

Will the Endeavors of NGOs to Alleviate Poverty Yield Any Enduring Consequences in Afghanistan? A Case Study of ABCO's Intervention

MSc. Mir Abdullatif Yahya¹

¹University of Europe for Applied Sciences, School of Business and Economics, Hamburg, Germany.

Abstract: Afghanistan, plagued by persistent socioeconomic challenges, has been a primary focus for worldwide development initiatives. Despite the large number of aid organizations operating in Afghanistan, almost 15.8 million individuals continue to experience acute food insecurity. This equates to one in three Afghans being uncertain about their next meal, as a result of the recent economic, political, and financial crises that have plagued the nation. The convergence of these multiple shocks has led to a deterioration in living conditions, further exacerbating the plight of the impoverished. In this context, the role of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and the efforts made by United Nation (UN) organizations are noteworthy to mitigate and execute initiatives accordingly. Despite the extensive efforts made by NGOs and UN organizations to tackle poverty in Afghanistan, the overall impact on poverty levels remains minimal. This study aims to explore the effectiveness of programs and projects carried out by key national NGOs and UN organizations in Afghanistan to examine their ability to mitigate poverty and change the lives of people. The research considers one of the Resilience and Food Systems (RFS) projects. The project was implemented by the Afghan Bureau Collaboration Office (ABCO) between 2022 and 2023 and was financed by the World Food Program (WFP). Data was collected using Yin's case study protocol, which involved gathering both primary and secondary data. The diverse interventions described in the RFS project have resulted in substantial enhancements in livelihoods, agricultural productivity, poverty alleviation, and environmental resilience among various communities. Nearly 19,684 direct and indirect households, farmers, and beneficiaries have all benefited significantly from RFS initiatives. ABCO achieved local exemptions enabling female personnel to engage in essential roles like training, supervision, and monitoring despite recent prohibitions on female employment in Afghanistan, showcasing the RFS project's success in promoting gender equality amidst regulatory challenges. These endeavors not only improve the availability of food and nutrition but also promote sustainable land use practices and community empowerment, underscoring the importance of integrated approaches in addressing multifaceted challenges in poverty reduction and rural development contexts.

Keywords: Poverty, Sustainable development, Socioeconomic impact, NGOs in Afghanistan, UN organizations.

1. Introduction

Poverty is a state characterized by the absence of essential resources to live, such as food, clothing, security, and shelter, resulting in bodily deterioration, illness, moral negligence, and embitterment of one's spirit. Furthermore, poverty can have varying degrees and types of effects, including social, economic, and political consequences (Hakim H. et al., 2018). It has been reported that more than 700 million people, which is equivalent to 10 percent of the global population, continue to reside in extreme poverty. Among them, approximately 385 million children survive on less than US\$1.90 per day (French, D., & Kotzé, L. 2021).

Various endeavors are made to mitigate global poverty. The United Nations launched the Millennium Project for this purpose in September 2000, with the aim of eradicating extreme poverty for all individuals worldwide by the year 2030 (UN SDG. 2015). In Afghanistan, nearly half of the population resides below the poverty line, with rural areas experiencing the highest poverty rates. By 2007, over 42% of the population lived below the poverty line, a figure that increased to 78.2% by 2014, reflecting widespread food shortages even in urban households (Kakar, K., et al., 2019; Wani, N., et al., 2022). However, Afghanistan has made some progress in poverty mitigation, the roles of international donors and local NGOs have been instrumental in addressing poverty mitigation (Table 1).

Poverty mitigation initiatives in Afghanistan have been reported to reduce poverty by 62%. Additionally, these initiatives demonstrated a 26.1% internal rate of return, suggesting that comprehensive interventions can effectively alleviate poverty in vulnerable, conflict-affected regions (Arguelles, G., et al., 2019) like Afghanistan.

Table 1. Some Major Projects Regarding Poverty Mitigation Implemented and Ongoing by ABCO Between 1995 – 2024

No.	Project Description	Funding Agency	Project Location		Duration	Start Date	Status
			District	Province			
1	Transferring cash assistance to families with pregnant and lactating women with children under the age of two	UNICEF	<i>Abkamre, ghormach, dychopan, kakar</i>	Badghes and Zabul	18 months	Jan, 2023	Ongoing
2	Resilience and Food Systems (RFS) – Phase 2	WFP	<i>Darzab, Qushtepa, Khamyab, and Qarqin</i>	Jawzjan	16 months	August, 2023	Ongoing
2	Resilience and Food Systems (RFS) – Phase 1	WFP	<i>Darzab, Qushtepa, Khamyab, and Qarqin</i>	Jawzjan	12 months	July, 2022	Completed
3	Community support and resilience against natural disasters DRR training and distribution of emergency response packages.	UNDP	<i>19 districts of 4 provinces</i>	Laghman, Nangarhar, Nuristan, and Kunar	6 months	Oct, 2023	Ongoing
4	Distribution of financial aid to internally displaced businesses, returnees, and host communities	UNDP	<i>Herat</i>	Herat	3 months	July, 2022	Completed
5	Registration, facilitation, and distribution of UNICEF financial aid to support education	UNICEF	<i>Aqcha, khneqa, kahmyab, darzab, sheberghan, Faizabad and qarqin</i>	Jawzjan	12 months	Nov, 2022	Completed
6	Carpet Weaving, Basic Business and Marketing Training	ARD	<i>Qarqeen District/ Khan Tapa village - Daraisuf Payen District</i>	Jawzjan and Samangan	17 months	Aug, 2008	Completed
7	Carpentry Basic Business and Marketing Skills Training	ARD	<i>Baysaqal</i>	Baghlan	7 months	Nov, 2008	Completed

