

Afghan Diaspora Response to Natural Disasters: The Herat Earthquakes

Background

On February 20, 2024, the Danish Refugee Council's Diaspora Programme hosted the webinar "Afghan Diaspora Response to Natural Disasters: The Herat Earthquakes". The series of devastating earthquakes that struck the Western province of Herat affected around 114,000 people, leaving an enormous need for relief efforts (UN OCHA, 2023). In the national context of a 1,3 billion dollar funding gap, the webinar explored how Afghan diaspora organisations and local humanitarian organisations swiftly mobilized and collaborated to provide immediate relief as well as longer-term support to the affected communities.

The 90-minute webinar was moderated by Kabul-based journalist Ali Latifi, Asia Editor at The New Humanitarian, with a diverse panel of six experts and practitioners in the field of humanitarian aid and diaspora engagement. To set the scene, Miralyne Zeghnoune (DRC initiative: Diaspora Emergency Action and Coordination) presented a snapshot from the mapping of Afghan diaspora emergency response to the earthquakes. In the subsequent panel discussion, Nasrat Khalid (ASEEL) presented innovative approaches to garner diaspora support, Ilaha Omar (Uplift Afghanistan Fund) detailed the partnership with Ahmad Mukhtar Sabri (Community Driven Development Organization) on sustainable responses, and Hila Limar (Visions for Children) shared how their successful fundraising efforts resulted in a collaboration with Shahabuddin Hamdard (Organization of Human Welfare) for reconstruction initiatives (see panelist bios in Annex A).

The event saw participation from 40 individuals across 18 different countries, highlighting the global concern and solidarity with the affected populations. This report summarizes the main takeaways that came out of the panel discussion and subsequent Q&A session.

The Scale of the Diaspora Mobilization

Within a week of the earthquakes, diaspora-led organizations had already begun to raise funds, mobilize resources, and deliver essential aid to affected populations, highlighting the swift and effective response of the Afghan diaspora to the crisis. On behalf of Diaspora Emergency Action and Coordination, Research and MEAL Specialist Miralyne Zeghnoune shared the findings from their internal, non-exhaustive, mapping of the diaspora response. During October and November, 38 Afghan diaspora organizations had mobilized funds and goods to respond to humanitarian needs in Herat. The majority originated from the USA, which, as explained by Miralyne, reflects that the US is the main country of emigration for Afghans, after Iran and Pakistan. By December 2023, the diaspora actors identified in the mapping had raised at least 3.4 million USD according to publicly available information online. Most of the diaspora organizations were initially collecting funds to purchase food packages and temporary shelter for those affected, but by December many had started to prepare longer-term recovery actions such as economic recovery projects, more sustainable reconstruction projects and expanding access to water and health. While most diaspora organizations implemented their activities directly through their own staff or volunteers, close to one third of the organizations were implementing together with local partner organisations.

Examples of Partnerships between Diaspora Organizations and Local NGOs

Central to the panel session was the exploration of collaborative efforts between diaspora and local organisations. Two different partnerships showcased their approaches to addressing the urgent humanitarian needs in Herat and promoting sustainable solutions.

Vision for Children

Visions for Children shared their experience on initiating a fundraising campaign through Instagram, which raised over \$345,000 in less than three weeks. After identifying gaps in the overall response to the region, they established a partnership with **Organization of Human Welfare (OHW)**. Being a well-established NGO, OHW elaborated on how they already had mechanisms in place for immediate response, through which they provide transitional shelters. Together, they have been able to scale up plans strengthening the sustainable housing response on the ground.

Uplift Afghanistan Fund

Uplift Afghanistan Fund elaborated on how they support and vet grassroots organisations that are doing impactful work in Afghanistan. Through their collaboration with **Community Driven Development Organization (CDDO)**, they could install immediate water reservoirs across various villages in the Zindajan District. Jointly they moved to a more sustainable reconstruction response, by building eco-friendly and earthquake-resistant homes. During the process, a network of Afghan diaspora-based engineers has been included to share their technical capabilities to help uphold the sustainable designs against international standard.

"There is a false narrative that Afghans cannot work together or trust each other. They can and they care to work together!" (Ilaha Omar, Uplift Afghanistan Fund)

Aseel's Case for IT Solutions and Private Sector Mobilization

Another topic of the panel was centred around the Afghan diaspora's role in pioneering solutions. Aseel, an innovative online aid platform, supports donation to in-kind as well as cash support to survivors of the earthquakes. Aseel has rapidly moved from in kind delivery to cash solutions distribution via a network in country and use of cards for repeat cash transfer and monitoring.

