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Solidarity Committee for Afghanistan

SCA Policy Brief

Left Behind: Afghanistan's Exclusion from Global Climate Finance

Cajsa Wikström[1]

Key recommendations

1. Invest in disaster risk reduction and climate adaptation which reduce damage and human suffering from natural hazards, and is much more cost-efficient than emergency response.
2. Ensure that non-governmental actors, UN agencies and other international institutions can access climate finance for investments in Afghanistan, including from the Green Climate Fund, without funding going through the authorities
3. Establish a mechanism for technical-level representation for Afghan authorities at regional and international platforms like COP, as well as representation of Afghan civil society and academia.

Introduction

Afghanistan's per capita carbon footprint is among the lowest in the world[2] (Worldometer 2025) but it stands among the countries most vulnerable to climate change. Devastating floods and droughts weaken already fragile livelihoods and food security. Despite the urgent needs for adaptation measures, Afghanistan is almost entirely excluded from international climate financing mechanisms under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) due to the international community's non-recognition of the Taliban regime (Ruttig 2024).

The rationale for the non-recognition is primarily human rights concerns, particularly the restrictions on women and girls (OHCHR 2024). At the same time, women in Afghanistan are disproportionately affected by climate shocks, due to factors such as their heightened vulnerability during natural disasters, dependence on agriculture and livestock, and responsibility for water management (UN Women 2024). As a result, they bear the heaviest burden of Afghanistan's exclusion from climate finance.

This policy brief examines the implications of Afghanistan's lack of access to climate finance and recommends measures to ensure climate justice for the Afghan people, without legitimising the regime.

[1] Policy Advisor at the Solidarity Committee for Afghanistan (SCA). Several people contributed with comments on draft versions, including Assem Mayar, Johan Schaar and Karim Merchant. N.B. that the responsibility for the content is solely the responsibility of SCA and the author.
[2] To compare, Afghanistan's per capita carbon footprint is 0.14 tonnes of CO_2.The corresponding figure for Sweden is 3.61 (Worldometer 2025).

Dire Impact of Climate Change

Afghanistan is ranked eighth on the Notre Dame Global Adaptation Index that summarises a country's vulnerability to climate change and other global challenges in combination with its readiness to improve resilience (ND-GAIN 2022). Decades of conflict, poverty, and underdeveloped infrastructure exacerbate the impact of extreme weather events, compounding the challenges posed by climate change.

Climate change is evident in changes in temperature and the hydrological cycle in Afghanistan, with effects such as these:

Temperatures rose by 1.8 °C between 1950 and 2010 (NEPA 2019). This is more than twice the global average (NASA 2024). Temperature increases are projected to continue to rise faster than the global average. Increases in the annual maximum and minimum temperature are projected to be greater than the rise in average temperature, likely amplifying the pressure on human health, livelihoods, and ecosystems (World Bank Group and Asian Development Bank 2020).

> **Decades of conflict, poverty, and underdeveloped infrastructure exacerbate the impact of extreme weather events, compounding the challenges posed by climate change.**

Drought is one of the main drivers of humanitarian needs across the country. Both the frequency and intensity of droughts have increased in recent decades. Over 13 million people were affected in 2018 and 11 million in 2021. Projections suggest that rising temperatures, melting glaciers in the Hindu Kush[3] , and shifts in precipitation patterns will intensify drought conditions in many regions. Human-induced factors—such as inadequate water storage and management, unsustainable water consumption, and environmental degradation—are compounding the crisis (ACAPS 2024). Annual droughts are expected to become the norm in many parts of the country by 2030 (FAO 2019).

Declining groundwater levels threaten water access for millions of Afghans. The majority of Afghanistan's renewable water resources come from surface water, but decades of underdevelopment have limited its use. As a result, communities across the country increasingly rely on groundwater to meet domestic, agricultural, and economic needs—driving a severe decline in groundwater levels. Kabul's shallow aquifers are particularly affected, with rising demand and reduced natural recharge. If unaddressed, preliminary analysis suggests central Kabul could run out of accessible groundwater by 2030. By the same year, its population is projected to reach 7 million. (UN projections).

