

National and International Response to COVID-19: A Case Study of Afghanistan

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the co-ordination of national and international response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Afghanistan which has affected the global economy, politics, education, religious activities and all other aspects of individuals' life today. World Health Organization (WHO) records suggest that 21.9 million people have been affected by COVID where 775,893 of them have lost succumbed to death worldwide. Although masses did not believe in veracity of the Pandemic in Afghanistan, there have been 37,599 confirmed cases and 1,375 deaths in the country, with unofficial numbers hitting millions., reported by WHO. In order to cope with consequences of the Pandemic, Afghanistan received support from international community, including but not limited to, United States, Turkey, China, and international organizations such as WHO, the World Bank, ADB, UNAMA, IOM, nonetheless, the situation was mishandled by the Government of Afghanistan. This paper attempts to evaluate and investigate the response and the manner of treatment of the situation overall in Afghanistan. Therefore, the first section deals with Afghan Government's response to the Pandemic; whereas the second section covers the international commitments to counter the ramifications of COVID-19 in Afghanistan and the third section is a critical analysis conclusion of the national and international response. This paper is produced using secondary data, which includes primarily reports of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the World Bank, media articles and news items.

Keywords: COVID-19, Pandemic, National and International Response

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Introduction

The Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic is described by UNDP as “the defining global health crisis of our time” and the greatest challenge world has faced post World War II.¹ COVID-19 has put its negative impact on economy of the world and affected the under-developed countries more. Afghanistan is one of the under-developed countries which needed the foreign assistance in such situation. This paper focuses on the Foreign aid responses to COVID-19: The Case Study of Afghanistan and critically analysis the ways of spending the huge amount of foreign aids for overcoming this pandemic. As coronavirus is a new issue which the entire world is facing many studies has been done in other countries but in Afghanistan the papers about this pandemic is less so, this paper will provide the information about amount of foreign aids which Afghanistan Government received to fight COVID – 19.

2. Afghanistan’s Local Response to COVID-19

The Government of Afghanistan established an Emergency Committee for Prevention of Covid-19 mandated to assess the situation and initiate relevant actions. Afghan government prevented price gouging and controlled the price of essential items such as foodstuff and consumables in coordination with private sector. Since Herat Province, in the western Afghanistan neighboring Iran, had the most cases of Covid19, A budget of 400 million Afghanis was allocated as emergency response for the province. Another 20 million Afghanis was planned to be allocated to each province of the central zone namely Kabul, Parwan, Kapisa and Maidan Wardak for fighting the spread of covid-19².

According to Finance Ministry spokesperson Shamroz Khan Masjidi, the government of Afghanistan approved Afs 89.9 billion (over \$1.1 billion) as part of a financial package to fight the coronavirus, with Afs30 billion (\$392 million) coming from the existing government budget, and the remaining Afs60 billion (\$785 million) from international donors.

Moreover, the government of Afghanistan invested Afs 13.7 billion (\$179 million) in agriculture with the help of the Ministry of Agriculture in order to overcome the negative impacts of coronavirus in the agriculture sector. With this vast investment government wants to increase the use of domestic products, create permanent job for around 60,000 people, and ban the import of some goods including fruit juice and up to 130 tons of fruit and vegetables will be processed in domestic factories with in the upcoming 8 months³. The proposed Afghanistan COVID-19 Emergency Response and Health Systems Preparedness Project aims to respond and mitigate the

threat posed by COVID-19 in Afghanistan and strengthen national systems for public health preparedness. This project has the following components:

- 1: Emergency COVID-19 Response:** The aim of this component is to slow down and limit as much as possible the spread of COVID-19 in the country. This will be achieved through providing immediate support to enhance disease detection capacities through increasing surveillance capacities, provision of technical expertise, strengthening laboratory and diagnostic systems to ensure prompt case finding and local containment.
- 2: Health Care Strengthening:** The aim of this component is to strengthen essential health care service delivery to be able to provide the best care possible for people who become ill despite a surge in demand. It will also ensure ongoing support for people ill in the community to minimize the overall impact of the disease on society, public services and on the economy⁴.
- 3: Mitigation of Social Impact:** This component will address significant negative externalities expected in the event of a widespread COVID-19 outbreak and include comprehensive communication strategies. The primary focus will be on addressing social distancing measures such as avoiding large social gatherings and should the need arise, school closings to mitigate against the possible negative impacts on children's learning and wellbeing.
- 4: Implementation Management and Monitoring and Evaluation:** Support for the strengthening of public structures for the coordination and management of the project would be provided, including central and local (decentralized) arrangements for coordination of activities, financial management and procurement. This component would also support monitoring and evaluation of prevention and preparedness, building capacity for clinical and public health research, and joint-learning across and within countries. As may be needed, this component will also support third-party monitoring of progress.

3. International Responses

According to a press release on April 02nd, 2020, World Bank approved a \$100.4 million grant for Afghanistan COVID-19 Emergency Response and Health Systems Preparedness Project to help Afghanistan take effective action to respond to the threat posed by COVID-19. The project is financed by International Development Association (IDA) and World Bank Group (WBG), \$19.4 million of \$100.4 million is provided by WBG⁵. This project will be implemented by Ministry of Public Health, Afghanistan with the support of UN agencies and Sehatmandi Project.

World Health Organization in coordination with the Ministry of Public Health, Afghanistan assists the health sector and its partners since January, 2020 regarding COVID-19 on preparedness and has massively expanded its assistance in key areas in eight pillars of the WHO Phase 2 plan. WHO closely worked with Vice Presidential Task Force assisting the overall COVID-19 response of the Government of Afghanistan, together with United Nations and other partners. During this critical situation, WHO has supported Afghanistan with equipping ventilators, oxygen concentrators, infrared thermometer, personal protection equipment, N95 masks, hand rubs, high voltage power generator, medical kits, test kits, infrared containers and thermography cameras across the hospitals available in all regions of the country. WHO, together with the Health Cluster, has developed and is implementing a COVID-19 preparedness plan to complement the Ministry of Public Health's Emergency Response Plan for Coronavirus 2020⁶.

In regard to the COVID-19 responses done by international organizations it worth mentioning that IOM in close partnership with Ministry of Public Health and the World Health Organization, was responding actively to COVID-19 in Afghanistan. Over 100 health staff was deployed to border level surveillance, health facility-based interventions and mobile health teams were appointed to help the Afghan nation during this crisis. If temperature checks and symptom screening identify a suspected case, they will be referred by an IOM ambulance to the nearest designated isolation facility. The same applies in IOM's migrant transit centers⁷. IOM appealed additional 5 million US dollars in financial support from donor partners to scale up lifesaving COVID-19 responses actions in Afghanistan.

According to a report by TOLO NEWS, The World Bank and International community have agreed after discussions to provide aid packages worth of \$300 million⁸. Abdul Hadi Arghandiwal, the acting minister of finance of Afghanistan stated that the government will distribute this amount of money in cash payments or food packages to those in needs.

A Turkish armed forces aircraft, carrying medical supplies reached Afghanistan as a friendly gesture by the president Tayyip Erdogan. These supplies are sent to use against the COVID-19 outbreak in Afghanistan. These supplies are consists of ventilators, defibrillators, oxygen regulators, PCR machines, nebulizers test kits, N95 masks and other surgical and normal masks⁹. These humanitarian aids will surely help nation of Afghanistan in such situation.

As being part of this crisis, the Chinese ambassador to Kabul has appreciated his country's continuance support to Afghanistan in the outbreak of COVID-19. 7.2 ton medical supplies was donated by China, including emergency equipment for this pandemic, such as test kits, masks, protective clothes, goggles and infrared thermometers¹⁰.