8	Water supply project	US ARMY (USAID)	<i>Kamard</i>	Bamyan	6 months	Sep, 2007	Completed
9	Construction of School	WFP	<i>Qarqin and Shoortipa districts</i>	Jawzjan	6 months	Aug, 2007	Completed
10	Construction of blood bank	UNFPA	<i>Faizabad</i>	Badakhshan	3 months	Apr, 2006	Completed
11	Rehabilitation of maternity hospital	UNFPA	<i>Faizabad</i>	Badakhshan	4 months	Jun, 2006	Completed
12	Construction of KhowjaEshtel School	WFP	<i>Faizani village, Argo District.</i>	Badakhshan	4 months	Aug, 2005	Completed
13	Road Repairing	WFP	<i>Dahan Ghori</i>	Baghlan	3 months	Feb, 2005	Completed
14	Distribution of Commodities	WFP	<i>Nahrin, Poli Hisar, Tala-Wa-Barfak and Old Baghlan.</i>	Baghlan	3 months	Oct, 2003	Completed
15	Distribution of Commodities	WFP	<i>Andarab</i>	Baghlan	3 months	Sep, 2003	Completed
16	Construction of Ortblaqi school	WFP	<i>Dahan Ghori district</i>	Baghlan	6 months	Nov, 2003	Completed
17	Road Repairing & Food Distribution	WFP	<i>Andarab district</i>	Baghlan	2 months	Oct, 2003	Completed
18	Rehabilitation of school	UNICEF	<i>Zandi Kot, PirozNakhchir District</i>	Samangan	3 months	Apr, 2002	Completed
19	District Drought Response Program	WFP	<i>Doshi, Dahni Ghori, and Tala WaBarfak Districts.</i>	Baghlan	3month	Mar, 2001	Completed
20	District Drought Response Program	WFP	<i>Doshi, Pul-E-Khumri and Dahan Ghori</i>	Baghlan	5 months	Feb, 2001	Completed
21	Irrigation culverts construction	UNOPS	<i>Qarqin</i>	Jawzjan	5 months	Nov, 1995	Completed

NGOs have been significant contributors to Afghan society even since the Soviet invasion in December 1979 (Acbar, 2014). From the outset of the Soviet War in Afghanistan till now, international donors, International NGOs, NGOs and humanitarian volunteers have been delivering aids in varying ways to the affected Afghan communities throughout the nation. However, the assistance community faced a predicament characterized by both a development crisis and a human rights crisis during the initial Taliban era in 1994 (OECD, 2002). Over the past few decades, the importance of NGOs working in areas of conflict has noticeably grown. Between 2000 and 2014, a total of 891 international and local NGOs operated in Afghanistan (Mitchell, 2017). However, a substantial increase has been observed in these figures, with a total of 2,061 local NGOs and 273 INGOs currently active in the country (MoE, 2024).

Due to nearly 40 years of civil war, conflicts, economic instability, and security issues the population faces significant challenges all contributing to the pervasive issue of poverty. This escalating situation prompted

humanitarian aid, with multiple local NGOs, INGOs, and UN organizations delivering relief and emergency assistance, particularly in the aftermath of the regime change in Afghanistan in 2021.

This research focuses on the interventions of local NGOs and international donor organizations in improving the living conditions of Afghan communities. The aim is to assess the extent to which these interventions contribute to poverty mitigation in the country. To accomplish this, this research conducted a case study, focusing on one of the Resilience programs implemented by ABCO; the ‘‘Resilience and Food Systems (RFS), Jawzjan 2022, 2023 and 2024, Afghanistan’’ project that is funded by the World Food Program (WFP).

This study raises a crucial inquiry: will the endeavors of NGOs to alleviate poverty yield any enduring consequences? The paper commences by presenting a comprehensive overview of the poverty condition in Afghanistan; thereafter, it proceeds to delineate its principal objective. Subsequently, the paper conducts an extensive examination of the literature about poverty in Afghanistan, specifically highlighting the collaborative efforts between NGOs and international organizations to mitigate poverty in the nation. Once the research procedure is elucidated, the analysis of the case study and subsequent outcome and discussions are presented.

The paper concludes by highlighting the effectiveness of longer-term income-generating projects, such as resilience and food systems, business and marketing training, and cash distribution initiatives, in reducing poverty through collaboration between NGOs and international donors. While immediate relief and emergency measures can provide temporary assistance to beneficiaries, these projects have proven to be exceptional in their ability to bring about lasting change.

2. Literature review

The situation in Afghanistan has been tumultuous since the Soviet invasion in 1979, followed by the United States in 2001, leading to a turbulent 40-year history of war, misery, and power struggles among diverse factions amid continuous conflict and instability. After the withdrawal of international forces in 2021, the country witnessed rapid economic and security deterioration, along with the looming prospect of the failure of international intervention (Kozerawski, D. 2022), culminating in the swift takeover of Kabul and most major cities by the Taliban on August 15, 2021. This US-Taliban agreement has further exacerbated the challenges faced by the Afghan government and its international allies in safeguarding fundamental rights, thereby contributing to the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan (Jamal, S. 2022).

Similar to Lebanon’s 1990 – 2020 situation, Afghanistan has faced prolonged conflict, political instability, and economic challenges exacerbated by years of conflict and mismanagement (Islam, Z., et al., 2021). The withdrawal of foreign aid and the freeze of international reserves have further crippled the economy, leading to widespread poverty and unemployment. The resurgence of the Taliban has sparked apprehension regarding human rights, particularly pertaining to the treatment of women and minorities (Plyais, Y. 2023). Reports of targeted violence, restrictions on freedom of expression, and the regression of advancements in education and women’s rights (UN, 2023) have sparked widespread international condemnation.

In Afghanistan, the recent regime changes in 2021 have compounded the challenges already faced by the nation, particularly in relation to poverty. According to The World Bank (2021) statistics, life expectancy at birth decreased by 3.125% from 2019 to 2021, net migration increased by 289.2% from 2018 to 2021, and gross domestic product (GDP) rates decreased by 27.1% from 2020 to 2021. The strain on healthcare, along with increased migration, reflects worsening conditions in Afghanistan, emphasizing the urgent need for international assistance amidst recent political changes.