During the discussion, Aseel shared an ambitious message about the capacity of the Afghan community to lead in tech solutions to disaster response. Given the quantity of disasters in Afghanistan, and the Afghan expertise in the field, there is potential to work transnationally to lead humanitarian responses, building on IT solutions.

"Afghanistan may lead - and I want to be very intentional about this - in disaster tech! (...) Given the amount of disasters that have happened in Afghanistan, (..) we see a very big opportunity in implementing community-based tech approaches in Afghanistan." (Nasrat Khalid, ASEEL).

The Challenges in Transferring Money to Afghanistan

Transferring money to Afghanistan remains a primary challenge for diaspora support. During the webinar, participants asked several questions regarding different methods of transfer, such as MoneyGram, Western Union, Hawalas, or bringing cash into the country in person. Engaging with any kind of funds transfer system requires thorough legal and practical research, as laws, amounts and fees may vary depending on the countries involved in the transaction.

Aseel explained how they provide a payment transfer mechanism for NGOs, INGOs and potential individual donors. Working as a fintech (financial technology) platform, Aseel enables seamless delivery of funds to Afghanistan via its decentralized aid platform. Each beneficiary is provided with an Omid (Hope) ID that considers the household's information. Aseel delivers cash to beneficiaries at their locations via its network of Atalan (heroes).

Uplift Afghanistan Fund shared their experience working with Tankhaa, which facilitates financial transactions for international aid organizations by enabling them to transact with Tankhaa's bank in UAE and receive the funds in Afghanistan. Uplift uses HesabPay to pay the salaries of its staff inside Afghanistan. HesabPay is an example of an Afghan interoperable e-payment solution that works together with Afghanistan Payments Systems, commercial banks, and mobile network operators to handle daily transactions.

“A key challenge is time efficient transfer of funds. During the crisis in Herat, we have lost private and diaspora funding because they couldn't find a way to transfer funds to Afghanistan due to the sanctions and other issues” (Ahmad Mukhtar Sabri, CDDO).

Key takeaways

During the webinar, the panellists highlighted some of the key lessons learned from their diverse experiences in providing support in the aftermath of the Herat earthquakes. Representing insights from both diaspora organizations and local NGOs, their reflections provide valuable perspectives on emergency mobilization and underscore the significance of partnerships:

- Effective **coordination with actors on the ground** emerged as paramount to ensure not to duplicate ongoing efforts, but instead feed into locally assessed needs and coordinated humanitarian efforts.
- There was broad agreement across the panel on the need to **transition towards sustainable response** as soon as possible after the emergency response.
- Equitable partnerships between actors in the diaspora and local organizations enable the **mutual reliance on each other's experience**, knowledge, and expertise, ensuring adaptability to the specific needs of Afghan communities.
- In a partnership, **transparency on opportunities and limitations** is vital in order to set realistic expectations and commitments.
- The panel encouraged actors involved in Afghanistan to **stay optimistic and believe in the impact** of aid as well as more innovative solutions.

For more information about DRC's Diaspora Programme:

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ANNEX A: PANELIST BIOS



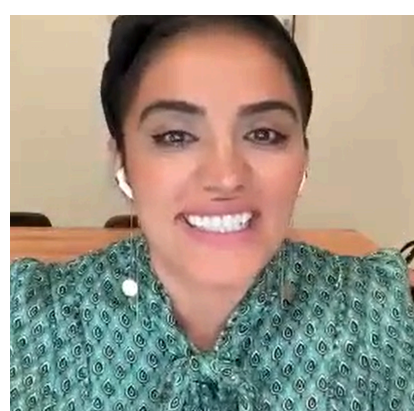
Miralyne Zeghnoune

Research and MEAL Specialist at the Diaspora Emergency Action and Coordination (DEMAC), an initiative of the DRC Diaspora Programme. She is specialized in mixed migration and human trafficking, particularly in the Sahel, Mediterranean region, and the Horn of Africa. At DEMAC, she focuses on utilizing research to enhance understanding of the diaspora's role during humanitarian crises and inform humanitarian efforts and strategies.



