



Conflict Factsheet

Poor water provision drives Taliban recruitment in Afghanistan

Type of conflict	Intensity 4
Conflict Locality Afghanistan	Time 2001 –ongoing
Countries Afghanistan	Resources Water



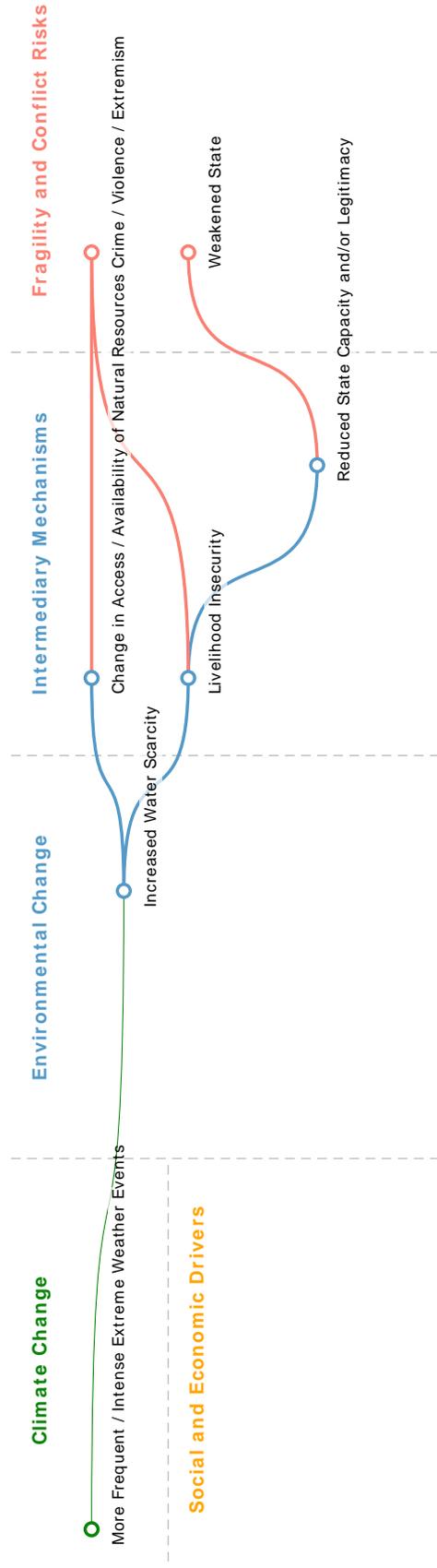
Livelihood
insecurity
and migration

Conflict Summary

Political neglect, ideology and economic hardship drive recruitment for the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan. As rural communities depend heavily on water for their livelihoods, pressures on resources due to over extraction, deficient infrastructures, and mismanagement, but also to climate changes, are likely to contribute to the conditions that facilitate recruitment by the Taliban.



Conceptual Model



Context Factors



Water

Dysfunctional Resource Management
 Inadequate Infrastructure
 Low Level of Economic Development
 Weak Institutions

History of Conflict
 Lack of Alternative Livelihoods
 Weak Institutions



Conflict History

Decades of civil war and military intervention have left Afghanistan in a desolate condition. In rural areas, making up nearly 70% of the Afghan population, roads, schools, medical facilities, and other infrastructures are often either absent, of poor quality, or at the hands of the Taliban (Leao et al., 2018). This undermines the legitimacy of the Afghan government and strengthens the Taliban insurgency (Johnson & Mason, 2007).

The military and police, solely responsible for upholding state authority since the end of the ISAF mission in 2014, struggle to hold controlled territory and have difficulties filling up their ranks, whilst suffering high casualties. The Taliban, on the other hand, find it much easier to recruit new fighters, especially in rural areas (Jones, 2015), giving them the ability to wage a tiring war on the Afghan government. The reasons for young men to join the Taliban are diverse but often connected to either religion and ideology, or political neglect and a lack of economic opportunities (Johnson & Mason, 2007). The latter often stem from poor service provision, especially in rural areas, and limited access to water resources.

Climate models for the end of this century predict a future reduction in water resources in Afghanistan, which would add to the above challenges and might create further recruitment opportunities for insurgent groups.