The humanitarian situation in Afghanistan is dire, with 3.3 million children lacking the financial means to obtain essential dietary resources, resulting in a significant number of fatalities on a weekly basis (Rahmat, Z., et al., 2022), along with widespread food insecurity and an urgent need for assistance (Corpuz, J. 2022). Despite these challenges, grassroots movements, civil society organizations, national NGOs, INGOs as well as UN organizations are attracted to persist in advocating for peace, justice, and humanitarian aid in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, Afghanistan’s future is unpredictable due to the simultaneous presence of political instability and a humanitarian crisis. This highlights the immediate necessity for collaborative international efforts to tackle the country’s long-standing issues and assist its population in their pursuit of peace and stability.

2.1. Poverty in Afghanistan

Poverty is defined by The World Bank as an experience of hunger, inadequate housing, illness without access to medical care, lack of educational opportunities and illiteracy, unemployment, apprehension about the future, and a day-to-day existence (GBN, 2009). As per the latest WFP (2024) statistics, currently, 15.8 million people in Afghanistan are suffering from severe food insecurity, which translates to 1 in 3 Afghans not knowing when they will eat next. The 41.7 million people that live in the nation provide a worrying context for this dire circumstance.

Al Mamun, A., & Yaya, S. 2019 provide insights on Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) utilizing Afghanistan as a case study. They mentioned that the use of a comprehensive approach in tackling poverty has gained significant backing, particularly with the implementation of the MPI by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) for countries at different stages of development. The program, which was initiated in 2010, has been included into the UNDP's Human Development Report, representing a notable advancement in global poverty evaluation and reduction efforts. Hence, the MPI methodology is a powerful tool for evaluating aid's impact on poverty reduction and meeting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Al Mamun, A., & Yaya, S. 2019).

Trani, J. F., et al., 2013 provide critical data on multidimensional child poverty in Afghanistan by using the Alkire-Foster method. They claim that child poverty in Afghanistan has a disproportionately negative impact on younger and rural children, girls, and children with disabilities, showing the poverty of children in Afghanistan. Then the study explores significant features of child poverty, using data from a survey conducted by Handicap International. Their survey covers facets of children's wellbeing that are often disregarded in conventional surveys. Their analysis encompassed ten elements, including healthcare, material deprivation, food security, social inclusion, education, freedom from exploitation, housing, autonomy, and mobility. Their findings indicate that children who are younger, living in rural areas, female, and handicapped are the most deprived portion of the society in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan MoE., & World Bank (2017) reported the deteriorating economic and security conditions in Afghanistan which resulted in a significant rise in poverty, with the percentage increasing from 35.8 percent in 2011-12 to 39.1 percent in 2013-14 (Figure 1).

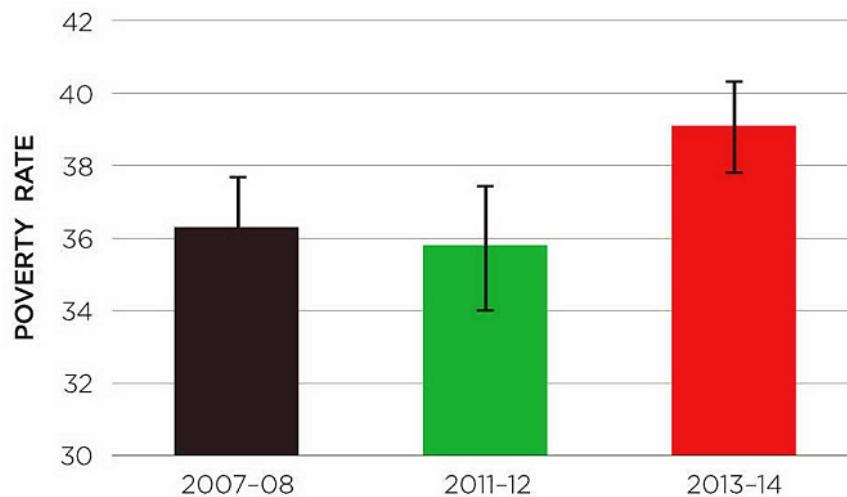


Figure 1. Poverty Trends in Afghanistan (Afghanistan MoE. & World Bank, 2017)

This tendency highlights the extreme vulnerability of Afghan families to falling into poverty when faced with various negative shocks. Based on these statistics, there is a clear risk that poverty might reach high levels every year.

Trani, J. F., & Loeb, M. (2012) investigated the poverty and disability involving Afghanistan and Zambia as case study. They mention the complexity and mutually reinforcing existing connection between disability and poverty. Their study examines the robustness of this correlation by evaluating data obtained from household surveys done in Afghanistan and Zambia. The data indicates that persons with disabilities have diminished access to healthcare, education, and career prospects, irrespective of their disability status. Nevertheless, the research reveals that there is no statistically significant disparity in poverty levels, as evaluated by an asset index, between those with impairments and those without disabilities.

Jalali, A. A. (2006) analyzed the future of Afghanistan. According to his analysis, Afghanistan reached a critical juncture after the Bonn Process. To avert a recurrence of previous instability, continuous foreign assistance and strong domestic leadership committed to implementing reforms for at least ten years are deemed essential. The nation's future prosperity hinges on establishing a sustainable government and fostering a robust economy. While the Bonn Process initially prioritized addressing security issues following the Taliban regime, subsequent phases must place greater emphasis on Afghanistan's long-term development to achieve enduring peace and stability. This entails aligning global aid with Afghan development objectives over the next five years, culminating in a formal agreement between the international community and the Afghan government. Integration of this agreement into a comprehensive strategic plan is imperative to ensure synchronized efforts

and resource allocation. Ultimately, Jalali A. A. (2006) concludes that adherence to this strategy can uphold the significant progress achieved in recent years, benefiting all parties involved.

