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Food Security and Religion: Role of Mosques

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Background

Defined as “the state of being without reliable access to a sufficient quantity of affordable nutritious food”, food security remains a critical issue throughout Afghanistan.(1) Food aid by international agencies active in Afghanistan is insufficient to feed all of those in need. The Afghan government provides food and other forms of basic assistance mostly in emergencies such as earthquakes and floods or through its limited winterization plan during the winter season in some of the provinces.

Recent assessments of food security in Afghanistan paint a dire – and deteriorating – situation, particularly in the pre-harvest winter season.(2) Since the withdrawal of the international security forces at the end of 2014, economic performance has been sluggish while the poverty rate has steadily increased. Food insecurity is on the rise, with almost six percent of Afghans, around 1.6 million people, severely food insecure and another 34 percent moderately food insecure. Food insecurity is expected to continue to increase as a result of ongoing internal displacement, returnee migration, further economic slowdown, a depressed labor market, and climate change.

Recent Seasonal Food Security Assessments indicate that for the first time, food insecurity in Afghanistan is more prevalent in urban centers than in rural areas, with nearly 42 percent of urban households either severely or moderately food insecure, in comparison to 39 percent of rural households. In rural areas the landless farmers and small landholders are the most vulnerable, while unskilled workers including daily laborers and petty traders are most affected by food insecurity in urban and peri-urban settings. The most vulnerable groups for food insecurity are female-headed households (59 percent food insecure), disabled headed households (39 percent food insecure and 25 percent severely food insecure), and households living in tents (74 percent food insecure).

Forty percent of children under five years of age are said to be chronically malnourished.(3) Provinces vary in the severity of local food insecurity, with the most acute needs identified in Badakhshan, Ghor, Helmand, Bamyan, Nangarhar, Daikundi, Nimruz and Laghman provinces.(4) Some of the increasing food insecurity levels detected in 2016 may have been as a result of limited funding for food aid, which led to World Food Programme (WFP) targeting only the most

- (1) From Poncin, A. (2016), Seasonal Food Security Assessment, Food Security and Agriculture Cluster, Kabul, Afghanistan, available from: https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/system/files/documents/files/sfsa_2016_final_report.pdf
- (2) United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA, June 2016). Humanitarian Bulletin Afghanistan, 53(1), and Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET, July 2016), Food Assistance Outlook Brief (Washington, DC: FEWS NET)
- (3) WFP (2016). Afghanistan Country Brief, available from: <http://documents.wfp.org/stellent/groups/public/documents/ep/wfp269062~10.pdf>
- (4) IPC Global Support Unit. (July 2016). IPC Afghanistan – Final Version: Acute Food Insecurity Situation Overview, Current (April- June 2016) and Projection (July-December 2016). Kabul: MAIL.

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vulnerable and to reduce some of its nationwide planned program activities.

Despite the efforts of various organizations, formal food aid programming to date appears to have been inadequate due to insufficiency and uneven distribution, prioritizing the displaced and the disaster-stricken while largely neglecting areas with chronic food insecurity.

Informal Food Aid

There remains a tradition throughout the country for wealthier families to assist poorer neighbors and relatives through food and clothing donations, particularly around religious and traditional ceremonies and events. In some rural communities, *zakat*, obligatory Islamic alms, is collected by the elders and distributed among the extremely poor.

The wealthy and the business people also provide food aid at the local level from time to time. This type of aid is sometimes need-driven but mostly tied to religious events, holidays and celebrations such as *eid ul fetr* at the end of Ramadan with food being made available to everyone in the community. The food distributed in conjunction with special events and Islamic holidays is does not distinguish between the food secure and the food insecure, however.

Mosques and Food Aid

Mosques do not have dedicated funds for providing food aid directly to those in need, while mosque authorities view themselves as recipients of aid from ordinary people, the wealthy, the Ministry of Hajj and Religious Affairs and others for food, fuel, electricity, carpets, and construction and repair of the mosque. There is no evidence to suggest that there is a formal role for mosques in addressing food insecurity.

Some mosques, typically those located in urban areas, are “government mosques” and receive financial support from the Ministry of Hajj and Religious Affairs. Other mosques are supported only through community donations. Community donations to mosques are generally given for specific purposes. Coordination between mosques and community elders and wealthier community members as charity givers is thought to be good, though informal and *ad hoc*.

Food security and its monitoring, when they are carried out, do not appear to include coordination or collaboration with mosques or mullahs in a systemic or systematic manner. Mosques do not have dedicated financial or material resources to provide food aid for their communities. Mosques are only involved in food assistance during Islamic holidays, based on contributions made by the wealthier community members. A number of the socially aware mullahs also encourage the wealthier community members to help the poor.

Mosques could play an instrumental role in addressing food insecurity through organized and systematic awareness-raising and advocacy for donations from the wealthy to those in need, identifying the families in the community most in need of food assistance, and ensuring transparency and accountability in food distribution.

During humanitarian emergencies, mosques are well placed to identify those most affected by a crisis, facilitating more timely and effective assistance. There are reports of mosques’ loudspeakers, used usually for call to prayers, being used in the event of a crisis or natural disaster to alert the broader community and responsible authorities to people’s emergency needs. As such, mullahs and mosques can play a key role in matching assistance from food aid agencies with families in need.

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Recommendations

Many mullahs are receptive to more formal prioritization of the issue of food security in their work, especially if supported and authorized to do so by the Ministry of Hajj and Religious Affairs or the government more generally. Three specific measures could be taken by the Ministry of Hajj and Religious Affairs:

Recommendation 1: Initiate a nationwide consultation process to explore closer, formal collaboration between food aid organizations and mosques.

Recommendation 2: Work with religious authorities on the possibility of apportioning some funds collected through *zakat*, for example, to provide food assistance for the community members most in need.

Recommendation 3: Provide support to mosques willing to run food distribution centers or community kitchens for the most food insecure.

One obstacle to mosques assuming a more active and formal role in food security is that this role is unspecified and

where it is in existence, it is voluntary. Efforts should be made by the Ministry of Hajj and Religious Affairs and food aid agencies on two fronts to formalize this role:

Recommendation 4: Mullahs should be asked to accept community donations for food security and play a lead role in distributing them and accounting for the distribution.

Recommendation 5: Sub-national food assistance program implementation should explore more direct involvement of mosques as local implementing partners.

Publicize Best Practices of Mosques Assisting in Food Security:

Recommendation 6: The media should be alerted to worthy examples of mosques and their congregations implementing creative solutions to addressing the problem of food insecurity at a local, community level.