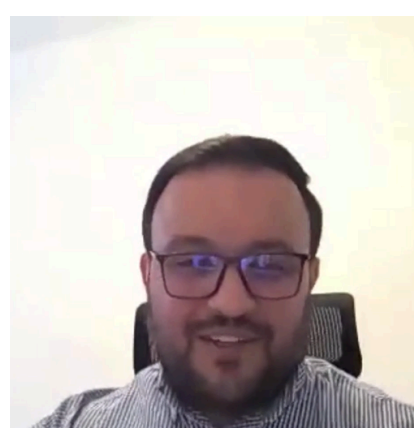
Nasrat Khalid

Founder and CEO of ASEEL, USA, a tech-based platform that has supported over 1 million people in Afghanistan since August 2021. He is featured by TIME, NPR, Al Jazeera, and is the recipient of the Andrew Rice Award. Before creating the Aseel platform, Nasrat served the international development sector with the World Bank, USAID, and the private sector for 12 years. By training, Nasrat is a systems Infrastructure architect. At the time of the webinar, Nasrat was visiting the earthquake sites in Herat and touring the country, to improve the situation of Afghans experiencing humanitarian crisis.



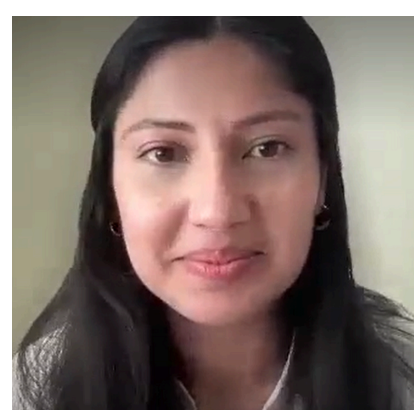
Ilaha Omar

Co-founder and Executive Director of Uplift Afghanistan Fund, USA. As an Afghan-American grassroots mobilizer and humanitarian aid expert, she has over two decades of experience facilitating aid delivery to marginalized communities in Haiti, Kenya and Afghanistan. A champion of women's rights, she has contributed to various self-sufficiency programs and worked with women entrepreneurs to build, manage, and expand their businesses in Afghanistan. Ilaha is passionate about supporting local, community-led initiatives that promote self-sufficiency and sustainability in the pursuit of a more equitable future for Afghans.



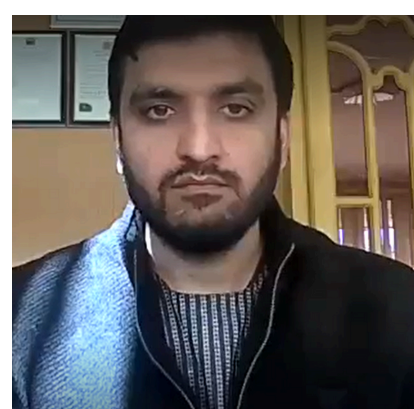
Ahmad Mukhtar Sabri

Director of the Afghan Community Driven Development Organization (CDDO), Afghanistan. He has completed his Master's Degree in International Economics and Public Policy and is also a certified Project Management Professional. Mr. Sabri has over 20 years of experience working in Rural Development, Livelihood, and Safety Net Projects in Afghanistan with the Government and World Bank. In partnership with Uplift Afghanistan Fund, and led by their local engineers, CDDO designed earthquake resisting housing, providing long-term resilience and recovery support to the affected population in Herat.



Hila Limar

Executive Chairwoman of Visions for Children e.V., Germany. Hila Limar advocates for improved educational opportunities for children in war and crisis affected areas. After dedicating more than 10 years to the organization as a volunteer, she gave up her job as an architect in 2018 to devote herself fully and full-time to her vision. Driven by the knowledge that her own extensive education is a privilege, she is convinced that education can advance societies sustainably. Visions for Children implement educational projects in Afghanistan and Uganda and has reached more than 40,000 students so far. Hila's work is also highly centred on the appeal to move away from a Eurocentric view on development cooperation, as well as raising awareness among (political) decision-makers and in German schools.



Sahabuddin Hamdar

Country Director of Organization of Human Welfare (OHW), Afghanistan. He is an experienced professional with a strong background in the non-profit sector. With a Master's in Business Administration from Kardan University in Afghanistan and over 10 years of experience, he has played key roles in operational management and project oversight at OHW. His leadership has been instrumental in successfully implementing projects across diverse regions of Afghanistan, emphasizing quality and effectiveness. Mr. Hamdar has extensive technical knowledge and experience in project processing and administration, portfolio management, country programming, and project evaluation. In partnership with Visions for Children, OHW focused on providing a sustainable response to the earthquake affected communities in Herat.