Rahimi, F. A. F. (2015)'s research highlights how persistent warfare, security concerns, and political instability intensify the level of poverty in Afghanistan. These factors have resulted in a large-scale relocation of people, a high level of unemployment, and restricted availability of crucial services. Moreover, the lack of collaboration across different regions hinders the ability to effectively tackle these challenges. The study also emphasizes the existence of divergent interests among significant stakeholders, such as the United States, Pakistan, and Iran, which further complicates the endeavors to find a solution. Rahimi, F. A. F. (2015) proposes that fostering regional collaboration might provide resolutions to both security concerns and poverty alleviation in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, persistent insecurity not only endangers the stability of Afghanistan but also poses a risk of entangling neighboring nations in protracted attempts to resolve the war.

The research conducted by Hakim Haider, M. et al. (2018) explores the severe repercussions of extreme poverty, including its impact on social, economic, and political aspects. The study focuses on the precise effects of poverty on employment, literacy, malnutrition, and health in Afghanistan. Impoverished individuals often lack the financial means to access unemployment benefits and are thus driven to participate in low-paying and insufficiently challenging jobs. In addition, impoverished homes often choose not to send their girls to school. Impoverished families, due to their limited buying capacity, are compelled to eat insufficient diets, which leads to detrimental health consequences for children, including being underweight, stunting, and wasting. The study mentioned that this continues a detrimental cycle in which inadequate nutrition results in compromised health, diminished productivity, decreased future income, and increased vulnerability to future poverty in Afghanistan.

Kantor, P., & Pain, A. (2011) conducted research on poverty reduction in Afghanistan and concludes that incorporating economic security for ordinary Afghans into a prudent departure plan may contribute to stability. Nevertheless, the realization of this objective is contingent upon the government and donor community adopting a guiding vision that prioritizes the Afghan people.

International donors, INGOs, and national NGOs are involved on how to provide the basic requirements of poor population, internally displaced individuals, and minority groups effectively and durably in the face of limited resources and increasing poverty rates in Afghanistan. To alleviate the effects of poverty and socioeconomic shocks, currently, 2,061 national NGOs and 273 INGOs (MoE, 2024), along with several UN agencies, are active in Afghanistan, willing to collaborate on and implement poverty mitigation projects. These programs strive to deter disadvantaged families from engaging in harmful coping strategies.

2.2. The collaborative role of international donors, INGOs, and NGOs in poverty mitigation in Afghanistan

International donors, NGOs, and INGOs wield significant influence in enhancing the welfare of disadvantaged populations locally and globally through their extensive involvement in international development and humanitarian activities. Moreover, NGOs, alongside INGOs and UN agencies such as WFP, UNDP, UNHCR, and UNICEF, are increasingly recognized for their pivotal role in shaping global policies concerning development, including poverty reduction, resilience, sustainable development, and advocacy for human rights. NGOs employ various strategies, both internally and externally, to exert their influence on global governance. This influence is shaped by their organizational objectives and the support they garner from their members (Dellmuth&Tallberg, 2017). INGOs, exemplified by organizations like Oxfam and Save the Children, often centralize their organizational structures to maximize their interests, enhance their legitimacy, and improve operational efficiency (Stroup & Wong, 2013). Nevertheless, INGOs play a critical role in advancing peace and disarmament agendas, influencing government policies, and striving to achieve the objectives set forth by the United Nations (Kalyadin, 1987).

In Afghanistan, the current economic, financial, and social conditions clearly indicate the pressing necessity for the country to undergo a recovery process. Data from the Ministry of Economy (MoE) in 2024 shows that numerous national and international NGOs are currently implementing projects financed by the United Nations in Afghanistan. However, concerns also exist regarding the performance and effectiveness of NGOs (Edwards & Hulme, 1995; Lang, 2000), as well as their access to financial services in Afghanistan (Moret, 2022).

Olson, L. (2006) states that the U.S.-led Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), which are international military coalitions, have also incorporated relief and reconstruction into their objectives. Nevertheless, numerous NGOs argue that the involvement of these military entities in aid and reconstruction efforts has infringed upon the impartial "humanitarian space" necessary for effectively addressing the needs and suffering of civilians. The research emphasize that this poses risks to NGOs and could potentially hinder the recovery process in Afghanistan. Their article analyzes the viewpoints of NGOs on three key topics: *I) the security challenges faced by NGOs, II)*

concerns about the increasing military influence on assistance efforts, and *III*) the tendency to blame NGOs for failings in the broader aid initiative. Furthermore, it examines the proactive actions made by numerous NGOs in Afghanistan to protect the humanitarian environment by engaging in advocacy and engagement with military forces and donors.

Rahmani, R. (2012) provides a comprehensive analysis of the operational environment for NGOs in Afghanistan, starting from 1979 when the Soviet invasion took place. The research examines how the public views NGOs and investigates the elements that shape this impression. It finally concludes that the ineffectiveness of local NGOs can be linked to donors' insufficient understanding of the local context and their accompanying policies.

The collaborative endeavors of international donors, INGOs, and NGOs are pivotal in alleviating poverty in Afghanistan, specifically in the domain of rural healthcare. Pueschel, M. (2010) mentioned that Special Forces (SF) medics facilitate the establishment of relationships between civilian assistance organizations, contractors, and NGOs by assimilating into local cultures. These partnerships are focused on promoting long-lasting advancements in rural health programs within Afghanistan. Furthermore, Samad et al. (2023) states that the implementation of Pay-for-Performance (P4P) agreements with NGOs has demonstrated notable enhancements in the provision of services while also achieving cost reductions, even in difficult security circumstances. This indicates the possibility of implementing similar contracts in other fragile environments, as suggested by Samad et al. (2023). Moreover, the efficacy of health programs relies on strong drug delivery networks, as evidenced by research carried out in Pakistan and on-the-ground experiences in Afghanistan by an INGO – Merlin. This emphasizes the crucial contribution of pharmacists working in NGOs to improve the management of the Drug Supply Cycle (Selection, Procurement, Distribution and Use) during an emergency (Villacorta-Linaza, 2009).