Flooding is the most frequently occurring natural hazard. Around 100,000 people are affected yearly, a number that is predicted to more than double by 2050. Flooding in rivers mainly occurs due to heavy precipitation and rapid snowmelt. Flash flooding together with landslides are of particular concern. Poorly built flood protection infrastructure, lack of early warning systems and increasing settlements in flood-prone areas are important drivers of flood risk (World Bank 2017).

Economic and Human Cost of Climate Shocks

In 2015, the National Environmental Protection Agency (NEPA) estimated that the country would need 17.4 billion USD for climate mitigation and adaptation between 2020 and 2030 (NEPA 2015). Given the low GDP and the high costs for damage caused by extreme weather events, it is clear that Afghanistan is fiscally incapacitated to deal with the consequences of climate change. Climate shocks cause annual economic losses estimated between 550 million and 3 billion USD, equivalent to between

[3] During 1990–2015), Afghanistan lost 406 km^2 (14%) of its total glacier area (ICIMOD 2018).

Devastating consequences

The droughts of 2018 and 2019, which displaced over 400,000 people, highlight the risks and economic consequences of climate shocks. In 2018, wheat yields dropped by more than 60%, and the government appealed for 550 million USD from the international community to feed the nation's livestock—equivalent to 2.8% of GDP. While the drought crisis continued into 2019, Afghanistan was simultaneously struck by flash floods, resulting in the displacement of 42,000 people, at least 63 deaths, and damage to several thousand homes (World Bank and Asian Development Bank 2020).

3 and 18% of GDP. Beyond the numbers, these losses are reflected in rising food insecurity and displacement, with consequences that reach past Afghanistan's borders (Mayar 2025).

Climate change affects every major sector in Afghanistan, but agriculture is especially vulnerable. It accounts for over a third of the national GDP (World Bank 2025) and 60% of households derive some income from the sector (World Bank 2021). In 2025, 14.8 million people, equal to 32% of Afghanistan's population, are projected to face high levels of acute food insecurity (Food Security Information Network 2025).

The effects of climate change and natural disasters are key drivers of displacement and migration. In 2024, such impact on livelihoods in subsistence farming and livestock rearing was a contributing factor for more than 1 million people in Afghanistan leaving their communities. Roughly half of them moved within the country while the other half left Afghanistan due to these economic challenges (IOM 2025).

Limited Progress in Breaking the Deadlock

Prior to the regime change in 2021, Afghanistan was eligible for support from the Global Environment Facility (GEF), the Green Climate Fund (GCF), and the Adaptation Fund, three of the UN funds that provide financial resources to developing countries for measures relating to climate change. Several projects including in water resource management and disaster risk reduction were in the pipeline for approval.

The regime change brought planned or ongoing projects to a halt and until recently, there was little progress towards breaking the deadlock. However, in March 2025, GEF approved the implementation of a UNDP project and two more UN-managed projects remain in the pipeline for GEF as of June 2025. Altogether, these projects are worth approximately 40 million USD—a small sum compared to the scale of the country's needs, but nevertheless an important step. The Adaptation Fund, while not currently implementing any new projects, has maintained contact with NEPA, but the GCF, which holds the largest volumes of the three funds, maintains no communication with Afghanistan.

Unrelated to the climate-specific funds, there is bilateral and multilateral aid to Afghanistan, mainly funnelled to communities through NGOs and UN agencies in efforts to build resilience at the local level. Yet, there is no overarching national plan guiding these efforts. Donors lack a shared definition of what constitutes climate resilience interventions and there are no standard indicators, joint monitoring systems, or common frameworks for tracking results. Meanwhile, NEPA has not been allowed to submit its updated Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC), outlining Afghanistan's climate plans, vulnerabilities, and financial needs. (Conversation with a UN official, May 2025).

A limited step towards international re-engagement was taken in 2024 when NEPA was invited to attend the Conference of the Parties (COP) in Azerbaijan. They were not granted official status or access to plenary sessions, but as "guests of the host country", they were able to engage with representatives of other countries and representatives of the climate funds on the sidelines of the conference (Yawar, Greenfield and Dickie, 2024).

Recommendations

As described above, the people of Afghanistan, particularly women, bear a heavy burden due to the effects of climate change. Climate change hits the agriculture sector, which is one of few sectors where women can work, further weakening food security. When food is scarce, women are the last to eat and hence affected disproportionately by food insecurity (WFP undated).

