaction as having a deleterious effect on relationships. Several participants also noted that lockdown and COVID-19 transmission concerns prevented gatherings from taking place which had previously served to mitigate local disputes.

Examples given included the cessation of monthly village-wide meetings where disputes would be aired and solved; dispute resolution meetings with community elders and other informal leaders; teacher's meetings designed to address education-related problems and disputes; and youth councils for sharing mutual grievances that would then be brought to local MPs. In these cases, conflicts which emerged during the lockdown period were seen as having no avenue for resolution.

30 169 – Male, Kandahar.

Marko Beljan/Shutterstock

> *"Previously, there were many gatherings in the village and CDC office, but they have decreased now. Even we do not have any councils nowadays, and elections that used to be held for the CDC are all stopped. Most of the problems used to be solved in meetings and councils, but since there is no meeting, none of the problems and conflicts are solved these days."*[31]

Though a few participants observed that relationships had recently normalized, a greater proportion indicated that social cohesion still remained weaker than before. Some participants noted that there had been permanent cleavages in specific relationships, for example as a result of nonattendance at a wedding or funeral. Others noted that despite the restoration of normality in other areas of life, there remained lower participation and/or alterations in the nature of social bonding activities up to present.

In the dataset, the topic of reduced social cohesion concurred most frequently with: reduced social gatherings, increased interpersonal/intra communal conflict, fear of COVID-19, and COVID-19 stigma/disagreements. The predominance of these thematic associations is noteworthy, given the many other possible sources of reduced social cohesion during this period — including economic strain and resource competition, changes in IDP and returnee presence, and increases in violent crime and AOG recruitment. This may speak to the critical importance of social bonding activities for the maintenance of social cohesion in a context driven by multiple, complex dimensions of conflict.

31 I11 – Male, Kabul.

Pathway 4: COVID-19 Response, Women's Rights and Gender-Based Violence

Overview

A full analysis of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on domestic and gender-based violence is beyond the scope of this study. However, participants described several common patterns of impact, linking COVID-19 regulations to tertiary shifts in women's rights, gender-based violence, and violence within and between family groups.