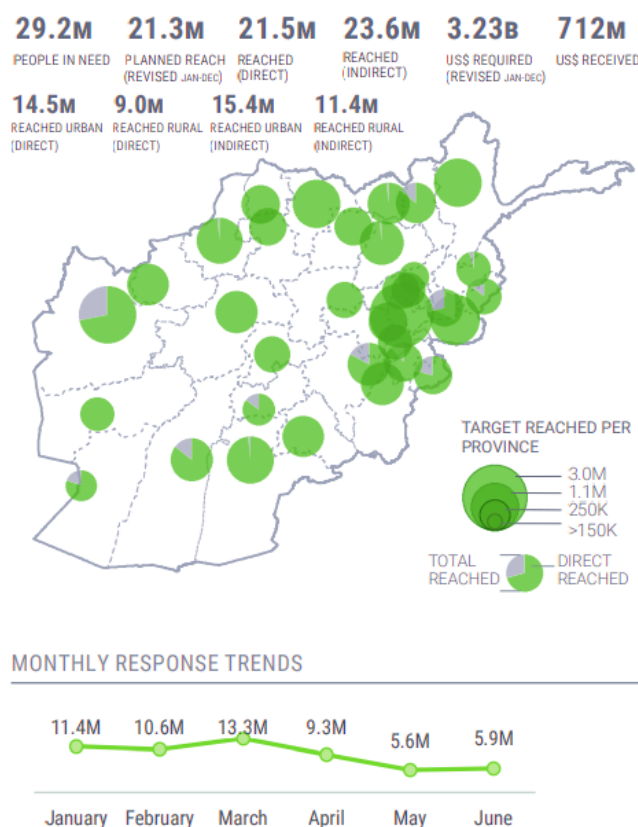
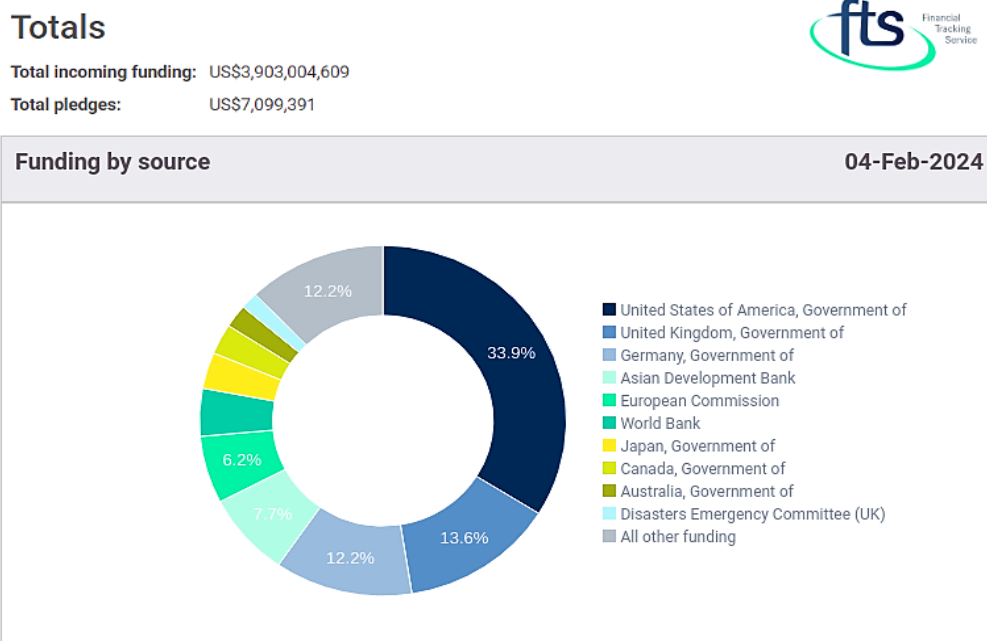


Figure 2. Humanitarian aid Trends Between January to June 2023 in Afghanistan (UNOCHA 2023)

Figure 2 provides a summary of humanitarian assistance initiatives implemented by multiple UN organizations and NGOs during a six-month period. It reveals that out of a total of 29.2 million individuals requiring aid, efforts were intended to assist 21.3 million people. Ultimately, these efforts successfully reached 21.5 million individuals through both direct and indirect methods. The monthly response trends indicate a peak of 13.3 million individuals reached in March 2023, followed by a significant decline to 5.6 million in May 2023. The total funding needed for these endeavors amounts to \$3.23 billion, of which \$712 million has already been

obtained(UNOCHA 2023). UNOCHA statistics indicate the success of humanitarian response projects in 2023, aiding a total of 23.6 million individuals, with direct aid reaching 21.5 million people in Afghanistan.

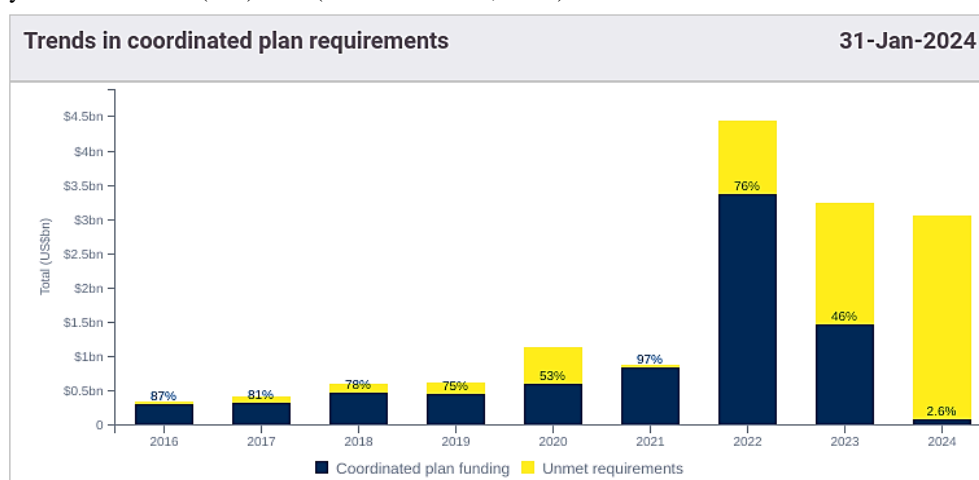
The major donors for aid assistance projects in Afghanistan are the United States Government, the United Kingdom, Germany, the Asian Development Bank, and the European Commission (OCHA services, 2023). Figures 3 and 4 offer additional information regarding the emergency response, poverty mitigation projects, and relief initiatives currently being executed in Afghanistan by various NGOs INGO. And UN organizations such as WFP, UNDP, UNICEF, and others.