Lacking economic perspectives drive recruitment for the Taliban

Many Taliban fighters are religiously or ideologically motivated. These men usually serve as full-time fighters and are indoctrinated in religious boarding schools, often in the Afghan-Pakistan border region. Anti-imperialistic (especially anti-American) grievances are usually paired with religious fundamentalism. However many join for pragmatic, economic or circumstantial reasons. Abuse of civilians, body-searches on women and other hostile actions by governmental forces and government-friendly militias are further drivers of radicalisation (Jones, 2015; Landinfo, 2017).

Others join the insurgency because they are suffering from poverty and poor access to basic services such as electricity and water. For many young Afghans economic prospects remain bleak, especially in rural areas where 53% of youth are illiterate (Leao et al., 2018). Corruption, ineffective administration, insecurity, and destruction of property due to continued fighting in some areas further compound this problem. It is estimated that one in five Afghans aged between 15 and 24 years is unemployed (Leao et al., 2018; Transparency International, 2018). Agriculture, which is the main activity in rural areas, is unreliable, due (among other reasons) to low selling prices, persistent insecurity, and destroyed irrigation infrastructure (Leao et al., 2018).

Joining the Taliban becomes a viable option under these circumstances; even more so than joining the national army or police (Jones, 2015). Pay for soldiers of the Afghan national army and police is irregular and sometimes lower than salaries for Taliban fighters (Landinfo, 2017). Many Taliban supporters are recruited on a 'part-time basis' which means that they would "(...) 'fight for a couple of hours in the morning' and then go home for other activities – 'in the field or in the bazaar' (...)" (Landinfo, 2017).



Furthermore, trust in the government as a provider of security and essential services is eroded in many rural areas as a result of corruption and poorly performing public administrations. Afghanistan ranks 172/180 on the Corruption Perception Index ([Transparency International, 2018](#)). This creates further incentives for joining the Taliban. In particular, this is visible in the water sector, where poor planning and deficient irrigation infrastructure exacerbate economic hardship and anti-state grievances ([Jones, 2015](#); [Johnson & Mason, 2006](#)).

Poor access to water and deficient infrastructure

Water is essential to rural livelihoods in Afghanistan, since the country's economy relies heavily on agriculture and related sectors, such as food processing, -trade, and agro-industry ([Leao et al., 2018](#)). Farming is usually also the primary source of income for people who return to their villages after having fled violence during the civil war. Yet the absence or poor condition of irrigation infrastructure, often a result of the war, is a major challenge for them ([Majidiyar, 2018](#); [Burt & Keiru, 2014](#); [McCarthy & Mustafa, 2014](#)). In fact, [Kuonqui et al., \(2011\)](#) estimate that the amount of irrigated surfaces in Afghanistan fell from about 3 million hectares in the 1970's to 1.8 million hectares in 2011.

Deficient infrastructure and access to water also lead to sanitary and health problems. Despite significant reconstruction efforts in the water sector only 40% of the rural and 71% of the urban population had access to safe drinking water in 2016 ([USAID, 2016](#)). A significant share of income is lost as a result. As a villager explains: "Half of our income every year is spent on doctors and medicine because we are always getting sick with stomach complaints and diarrhea" ([Burt & Keiru, 2014](#)). This contributes to the conditions that facilitate recruitment by the Taliban.

Water management as a key challenge

Formal and customary institutions struggle to address the above problems, which is further undermining trust in the state and customary resource management.

While urban water resource management is organised by water boards and respective municipalities, management in rural regions of Afghanistan is often handled by customary authorities. The so called Mirab are traditionally responsible for administering water distribution, overseeing local water infrastructure maintenance, and resolving disputes. The Mirab further allocate rights to tap water, usually based on users' participation in construction and maintenance ([Reich & Pearson, 2013](#)).

The patchy and incomplete implementation of formal water management frequently combined with a lack of understanding of the customary system among government officials result in confusion about the distribution of tasks and responsibilities between formal and informal water management institutions. Ultimately, this undermines both ([McCarthy & Mustafa, 2014](#)).

