

GoI has been the primary actor supporting Afghans in Iran. Its service provision outweighs that of any humanitarian and development actors. This level of support has been consistent despite the worsening economic crisis triggered by the US unilateral sanctions in 2018. While the economic situation is disproportionately affecting Afghans who, due to their status, are more vulnerable to economic downturns and rising unemployment rates, the additional hardships posed by COVID-19 have likewise further compounded the vulnerability of many Iranians.

In spite of GoI's commendable commitments as hosts, the extreme challenges posed by the current context represent a risk to the inclusive health and education policies in place.

2.2. Problem Analysis

Education: Despite the 2015 decree granting access to education to all Afghan children regardless of legal status, limited space and resources add to the continued strain on the public education system. Existing access limitations for Afghan children, often stemming from household financial pressures, are further exacerbated by COVID-19. Face to face learning has been largely on hold as of end February 2020. It is expected that many Iranian and Afghan children, especially those who already faced barriers to education, will find it even harder to go back to school. As reported by the Ministry of Education, 3.2 million students (21%) were left out of distance learning as they lacked access to devices and/or sustainable internet access. Among these approximately 300,000 are refugees/migrants. Students are in need of safe and improved learning environments where cognitive, social, and emotional skills are developed to be able to get the education process back on track. To illustrate, Relief International (RI) conducted an assessment to measure the impact of COVID-19 on Afghan households in mid-2020; among 7,500 households interviewed in 7 provinces, 13.4% of households had a child primary breadwinner and they reported dropping out of school as a coping mechanism. In addition, observational data on the impact of COVID-19 on the education of vulnerable children has included increases in psychosocial stress and need for support, lack of media literacy and awareness among children and lack of support at household level. Moreover, there are unofficial reports indicating preschool registration rates have dropped drastically, which means many children would be registering at Grade 1 next year without having learned basic skills.

Health: Afghan populations in Iran demonstrate higher incidence of poor health conditions relative to general population, improper dietary behaviours, physical and mental health disorders all contributing to increased vulnerability. Despite policy improvements, Afghans already face severe barriers in accessing health care. This is compounded by the restrictions enacted to mitigate COVID-19, on top of an already costly healthcare system. One of the most critical constraints is lack of information about services, which has further deteriorated in the context of the pandemic. The primary challenge remains the cost of healthcare in a context of dwindling resources. A large-scale survey done by Relief International in 2020 demonstrated that limiting health expenses was the primary negative coping mechanism amongst vulnerable households when faced with COVID-19, with 49% of households surveyed reporting limiting health spending in 2020. Many refugees report they cannot afford insurance due to lack of adequate documentation, which results in untimely visit to health facilities and the aversion to be hospitalized, even in severe cases. As a result, preventable illnesses reach critical levels requiring life-saving interventions which are hugely costly and often exacerbate the poverty cycle for affected families. Studies have noted a decline in the number of Afghans accessing clinical care in health facilities; in addition to financial restrictions other severe constraints reported include fear that accessing health services will result in deportation for the undocumented, and in some communities, preferences for cultural healers¹⁶.

Women in particular face health issues associated with reproductive and sexual health. Socioeconomic disadvantages and comorbidities worsen the negative pregnancy outcomes among vulnerable Afghans while Iranian health resources have been inadequate to provide universal coverage for public – including reproductive - health. According to assessments the majority of reproductive and sexual health cases reaching health facilities had already developed a critical condition upon arrival.¹⁷

Livelihoods: Financial security and ability to generate income remain significant challenges for Afghan households in Iran with increasing numbers resorting to negative coping mechanisms as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and restrictions on public life. Assessments by NRC and RI conducted during 2020 highlight decreased access to income generation for vulnerable people. According to RI's assessment, 64% stated that the main breadwinner of the

¹⁶ Hosseini Divkolaye, N. S., & Burkle, F. M., Jr (2017). The Enduring Health Challenges of Afghan Immigrants and Refugees in Iran: A Systematic Review. PLoS currents, 9, ecurrents.dis.449b4c549951e359363a90a7f4cf8fc4. <https://doi.org/10.1371/currents.dis.449b4c549951e359363a90a7f4cf8fc4>

¹⁷ Mohammadi S, Carlom A, Taheripناه R and EssénB (2017) Experiences of inequitable care among Afghan mothers surviving near-miss morbidity in Tehran, Iran: a qualitative interview study. International Journal for Equity in Health (2017) 16:121 DOI 10.1186/s12939-017-0617-8.