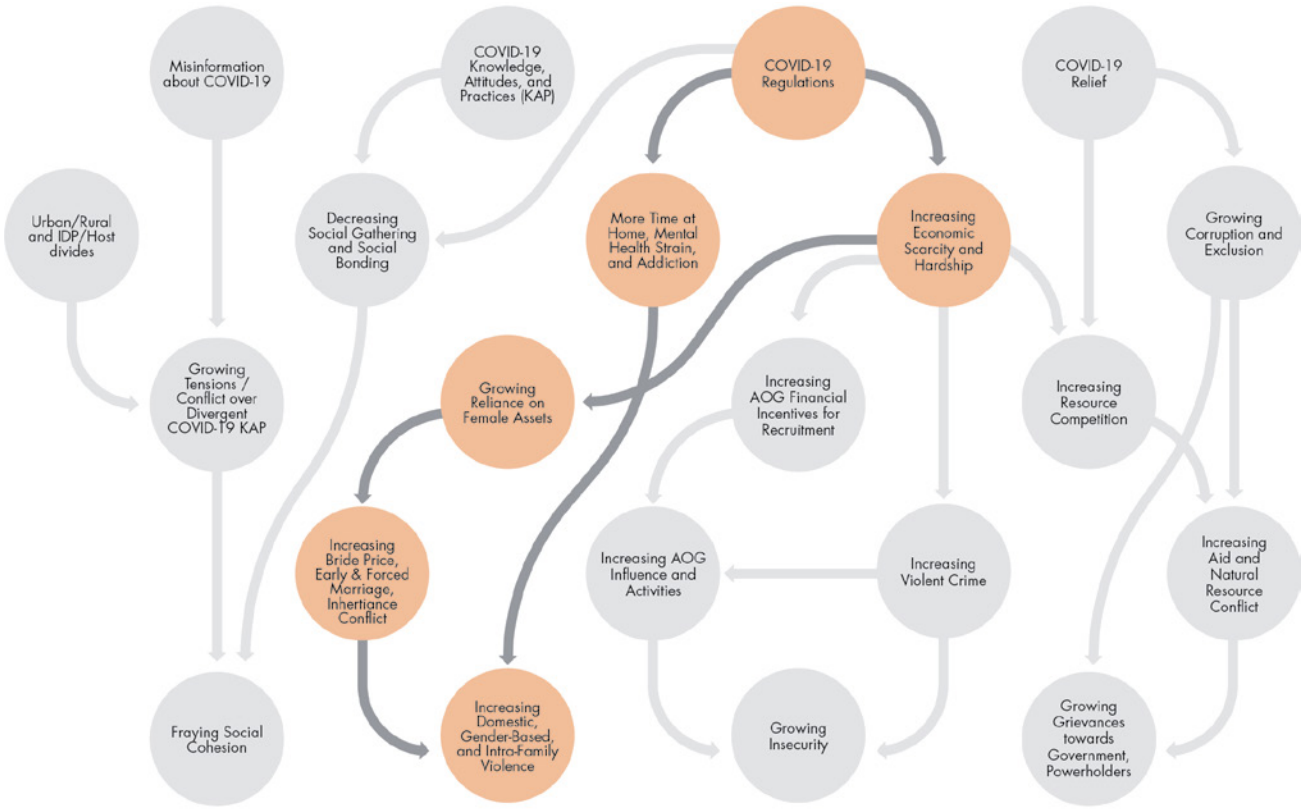

Figure 5. Pathway 4- Women's Rights and Gender-Based Violence

Lockdown, mental health and domestic violence

> *"I should say that the level of insecurity and unemployment have doubled since March of 2020. Poverty has reached its peak. The majority have become unemployed and they were not even able to feed their families. In addition, unemployment caused violence against the women, and many women divorced their husbands. We have witnessed many cases of violence against women on news and social media. All of the above conflicts have increased since the outbreak of COVID."*[32]

During the early stages of the pandemic, some participants noted an increase in time spent at home, either due to enforced lockdown measures or fear of the virus leading to self-imposed movement restrictions. In describing the impacts, many participants focused on the presence of newly unemployed males in the home, alongside increased pressure from wives to

32 I9 – Female, Kabul.

Jono Photography/Shutterstock

provide for the family in light of increased food insecurity. These factors combined were commonly perceived as having led to deteriorations in mental health, with some participants observing an increase in rates of suicide as a result.

Participants noted that the two most common responses to this psychological strain among men were new or exacerbated drug addictions, and increased physical violence perpetrated against their families, particularly towards their wives. Women's responses to psychological strain were less frequently discussed. However, among urban interviewees in Kabul, several noted an increase in cases of women divorcing their husbands, largely as a result of domestic violence.

> *"People of this area were providing for their expenses by working in foreign countries, but during the COVID-19 pandemic, they returned to Afghanistan, and due to lack of working opportunities, they couldn't work here. The unemployed men who had no income sources committed family violence and beat their wives and kids, and they also stole things from their neighbors. People who are poor and unemployed with many family members can't provide for their family's expenses and needs, so they will commit family violence. And family controversy and anxiety will cause them to get addicted to drugs."*[33]

Narratives of increased drug addiction, particularly among unemployed men, including unemployed returnees, were framed as a consequence of lockdown, unemployment, and psychological strain. Participants also cited increases in drug addiction as a cause of domestic violence, particularly towards women and children in the household, further fueling the economic and psychological strain that drove unemployed men to addiction. Households caught in this vicious cycle were then exposed to compounding vulnerabilities, with women and girls bearing much of the cost, in the form of gender-based violence, curtailing of their rights and female commodification, as detailed in the next section.

33 W52 – Female, Takhar

Jono Photography/Shutterstock

Economic shocks, violence against women, and early or forced marriage

As noted in Pathway 2, resource competition increased in some areas as a natural consequence of increased economic deprivation. This competition served not only to exacerbate tensions and conflict, but also to shift the value of some resources. The same pattern emerged with regards to issues such as bride prices and female inheritance. Some participants noted that the increase in economic deprivation as the result of COVID-19 regulations led to shifts in and exacerbation of these practices.

> *"In the lockdown, most of the people become jobless. They were cruel towards their wives and children; they would beat them. In addition to this, they would tell their wives to demand their inheritance from their fathers... Before the spread of COVID-19, people did not pay much attention. Most of them were busy with their jobs; however, after the spread of this virus, they became aware of this issue. They would taunt their wives, and even some of them would force their wives to get out of their houses. They would tell their wives: if you cannot take your inheritance, we do not need you. Consequently, it created tensions between the families and eventually ended up in conflict between the tribes. In our village, there is a conflict over inheritance between the Mohmand and Popalzai tribes."*[34]

The first of these centers on miras, or the right of women to claim inheritance from their fathers. According to the Asia Foundation's 2018 Survey of the Afghan People, acceptance of this right has been steadily increasing over time (Khan, 2018). Nonetheless, particularly in more traditional rural communities, this right is often not honored, with fathers, husbands or brothers co-opting the inheritance of their daughters, wives or sisters. Some participants perceived an increase in this practice of male capture of women's inheritance within their community.

34 W40 – Female, Kandahar.

This was explained not only as an issue of the extent of miras capture, but in terms of generating more intense intrafamilial conflicts over accessing miras, particularly between husbands and their wives' fathers or brothers. In some cases, these intrafamilial conflicts also spilled over into broader intercommunal conflicts, for example when the wife's family of birth belonged to a different tribe than her husband's. These conflicts were sometimes violent in nature, with a few examples cited which ended in murder. Though inheritance conflicts are not a new development, some participants felt that they had intensified because of increased economic deprivation linked to the pandemic.