Since the national government was virtually absent from many rural areas during the civil war, customary water allocation institutions have often been co-opted or violated by warlords. This has further undermined the capacity of customary systems and is impeding effective water management to this day ([McCarthy & Mustafa, 2014](#)).



Another major disadvantage in management capacity and effectivity building is the lack of hydrological data. Data collection was already difficult in pre-war times but became close to impossible during the three decades of war (Palmer-Moloney, 2011; Campbell, 2015).

The aggravating potential of climate change

Challenges to the water sector in Afghanistan could be amplified by climate change. Predictions show that temperatures in Afghanistan will rise by 3°C to 7°C by 2100 leading to scarcity of water and desertification in arid and semi-arid areas. Unpredictable seasonal water flow patterns due to changes in glacier melt could lead to more extreme weather events such as floods and droughts. By augmenting pressure on water resources and undermining rural livelihoods, climate change could thus accelerate the vicious cycle of poverty, recruitment, and violence (Bishop et al., 2014; Scherer & Taenzler, 2018).

Resolution Efforts

The above explanations suggest that improvements in water availability and management through infrastructure and legal frameworks, including measures to increase the overall resilience of the water sector, can have a positive impact on the ongoing insurgency. It could strengthen rural Afghans' livelihoods and trust in the government and thus slow down recruitment by the Taliban.

Addressing water issues in rural development

Water issues in Afghanistan are addressed foremost in the National Solidarity Program (NSP), the main development tool of the Afghan government in rural areas. The program started in 2003 and aims to promote community-based development through the establishment of a network of community development councils (CDC) and allocation of funds for governance and infrastructure projects (Black, 2017). Infrastructure development and the strengthening of local governance mechanisms are key goals of the NSP. The program further aims to prevent possible conflicts and promotes cooperation between customary leaders and public administrations. Water management is a key concern due to the resource's importance for rural livelihoods (Palmer-Moloney, 2011; McCarthy & Mustafa, 2014).

Building institutional capacity

Since 2001, the Afghan government is developing a decentralized Integrated Water Resource Management approach that promotes the participation of local leaders in decision making processes. It has established an institutional framework for water use around a newly created Supreme Council for Water Affairs Management (SCWAM) and its associated technical secretariat, which are responsible for developing and implementing the government's water sector strategy. The Afghan government has further supported the creation of basin agencies, provincial development/management committees, and different advisory boards. Legally, the water management is regulated by a new Water Law from 2009 (Afghan Ministry of Justice, 2009; Shroder & Ahmadzai, 2016), which supersedes any previous laws.

Yet, corruption remains a major challenge. According to Transparency International, Afghanistan has made no progress towards reaching Target 16 of the Sustainable Development Goals, which includes tackling corruption (Transparency International, 2018). Afghanistan's anti-corruption measures are largely



viewed as inefficient or not existent, where even anti-corruption officials are believed to be compromised by corrupt networks (Tiefer, 2018).

Irrigation infrastructure and water management

To improve the condition of water infrastructures, numerous projects of varying scale have been conducted, of which many are part of the NSP program or supported by it. One of the most important projects for infrastructure restoration is the Irrigation Restoration and Development Project launched by the Afghan government in 2011 and cofounded by the World Bank (AF IRDP). The project aims to improve small scale irrigation infrastructure. Besides international institutions such as the World Bank, UNICEF, the Asian Development Bank and others, NGO participation in redevelopment is high. Between 2010 and 2014 alone 891 international and local NGOs were active in Afghanistan, of which 158 were active in the field of WASH (water, sanitation and hygiene), and 147 in infrastructure (Mitchell, 2017). For example, the Japanese NGO JEN has been active for a number of years and involved in the construction of water pipes and sanitation projects (JEN-NPO).

Other initiatives aim at strengthening water management institutions. An example is a joint program for knowledge-exchange between the United States Department of Agriculture (foreign agriculture service) and the Afghan Ministry for Agriculture, Irrigation, and Livestock. Within this program, US-American irrigation management experts conducted workshops in effective management of irrigation in high altitude water abundant areas (as in Colorado, USA and Afghanistan) for their Afghan counterparts (Reich & Pearson, 2013).