The graph shows the top 10 sources of all reported humanitarian funding in the Country; a source of funding can be a UN member state, an international organization, a private donor, a UN Agency, etc...

Figure 3. Funding sources for Afghanistan in 2022 (OCHA services, 2022).

The United States Government is the primary source of funding, contributing 33.9% of the total amount. The Governments of the United Kingdom and Germany respectively have a 13.6% and 12.2% following. The Asian Development Bank also provides a contribution of 7.7%. Additional sources comprise 6.2% from the European Commission. The remaining portion of the funding is derived from diverse sources such as the World Bank, with smaller percentages from the Governments of Japan, Canada, and Australia, as well as the Disasters Emergency Committee and (UK) etc...(OCHA services, 2022).



Amounts shown for the current year (far right bar) are for the year to date. No data is shown in years where there was no plan/appeal.

Figure 4. Trends in coordinated plan requirements for Afghanistan in 2023 (OCHA services, 2023)

Figure 4 presents a comprehensive overview of the requirements for coordinated plans in the Afghanistan Humanitarian Response Plan for the year 2023. The data illustrates the correlation between the funding received through coordinated plan funding and the unmet requirements for each year spanning from 2016 to 2024. In 2023, the funding needs were only fulfilled by 46%, resulting in a shortfall of 54%. The projected funding needed for 2023 is slightly below \$4 billion. As of 2024, only a minuscule proportion (2.6%) of the requirements has been fulfilled thus far. The years 2021 and 2022 exhibit higher rates of compliance, with percentages of 97% and 76% respectively, indicating more efficient allocation of funds during those years in comparison to 2023 and 2024 (OCHA services, 2023).

3. Methodology and description of case study

3.1. Research methodology

The primary objective of this paper is to scrutinize and question the efficacy of poverty resilience initiatives implemented in Afghanistan, with a particular focus on evaluating the impact of the Resilience and Food Systems (RFS) – phase 1, project—funded by WFP—on long-term poverty mitigation. Owing to the scarcity of accessible data within the country and the limited timeframe for the study, a comprehensive analysis was conducted, centering on the operations of a single national NGO in Afghanistan—referred to herein as ABCO (Afghan Bureau Collaboration Office). ABCO was chosen based on its extensive 30 years of experience in the field, being recognized as one of the largest national NGOs operating in Afghanistan since 1993. It has established partnerships with over 15 UN organizations, INGOs, and local NGOs, with a budget exceeding \$15 million between 2020 and 2024.

The case study examined a resilience initiative implemented by ABCO known as the "Resilience and Food System (RFS)—Jawzjan" project. This project received funding from WFP and implemented its first phase in Afghanistan between 2022 and 2023 and the second phase commenced in August 2023 and is scheduled to conclude in Dec. 2024.

The case study analysis utilized Yin's (1994) methodology, as prescribed by K. Yin (2018). This method is designed to provide clear explanations, with a specific focus on clarifying the connection between the NGO's project and the reduction of poverty. As the utilization of qualitative research methodology is deemed beneficial for assessing the alignment between organizational context, project management implementation, and organizational strategy (Aubry, M., et al., 2012), this research employed a qualitative approach. This involved conducting comprehensive interviews with key stakeholders, including country program manager, project managers, project coordinators, and eleven beneficiaries of the specified project.

Utilizing purposive sampling can bolster the credibility of research findings among stakeholders and strengthen the rigor of the study (Denieffe, S. 2020). In this research, purposive sampling was employed to select beneficiaries from ABCO's beneficiary database, ensuring their relevance to the paper's objectives. Furthermore, data and documents provided by ABCO, such as project completion reports, project evaluations, and external auditor evaluations, were thoroughly examined.

3.2. Afghan Bureau Collaboration Office (ABCO) overview

Afghan Bureau Collaboration Office (ABCO) founded in 1993 to assist in the reconstruction, bolstering resilience of livelihoods, and improving food security for communities impacted by internal conflicts and poverty in Afghanistan. Initially established as the Afghan Building Construction/Association (ABC), it underwent subsequent name modifications over time, eventually transforming into its present form as ABCO. ABCO has been actively engaged in multiple crucial sectors of development in Afghanistan since its establishment. ABCO has successfully executed and is currently implementing projects in 4 regions (South, North, Eastern, and West) of Afghanistan, both on-site and off-site, for more than 30 years. With a team of 240 members working across these regions throughout Afghanistan, ABCO continues its commitment to serving communities and promoting development (ABCO, n.d).

The NGO has effectively implemented projects financed by various entities such as UN agencies, international banks, ministries, international NGOs, USAID, ISAF, FAO, UNHCR, WFP, UNDP, ARD, IOM, Relief Int, UNAMA, OPS, ADB, UNFPA, UNOPS, and other international organizations active in Afghanistan. ABCO's dedication to achieving high standards and ethical conduct is emphasized by the acknowledgement it has received from multiple benefactors, including official certifications from UN organizations like WFP and United States Agency for International Development (USAID). ABCO maintains a commendable level of transparency, as it has undergone audits by international organizations such as UNDP and WFP to ensure adherence to standards and transparency. ABCO projects such as Cash+, School Feeding and disaster risk reduction (DRR) projects benefited over 178,000 beneficiaries with a budget of \$7,028,947 between 2020 and 2023.

