

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

SEISMIC SHIFTS: HOW A HUMANITARIAN SECTOR IN UPHEAVAL RESPONDED TO THE 2025 AFGHANISTAN EARTHQUAKE

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This report is the latest in a series of rapid reviews conducted by Humanitarian Outcomes under the Humanitarian Rapid Research Initiative (HRRRI), commissioned and supported by the UK Humanitarian Innovation Hub (UKHIH)–Elrha with UK Aid from the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO). The review was carried out in September 2025 and encompassed interviews with 39 informants, including 20 in-person meetings with community leaders and residents in the affected areas of Kunar and Nangarhar. The research builds on previous work conducted under the HRRRI project by the [Afghanistan Strategic Learning Initiative \(2023\)](#) and on [Navigating Ethical Dilemmas in Afghanistan \(June 2023\)](#).

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The earthquake that struck eastern Afghanistan on 31 August 2025 was a devastating shock for the mountain communities of Kunar and Nangarhar, and a test for the humanitarian sector operating under radically changed conditions. How would the system respond to a rapid-onset disaster in the context of severe funding cuts and a pariah host state?

A research team examined the crisis response in the weeks following the disaster, conducting on-site interviews with affected people and local responders, as well as national and international humanitarian actors and donor representatives. This report provides an initial snapshot of the response, analysing the challenges and roles of different actors in a radically altered funding landscape as well as the ethical and operational costs of the systematic exclusion of women.



COMPETENT IMMEDIATE RESPONSE, MASKING DEEPER GAPS

The rapid response to the earthquake demonstrated the commitment and professionalism of Afghan and international actors working under extraordinary constraints. Local authorities, community organisations and volunteers mobilised within hours, and most aid groups were operational within two days – an improvement over the Herat earthquake response in 2023. Most interviewees agreed that initial aid reached affected areas promptly and was distributed fairly. However, some reported instances of corruption and diversion, and more significant gaps in coverage and access became evident in the following days and weeks. Several villages took days to access, while others were de-prioritised for aid due to difficulties reaching them. Aid services were centralised in temporary camps for affected people but serious shortfalls persist in emergency shelter (tents), clean water, and medical and mental health care – especially for women – and concerns are mounting about unmet winterisation needs as temperatures drop.



DRAMATICALLY REDUCED FUNDING BASE, THREATENING RECOVERY AND ONGOING SUPPORT

The extent of damage to the international aid system caused by the US dismantling of its foreign aid programme, along with cuts from other major Western donors, is apparent in the weak funding response to the coordinated appeal, led by the United Nations (UN). Although the situation is still evolving, funding for the emergency will be markedly smaller in scale than for past disasters in the country, despite the 2025 earthquake being the deadliest and most destructive in decades. The success of the immediate response relied in part on aid organisations drawing down remaining reserves and reprogramming existing grants. Repurposed funds and depleted stockpiles are unlikely to be fully replenished, leaving future emergency needs and basic services across the country at risk. The longstanding gap between emergency response and recovery will only widen as aid budgets shrink overall. A pattern of emergency-only funding risks entrenching a cycle of crisis response without recovery, eroding the resilience of communities.



CONTINUED AND WORSENING GENDER EXCLUSION

Aid groups largely expressed relief that local authorities did not block the small number of female staff deployed for needs assessment and service provision for women in the affected areas, allowing tents and safe spaces to be set up for women to allow them to access aid and services. Because women are prohibited from interacting with unrelated men, female responders are essential to reach women affected by the disaster, yet systematic restrictions on their participation have sharply reduced their numbers. At the same time as the earthquake response was happening in the east, the female staff of UN agencies elsewhere in the country were facing new barriers. There are fears that restrictions on women could be tightened as the acute phase of the earthquake response subsides.

That the humanitarians saw the de facto authorities' initial tolerance of female aid and medical workers in the response as such good news reflects how the window of acceptability has shifted. After initial outrage and painful internal debate, most aid groups have adjusted and adapted to the Taliban's restrictions on female staff – absorbing the additional costs and delays associated with separate transport, accommodation and *mahrams* (male close relative escorts). While failing to comply would mean expulsion from the country, acceding to each new edict has left aid organisations open to pointed criticism for normalising and appearing complicit in the violation of Afghan women's human rights.