Improving hygiene and sanitation

Numerous NGOs contribute towards hygiene and disease resilience. The British NGO Tearfund, for example, operates in several provinces using social marketing approaches to promote household treatment systems, sanitation facilities and hygiene behaviour improvement. They promoted bio sand filters and trained local artisans to manufacture sand filters to meet local demand and held workshops on personal hygiene and bacterial/viral infections (Burt & Keiru, 2014).

International organisations such as UNICEF, the WHO, and the Red Cross are present in Afghanistan and help improving disease resilience through e.g. chlorination of shallow wells and distribution of chlorine tablets and medical equipment, as well as health and water hygiene education (Kakar et al., 2008).

A large number of small, village scale, WASH projects is bundled within the Rural Water, Sanitation and Hygiene project, a 30 million USD initiative jointly launched in 2016 by UNICEF, USAID, and the Afghan Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (USAID Water Team, 2018).

Although much has been achieved, water and sanitation remain important challenges in Afghanistan.

Climate Change adaption

Few international projects directly address the effects of climate change. Nonetheless efforts exist, such as the "Building adaptive capacity and resilience to climate change" project (2013-2017), which is cofounded by UNEP and the Least Developed Countries Fund (LDCF). The program aims at strengthening



institutional capacity and building sustainable water infrastructure, as well as hydrological data collection to support risks mitigation in the water sector (UNFCCC).

Another major program was conducted by United Nation Development Program (UNDP), building government capacity to integrate risk and impact assessments into development plans at the local level in four provinces. It further trained locals in disaster response and promoted climate-resilient crops among other measures. The project was cofounded by the Asian Development Bank among others (UNDP 2016).

Resilience to climate change is further strengthened by national programmes like the NSP and the Irrigation and Restoration Development Project, which build institutional capacity for disaster response and support flood and drought control through the rehabilitation of weirs, reservoirs and channels. Yet, lacking capacity and expertise still make it difficult to implement those plans (Heinrich Boell Stiftung, 2016).

Intensities & Influences



INTENSITIES

International / Geopolitical Intensity



Human Suffering



INFLUENCES

Environmental Influences



Societal Influences



Violent Conflict

Yes



Salience with nation

National



Mass displacement

More than 100.000 or more than 10% of the country's population are displaced within the country.



Cross Border Mass Displacement

Best estimate that more than 100.000 or more than 10% of country population are displaced across borders.



Resolution Success

Reduction in Violence

There was no reduction in violence.



Reduction in geographical scope

There has been no reduction in geographical scope.



Increased capacity to address grievance in the future

The capacity to address grievances in the future has increased.



Grievance Resolution

Grievances have been partially addressed.





Entry Points for Resilience and Peace Building

Humanitarian & Development aid

2

International institutions and national developmental aid agencies like USAID or GIZ and a large number of NGOs support the Afghan government in its effort to improve rural water infrastructures and -management.

Social inclusion & empowerment

2

Afghanistan's National Solidarity Program (NSP) provides for the creation of Community Development Councils, which facilitate the participation of community representatives in local development planning.

Improving state capacity & legitimacy

2

Major reforms have been conducted by the government since 2001. Advisory boards, Community Councils and respective courts have been established to manage water issues.

Improving infrastructure & services

2

Many state and non-state organisations are involved in the construction and rehabilitation of irrigation infrastructure, including the instalment of wells and pumps and construction of pipe networks.

Improving actionable information

1

Some efforts have been made to improve hydrological data collection, but much remains yet to be accomplished; especially in terms of building necessary capacities in afghan agencies. Hydrological data are indispensable for efficient water management and thus should receive greater attention.

Improving resource efficiency

1

Afghan water management representatives and farmers are being trained in efficient irrigation techniques.

Mitigating impacts on health

2

Many development projects in Afghanistan focus on Water Sanitation and Health (WASH) and aim at improving hygiene standards to combat infections and spreading diseases. E.g. small scale water filters are being handed out and local artisans are trained to manufacture more of them.

Resources and Materials



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Further information

<https://factbook.ecc-platform.org/conflicts/influence-afghanistans-weak-water-sector-taliban-recruitment>