3.3. ABCO's initiatives in poverty mitigation

ABCO collaborates with international donors and local and UN organizations to implement various initiatives throughout Afghanistan's 4 regions: South, North, Eastern, and West. These efforts seek to rebuild communities and strengthen the ability of people who have been greatly affected by internal conflicts to withstand and recover from challenges to their way of life, including ensuring access to food and alleviating poverty. These activities (Table 1) mostly target school children, women, and families deprived from conflicts and economic crisis in Afghanistan by transferring cash assistance to families with pregnant and lactating women with children under the age of two, implementing resilience and food systems programs, providing community support and resilience against natural disasters through DRR, training and distribution of emergency response packages, distributing financial aid to internally displaced businesses, returnees, and host communities, facilitating and distributing financial aid to support education, offering training in carpet weaving, basic business, and marketing, providing carpentry training in basic business and marketing skills, undertaking water supply projects, constructing schools and blood banks, rehabilitating maternity hospitals and existing schools, repairing roads, distributing commodities, implementing district drought response programs, and constructing irrigation culverts.

3.4. Case study description

“Resilience and Food Systems (RFS) —AF01-1492/2022/ACL-CBT/ABCO/Jawzjan-phase one” project funded by the World Food Program (WFP) was considered for the case study in this research. In partnership with the WFP, ABCO allocated \$1,685,258 to support communities in the Jawzjan Province of Afghanistan, covering several villages of Darzab (Moghul, Awlad, Uzbegi, and Qarai), Qushtepa (Chigher, Khanqa, and Bigsar), Khamyab (Mardaq, Dewqala, Chopletepa, Aqmasjid, and Bosagha), and Qarqin (Kawk, Khanqepa, Shortepa, and Dinar), totaling sixteen project sites. This project aimed to enhance agricultural productivity and food security for 4,500 local farmers, laborers and for almost 19,684 direct and indirect beneficiaries through sustainable land and water management practices.

The project employed vulnerable local community members and beneficiaries, offering them labor in exchange for Food Assistance for Assets (FFA) and training (Food for Training - FFT) over a period of 12 months (July 2022 to July 2023). The main activities of the project were divided into three categories:

1. Community Based Participatory Planning (CBPP): This was a method for engaging the community in planning the project to ensure that it met their needs.
2. Food for Work (FFA): Included various construction and agriculture-related activities such as building canal retaining walls, terraces, orchards, solar wells, and engaging in kitchen gardening and compost making. This was designed to provide food or benefits to participants in exchange for their labor as a poverty reduction approach.
3. Smallholder Agricultural Market Support (SAMS): This included the distribution of improved seeds and saplings, hermetic bags (likely for grain storage), establishing savings groups, farmer trainings, and interventions at the market level to improve linkages and support.

The project built and rehabilitated infrastructure critical for agriculture, such as irrigation canals, retaining walls, and access roads, positively impacting over 2,000 hectares of farmland. Furthermore, the project supported market access for smallholder farmers (Smallholder Agricultural Market Support - SAMS) by providing improved agricultural inputs, establishing savings groups, and improving market linkages. An additional component included training farmers on sustainable farming techniques and nutrition-sensitive agriculture, aiming to enhance long-term resilience and food security.

The project distributed 100 metric tons of food supplies and disbursed cash payments totaling \$1,021,083 to participants. The overall fund allocation for this project was set at \$1,685,258, ensuring a broad and impactful reach across the province for almost 19,684 direct and indirect beneficiaries.

3.5. Description of sample beneficiaries

ABCO has granted authorization for the survey and research on the RFS project to be conducted for this study. Furthermore, ABCO supplied additional reports and documents required for the study. The sample beneficiaries selected for this study were intentionally chosen to provide a diverse representation of individuals participating in the Resilience and Food Systems project. Comprising 11 participants, the sample includes 5 females and 6 males, aged between 33 and 65 years old. These beneficiaries represent a diverse group of individuals from various districts of the Jawzjan province of Afghanistan, reflecting the project's broad reach and impact. They have been actively engaged in a range of initiatives such as land reclamation, kitchen gardening, orchard establishment, and wheat distribution, all of which have played pivotal roles in transforming their lives. Collectively, these narratives showcase the outcomes achieved through diverse interventions aimed

at enhancing agricultural productivity, promoting economic empowerment, ensuring food security, and addressing poverty in Afghanistan.

4. Results and Discussion

The Country Program Manager, Mr. Mohammad Amer, reported that the outcome of the project reveals a significant advancement in gender-inclusive employment practices within the targeted areas. A total of 288 women were effectively employed for kitchen gardening; 150 in Darzab, 76 in Qushtepa, 126 in Qarqin, and 86 in Khamab, indicating a substantial increase in women's participation in economic activities. Despite existing prohibitions on female employment (UN, 2023), the project successfully obtained local exemptions for female personnel, enabling their engagement in essential roles such as training, supervision, and monitoring. This accomplishment demonstrates the project's ability to navigate regulatory challenges and promote gender equality in the workforce. Moreover, women constituted 25% of the recipients of Food for Assets (FFA) and Cash-Based Transfers (CBT) within the project's local committees. Additionally, six savings groups exclusively for women were established, with 150 members in Darzab and 76 members in Qushtepa, highlighting the project's commitment to fostering financial inclusion and empowerment among female beneficiaries. The farmers and employees were selected for the project based on their vulnerability within the community, as well as their status as local inhabitants. The primary objective of the project extended beyond the mere distribution of funds and other advantages. It aimed to cultivate a sense of communal cohesion and solidarity among the recipients.

Table 2 demonstrates how these beneficiaries achieved success through various initiatives of the RFS project implemented by ABCO-WFP, aimed at improving agricultural productivity, economic empowerment, food security, and interventions for poverty mitigation in Afghanistan.