Another practice reportedly impacted by the pandemic relates to the financial value placed on girls and women by men in the process of arranged marriage. Several participants reported that the bride price (paid to by the men of the groom's family to the men of the bride's family) increased significantly during the pandemic, for example from 80,000 ANF prior to the pandemic to upwards of 1,000,000 ANF during the pandemic. Considered alongside the reports of increased economic deprivation during the pandemic, this may indicate increased reliance on the commodification of girls and women in marriage as an economic coping mechanism in some communities. Several participants who observed these patterns also noted specific increases in early and forced marriages as a result. One participant also connected reduced school attendance due to economic deprivation and school closures with increased early and forced marriages.

> *"Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 has occurred, schools are closed. Fathers could provide the transport allowance of their children before the pandemic started; however, they cannot do it now. As a result, they take their daughters out of school and marry their daughters. There is no school, so they are compelled to take their daughters out of school. The number of girls who have gotten married compared to before the pandemic increased significantly. They marry their daughters at a younger age."*[35]

35 160 – Female, Herat.

Conclusion and Implications

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic coincided with a period of substantial political change and growing insecurity within Afghanistan, most prominently linked to the peace process, announcements of US troop withdrawal, and intensification of armed conflict. Against this backdrop, COVID-19 mitigation regulations were limited in duration and uneven in application. Perceptions of the threat that COVID-19 poses to the country have also varied over time and across different areas of the country. There appears to have been a dominant perception in the very early stages of the pandemic, and then again following the first wave, that the virus was not a significant concern. These factors in totality have resulted in limited focus and analysis on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in the country, as compared to other concurrent political and conflict developments.

Nevertheless, the findings of this study indicate that the COVID-19 pandemic has had salient negative impacts on communities across diverse geographic, identity group and socioeconomic lines. Most of the pandemic's consequences are not new phenomena within the context of Afghanistan. Unemployment, violent crime, population movements, changing AOG modalities, fragile social cohesion and a weak social contract are challenges that the people of Afghanistan have grappled with for decades. However, the pandemic and response measures played a critical role in compounding these pre-existing stressors, contributing to the exacerbation of multiple dimensions of conflict and violence within and between communities.

Within Afghanistan's complex conflict landscape, the findings of this case study demonstrate the COVID-19 pandemic entered a set of new factors into the conflict system, most notably lockdown measures, border closures, COVID-19 relief programs, and divergent knowledge, attitudes and practices related to the virus. These factors generated a series of secondary impacts on economic, social and governance factors, which in turn contributed to tertiary impacts on conflict and violence. The direct and indirect consequences of the pandemic added new dimensions of complexity and strain on pre-existing vulnerabilities, contributing significantly to an enabling environment for more pro-violent and pro-conflict outcomes. This is evident in the widely reported shifts in:

- The rates of violent crime as a coping mechanism for exacerbated economic deprivation;
- The opportunism of AOGs in bolstering recruitment through increased reliance on financial recruitment incentives;
- Shifts in perceptions and grievances related to the social contract when encountering a completely new type of catastrophe;
- The intensification of conflict over natural, material and gender-specific resources; and
- The weakening or even destruction of social bonds and cohesion.

Each of these pathways of impact have been either exacerbated or transformed by the COVID-19 pandemic with many of the effects enduring up to the present day. Particularly at the local level, understanding these less obvious but equally important contributing factors — and their interaction with other conflict drivers — is critical to effective conflict prevention and mitigation.

These findings also carry important policy implications, in particular approaches to mitigate the pandemic's adverse effects on conflict and violence, and to prevent new or worsening conflict in the future. More specifically, the analysis presented here points to a need for:

- A comprehensive economic support package to counter the negative effects of public health measures and restrictions with a focus on development, in particular a livelihood response as well as a humanitarian one;
- International diplomatic pressure to maintain open borders for trade - i.e. COVID Safe border crossings for goods;

- Diplomatic action for protection of migrant workers, including engagement with key countries such as Iran and Pakistan, to work towards - at a minimum - cooperation to prepare for and mitigate as far as possible the economic and social shocks of migrant returns to their communities;
- Redoubling support for economic development, especially in the agricultural sector, in rural areas to lessen the impact of reverse migration to rural areas;
- International assistance and effective means to provide income protection and a social safety net to stymie crime and AOG recruitment;
- Mechanisms to target and distribute aid to prevent breakdown in social cohesion and to reduce clientelism, which hampers communities' trust in the GOA and worsens conflict risks;
- Greater COVID relief and policy reforms to focus on addressing the economic and social impacts of COVID-19.

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Where possible, we tried to source photos depicting life during the COVID-19 pandemic period in the areas of Afghanistan that are the focus of this study: Kabul, Herat, Takhar, and Kandahar. Many of the images in this chapter are from other parts of the country and/or from the years preceding the pandemic, but were chosen to help illustrate the broader themes, ideas, people, and places described by the individuals who participated in our research.

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