While recognising the current regime's lack of respect for human rights, particularly for women, using this as a reason to exclude Afghanistan from climate finance leads to a double punishment. Climate action must be based on the rights of all, including the people of Afghanistan. It cannot be tied to recognition of the current Taliban regime.

There is a need to urgently take steps to ensure Afghanistan's access to climate finance and participation in global climate collaboration. These are some recommendations for international policymakers and donors:

Afghan inclusion at COP. To ensure Afghanistan's participation in global climate action while avoiding legitimisation of the regime, the international community should develop a mechanism to enable representation at key platforms such as COP and regional forums. A viable approach could involve granting NEPA a special status—such as that of a parastatal. Accreditation could be restricted to technical staff, and be time-limited, subject to annual review and renewal, contingent upon compliance with global climate governance norms and standards. NEPA should be allowed to submit its NDC, and the receive technical support for NDC revision. Additionally, provisions must be made to ensure that Afghan civil society, academia, and technical experts can participate in global climate fora.

Access to climate finance. Ensure that credible, non-governmental actors with proven operational capacity and evidence-based models, such as the World Bank, UN agencies and NGOs, can access climate finance for investments in Afghanistan, including from the UN system, without funding going through the authorities. GCF should follow the example of GEF and Adaptation Fund by appointing a focal point, to ensure national ownership and coherence. NEPA seems to be the best positioned to take on this role as a technical public agency that has shown commitment to tackle the impact of climate change.

> **Investing in preparedness is significantly more cost-efficient than responding to emergencies after natural hazards occur.**

Invest in disaster risk reduction and adaptation. Investing in preparedness is significantly more cost-efficient than responding to emergencies after natural hazards occur, as it reduces the scale of damage and the need for prolonged humanitarian aid. Every 1 USD spent on disaster reduction saves 4-7 USD in disaster response (UNDRR 2023) and significantly reduces human suffering.

Scale up existing projects that have produced good results. A thorough evaluation is needed to determine which kinds of projects have been efficient and which have not. Most interventions aimed at building climate-resilient agriculture and improving food

security are short-term, project-based and implemented only in a few provinces. Significantly higher amounts of funding and a long-term approach are needed to make a lasting impact. Local NGOs play an important role in the implementation, but their funding remains precarious.

Small-scale agriculture at the centre. Making the agriculture sector climate-resilient is essential for both climate adaptation and economic recovery. Agriculture remains a critical source of income and food security for the rural population—especially for women. Given the deep dependency of Afghan agriculture on freshwater availability, it is vital to prioritise investments in sustainable water management as part of climate resilience efforts. This includes climate-smart irrigation, groundwater recharge—particularly in urban areas—drought-resistant crops and enhanced water storage capacity.

Regional approach. Afghanistan should be included in regional initiatives on shared challenges such as water scarcity, and in monitoring to ensure early warnings. Excluding Afghanistan entirely risks undermining the effectiveness of regional efforts and increasing vulnerability across the region.

Capacity development. Development professionals in and outside Afghanistan testify that technical ministries and agencies are taking the threat of climate change seriously but are lacking in capacity. Investments should be made in capacity building at national and provincial level, to enhance their ability to manage data and projects, as well as drafting policies and plans. To enable this, the international community must be open for a dialogue with technical authorities.

Coherent plans and priorities. There is a need for a strong mandate for NEPA, as well as other technical agencies and ministries, to coordinate and provide priorities for all actors in adaptation and resilience.

Build on local knowledge and community structures. Where possible, programmes should draw on local and indigenous knowledge and practices to enhance sustainability, community ownership and effectiveness. This principle also applies to community structures for preparedness and adaptation. In rural areas, there are already well-functioning forms of civil society—such as traditional councils, religious groups, or informal community networks—that may not have addressed climate issues before but are key to building collective resilience. Rather than creating parallel systems, climate programmes should aim to strengthen and integrate climate resilience efforts into these existing structures.

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Capturing floodwater

In Seyab Kodai village in mountainous Wardak province, the soil is so dry that it cannot absorb the water during heavy rains. Villagers are digging ditches to capture floodwater so that it seeps into the ground and replenishes the groundwater instead of flooding crops.