Table 2. Summary of Outcomes from Survey

No.	Beneficiary	Age	Gender	Location	Focus Area	Created Impact
1	Bibi Zainab	37	Female	Qarqin	Laborer to landowner	Became a landowner, expressing gratitude.
2	Khudai Nazar	40	Male	Qarqin	RFS activities	Enhanced agricultural production and market access.
3	Noor Mohammad	62	Male	Qarqin	Reclaiming land, landowner	Reclaimed land lost to flooding, rebuilt life as landowner.
4	Agha Mohammad	51	Male	Khamab	Transformation of barren lands	Transformed barren lands into flourishing fields.
5	Taza Gul	57	Female	Qarqin	Kitchen gardening	Achieved success through kitchen gardening, improved life quality.
6	Oghol Jan	45	Female	Khamab	Kitchen gardening, income generation	Gained fresh produce and additional income from surplus vegetables.
7	Sabira	40	Female	Darzab	Women empowerment, kitchen gardening	Empowered women for economic independence and poverty reduction.
8	Durdi Khal	55	Female	Qushtepa	Kitchen gardening for single mothers	Empowered single mothers, leading to more stable lives and financial independence.
9	Mohammad Naem	43	Male	Darzab	Orchard establishment	Positive impact on life and community through orchard establishment.
10	Mohammad Nabi	33	Male	Qushtepa	Economic/environmental benefits of orchards	Economic and environmental benefits from orchard establishment.
11	Abdul Rahman	65	Male	Khamab	Modern agricultural practices, wheat distribution	Transformative impact on agriculture through modern practices and wheat distribution.
12	Bibi Zainab	37	Female	Qarqin	Laborer to landowner	Became a landowner, expressing gratitude.

13	KhudaiNazar	40	Male	Qarqin	RFS activities	Enhanced agricultural production and market access.
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Mr. Mohammad Amer also highlighted that the RFS project activities supported the development and empowerment of beneficiaries in several aspects. Individuals transitioned to landownership, agricultural production flourished, alongside enhanced market access. Efforts were made to reclaim land lost to flooding, rebuilding lives as landowners, and transforming barren lands into thriving fields. Kitchen gardening initiatives yielded success, improving overall life quality. Women were empowered for economic independence and poverty reduction, while single mothers found stability and financial independence. Orchard establishment brought about positive community impacts and economic/environmental benefits. Transformative agricultural practices, including wheat distribution, further contributed to the advancement of agriculture and livelihoods.

The project coordinator, Mr. Hedyatullah, who was present at the job site and maintained regular communication with the workers and beneficiaries, provided a report on their financial situation. All beneficiaries of the RFS project were farmers and individuals who either became landowners or significantly enhanced their capacity through the project's efforts, highlighting a key aspect of its developmental focus. Previously facing challenges in development and empowerment, these individuals received the necessary assistance and created impactful changes as outlined in Table 2.

A 55-year-old single mother, Durdi Khal, residing in Qushtepa, emphasized how the project's kitchen gardening initiatives have empowered women like herself, providing them with opportunities for stability and the vision of future financial independence. Similarly, Agha Mohammad, a 51-year-old man from Khamab, shared his experience of witnessing barren lands being transformed into thriving fields through the RFS activities within this project, expressing gratitude for the support provided by WFP and ABCO in this endeavor.

The outcomes of the interviews and the findings (Table 2 and 3) clearly indicate that a larger portion of participants reported an improvement in their economic situation during the project's duration, they also receive financial aid intermittently from NGOs and donors, sometimes in exchange for labor.

Table 3. A summary of findings

Interventions	Major outcomes
Stone Masonry Retaining/Protection Walls	Various lengths and volumes of stone masonry, benefiting thousands of households and aiding in irrigation.
Orchard Establishment	64 orchards across 86 Jerib(acre) of land, transforming fallow lands into horticultural areas, benefiting 64 farmers in 7locations.
Kitchen Gardening and Compost Making	150 kitchen gardens established, significantly improving nutritional intake in 150 number households.
Watershed Management	44,156 trenches excavated, more than 4,000 small check dams built for flood and erosion control.
Farmer Field Schools and Technical Trainings	173 trainings conducted on various agricultural topics, enhancing 500 local farmers' skills and practices.
Savings Groups	Five savings groups established, focusing on collective financial management and resilience.
Nutrition-Social Behavior Change Sessions	32 sessions conducted, promoting healthier diets and agricultural practices.
Distribution of Agricultural Inputs	Distribution of seeds, bags, fertilizers, and saplings to 73 local farmers and beneficiaries, aimed at boosting production and diversity.
Land Reclamation	Reclamation of barren lands into fertile agricultural lands, employing hundreds of laborers.
Job employment for women	Despite recent prohibitions on female employment in Afghanistan (UN, 2023), ABCO achieved local exemptions enabling female personnel to engage in essential roles like training, supervision, and monitoring, showcasing the RFS project's success in promoting gender equality amidst regulatory challenges.
Fund allocation and impact	The overall fund allocation for this project was set at \$1,685,258, ensuring a broad and impactful reach across the province for 4,500 local farmers, laborers and for almost 19,684 direct and indirect beneficiaries through sustainable land and water management practices.

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Appendix

Part 1: Survey questions for beneficiaries:

- What was your primary occupation and life condition before joining the program?
- Have you found employment opportunities since the conclusion of the program?
- How has ABCO's intervention impacted your livelihood or living conditions?
- Can you share any success stories or positive changes that have occurred as a result of this intervention?
- How did you first learn about and become involved in the program?
- How do you envision your prospects or opportunities with continued support from ABCO and other organizations?

Part 2: Interview questions with project managers, country program manager, and coordinators of the NGO:

- How would you describe the overall objectives of ABCO's intervention in poverty mitigation in Afghanistan?
- What specific strategies or interventions has ABCO implemented to address poverty in Afghanistan?
- What is the RFS project and objectives?
- How are beneficiaries selected in projects?
- How does ABCO collaborate with other NGOs and UN organizations in its poverty mitigation efforts?
- How does ABCO ensure the sustainability of its poverty reduction initiatives in Afghanistan?
- Can you provide examples of successful outcomes or achievements resulting from ABCO's intervention in poverty reduction?
- In your opinion, what role do NGOs and UN organizations play in achieving long-term poverty reduction goals in Afghanistan?

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