MENTAL HEALTH SEVERELY UNDER-ADDRESSED

Community members interviewed for this review universally reported the disaster's mental health impacts and the urgent need for psychosocial support among traumatised survivors. Yet meeting these needs remains highly challenging given the current funding gaps and restrictions on female aid workers. Addressing the crisis will require new approaches and alternative providers, though remote options are limited by poor internet access. Beyond direct mental health care, restarting schooling, emergency childhood education, safe spaces for women and children, disability inclusion and livelihoods programmes could help to mitigate the psychosocial toll. Mental health provision was inadequate even before the earthquake, and today the system's capacity is even more constrained.



FAILURE TO ADAPT OUTDATED STRUCTURES

This earthquake has exposed how the international humanitarian system, severely impaired by US defunding, struggles to manage medium-scale disasters when an acute shock hits populations already facing protracted crisis. With funding gaps reaching 80%, even after targets have been drastically reduced, current models for appeals, coordination and response are increasingly untenable, and alternative approaches are needed. As aid from traditional donors shrinks, the private sector, civil society and emerging donors are assuming larger roles in supporting Afghans' response to shocks. This increasingly decentralised and multipolar aid landscape will demand a rethink of strategic coordination by traditional humanitarian actors and the UN-centred aid architecture to remain relevant and advance the goals of principled humanitarian action. Area-based approaches that allowed coordinated action and pragmatic engagement with local authorities and communities were seen to be relatively effective, while the greatest shortcomings lie in the chronic funding deficit for recovery and the profoundly inadequate provision of mental health support. Above all, the unresolved tensions and ethical dilemmas of operating within a regime that systematically excludes women creates collective moral injury for the humanitarian sector, demanding change.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this review point to deeper systemic weaknesses than is possible to address with specific operational or technical fixes. The following summary recommendations are therefore necessarily indicative and aim to identify potential constructive ways forward for collective reflection and action in four key areas.



ACTION AREA 1: CONCENTRATE LIMITED CAPACITY AND RESOURCES ON LOCAL RESPONSE SYSTEMS

UN and international NGOs

- **Adopt area-based approaches to operations, coordination and appeals.** Reduce national-level offices and activities to pivot to an area-based operational approach that concentrates limited capacity in a defined geographic area rather than spreading it thin.

National and local humanitarian actors

- **Continue to build domestic capacities for search, rescue and immediate response.** Support and enable access for Afghan and international humanitarian organisations. This requires access for female first responders and aid workers so they can reach women and girls in need, as well as maintaining connectivity as a crucial lifeline for people across Afghanistan to access support.



ACTION AREA 2: DEVELOP COLLECTIVE, PRACTICAL STRATEGIES TO EXPAND WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION AND ACCESS

International and Afghan NGOs

- In collaboration with Afghan civil society actors, work to create standing cadres of trained female outreach workers and pre-established women's spaces to make women's involvement in responses a built-in feature rather than a continual subject of negotiation. Shift from an attitude of reluctant appeasement to subversive solidarity to restore women's rights, as well as the moral agency of humanitarian actors.

Afghan Red Crescent Society and other civil society actors

- Engage with the de facto authorities to defend and expand an operational space that respects humanitarian principles and enables impartiality and independence, including the ability to reach women and girls. The Afghan Red Crescent Society in particular plays a critical auxiliary and bridging role in this space.



ACTION AREA 3: BUILD CAPACITIES TO ADDRESS THE GAP IN MENTAL HEALTH AND PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT SERVICES

UN and international NGOs

- Support Afghan organisations to meet the acute mental health needs of disaster-affected populations through community-based approaches, including training support to deliver it, and establish entry points for addressing the broader social and practical needs of women.



ACTION AREA 4: IDENTIFY, MOBILISE AND ALIGN A WIDER SCOPE OF FUNDING RESOURCES

Donors

- Actively coordinate to aim for coherent and complementary funding strategies and sequencing between humanitarian and recovery phases within a context of reduced resources. Prioritise contributions to pooled funds – including but not limited to the UN Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) and Afghanistan Humanitarian Fund – and strengthen these mechanisms to better support immediate response needs while planning early for the transition to recovery financing.
- Encourage the participation of government donors outside the traditional Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Development Assistance Committee ('non-DAC' donors) in pooled and anticipatory financing mechanisms to broaden the donor base and increase overall funding levels.

International financial institutions

- Prepare to engage earlier in post-disaster contexts where traditional humanitarian funding is insufficient or depleted. Work with humanitarian and donor counterparts to sequence financing instruments more deliberately, ensuring that concessional and recovery financing can follow humanitarian spending without delay. Support coherence across funding streams to sustain essential operations and enable recovery.



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