According to the statement of US embassy in Kabul the United States has allocated more than \$36.7 million to help the people of Afghanistan respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, and expedited \$90 million in continued development assistance through the World Bank to support Afghanistan's national health and education sectors and local government needs. The aim these funding to Afghanistan is to deal with the effects of COVID-19 and to prevent the further spread of COVID-19; attend to the sick; put people back to work; and protect vulnerable women and children, who can become victims of rising domestic violence in these kinds of situations. The statement said this funding builds on resources previously announced by US Secretary of State, Mr. Pompeo for COVID-19 response in Afghanistan.

More than \$19.1 million of the fund will be spent on health and international disaster assistance to support the detection and treatment of COVID-19, as well as protection and health support for internally displaced persons; nearly \$3.1 million in migrant and refugee assistance for Afghan returnees; \$500,000 to procure COVID-19 prevention and control supplies for correctional facilities; and \$14 million in existing economic support funds to support the Afghan government's nationwide response to COVID-19, according to the statement.

The \$90 million fund will be available from the World Bank for continued health and education services during the pandemic; to enable citizen-led Community Development Councils to meet sanitation and infrastructure needs; and to support the health sector in maintaining emergency services and strengthening disease surveillance, testing, and treatment, the statement said¹¹.

4. Critical Analysis

4.1. Challenges

1. In a developing country like Afghanistan where corruption is high this amount of budget which is allocated for agriculture sector must be spent in a transparent way in order to increase the domestic products and create more jobs.
2. The funds and aids provided by the States and other international organization were reactive actions. Afghanistan, being third world country needed such aids as soon as possible the fight the pandemic and

decreases the positive cases and dead due to this pandemic. Over the past two decades, the spending of foreign funds through the government's budget has been a disputed issue between the Afghan government and international donors. It may not be acceptable for the international community, recently the World Bank announced \$20 million in aid to Afghanistan, but so far the World Bank has not allowed the allocation of the funds, because the government doesn't have a proper mechanism for it.

3. Millions of dollars have been funded for Afghanistan since the start of this pandemic to decrease the rate of positive cases and to provide medical assistance for the nation, but in last days most of the hospitals in the country announced that they are running out of compressed oxygen for patients. "The oxygen lasts for only five minutes, and then we are asked to go to private hospitals. Even if there is oxygen at private hospitals, I must buy the oxygen for 12,000 afs from my own pocket," said Mohammad Suhrab, a family member of a COVID-19 patient¹². "The companies have different capacities, but they have not shared the actual capacity of producing oxygen with us. The statistics which we have are not sufficient for us," said Wahid Majroh, the deputy Minister of Health.
4. "The companies have major production capacity--some companies are able to produce 300 to 400 and in some cases 600 oxygen balloons daily, one of our companies is able to produce 5,000 balloons of oxygen daily," said Rahimullah Samandar, the head of Afghan Chamber of Commerce and Industries. Lack of oxygen in the country's hospitals for COVID-19 patients who are seriously ill has posed a new challenge to the coronavirus response in Afghanistan, where, according to officials, over 20,000 people are affected¹³. The concern is that by injecting huge amount of money by International Organizations in Afghanistan to support Ministry of Public Health in order to take care of the patients and to decrease the number of deaths due to this pandemic, still people have to spent their own money to buy compressed oxygen and essential medicine for their patients.

4.2. Opinions

A committee should be established that includes; national and international members with a proper policy and mechanism for spending the funds effectively in this time of crisis in Afghanistan. A database of poor people which are jobless or wage day workers must be made by the Ministry of labor and social Affairs because these peoples are more vulnerable and

need more help so, a transparent system must be used to deliver aids to these classes of peoples.

Government of Afghanistan must pay more attention in producing hygiene kits and invest significant amount of money for producing Masks and other related hygiene kit tools. Because the price of masks and gloves are very high in market and all people cannot afford to buy it. The Ministries of education and higher education must focus more on digital learning because in this five months of lockdown students from schools and universities did not studied much more. So, the system for creating digital learning is important. If electronic system of learning was there the students may learn more in these five months of lockdown in their homes.

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