

Newsletter

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Spotlight

Why Watch for Corruption While Fighting COVID-19 In Afghanistan?



Healthcare workers check passengers entering Herat city. Photo: Ministry of Public Health

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According to the [Ministry of Health of Afghanistan](#) COVID-19 could kill more than one hundred thousand people in Afghanistan as more than 80% of the people are at risk of contracting the virus. To fight the pandemic, [the World Bank announced a \\$100 million grant to Afghanistan](#) to stop the spread of the disease. They payments are being fast-tracked to enable the Government of Afghanistan to make an emergency response. A statement issued by the Bank stated that the fund will be used to “support infected people, at-risk populations, medical and emergency personnel as well as service providers, medical and testing facilities, and national health agencies.” Following this the [Ministry of Finance recently announced an allocation of 6.6 billion Afghanis](#) (\$87

million) to fight the spread of COVID-19 out of which each Province will be given one million dollars (on average) discretionary funds.

While provision of discretionary funds and emergency procurement are required to prevent the spread of COVID19, they also create vulnerability to corruption. Afghanistan's public sector suffers from the prevalence of impunity and weak controls and therefore is considered one of the most corrupt in the world. Corruption, misuse of funds, procurement and delivery of low-quality equipment and supplies could put the lives of doctors, nurses, medical staff, and patients at risk and could help the virus spread to a catastrophic level. A recent [report](#) indicates that the Ministry of Health procured hand sanitizers and supplied them to a hospital designated to fight COVID-19. The hand sanitizers were later found to have no alcohol content and therefore had to be disposed of.

In addition, weak management, lack of responsiveness, and weak health infrastructure could jeopardize service delivery to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and to treat patients. Corruption in service delivery could result in hospitals and health centers running out of essential supplies and medicine. Mismanagement and lack of capacity could result in equipment not being used and the waste of essential supplies such as testing kits. Reports indicate that there is only a total of 12 ventilators across the country some of which are not even installed and are therefore not being used. Therefore, it is critical to monitor the delivery of essential supplies, equipment, and service to the most needed areas.

The government must take steps to fight corruption to prevent the crisis from going completely out of hand. The government must put access to information and accountability to the forefront of the fight against COVID-19 to ensure scarce resources are used wisely and in a transparent and accountable manner. Some governments are using COVID-19 as an excuse to silence those who ask for essential information. The Afghan Government cannot afford to do this. The government should disclose the available procurement data to the public on a proactive basis to enable citizens and civil society to monitor procurement and spending. Proactive disclosure of information is more important than ever before. The government must make it a requirement for all provincial and central offices involved in service delivery and emergency procurement to proactively publish data on their websites and come up with mechanisms on how to share information with the public on regular basis. We can learn from [the Ukrainian example where they have developed an online tool](#) to "[show all the COVID-19 related emergency procurement, and includes information such as the name of items, the price per item, terms, supplier, etc.](#)" The government should also facilitate civil society monitoring.

Civil society should make use of the data provided by the government to analyze the

data so as to hold the government accountable. Citizens and civil society can even develop their own datasets, if they are not provided by the government ,by extracting procurement data from contracts and by making access to information requests. Open contracting tips [here](#) are very useful to begin with. Civil society can also check government responses and preparedness by monitoring the availability of essential supplies and by carrying out surveys to collect data.

Fighting corruption may take a backseat during an emergency such as COVID-19 but in the case of Afghanistan, ignoring corruption could prove to be catastrophic.

Balkh Integrity Network Meets Local Health Officials to Coordinate Joint Efforts to Fight COVID-19



Balkh Integrity Network meeting with Provincial Health Officials. Photo: Integrity Watch

Naser Timory, Integrity Watch Afghanistan

Integrity Watch's Balkh Integrity Network met with the Provincial Public Health Directorate to discuss mechanisms and ways to coordinate civil society efforts to assist the government to fight the Coronavirus outbreak. The civil society group offered to oversee the use of funds and the government officials involved welcomed the initiative.

Mr. Aziz Mubariz, Integrity Watch's Provincial Coordinator in Balkh said, "With the Coronavirus outbreak and the Government pledging to allocate emergency funds to fight it, the group has mobilized its resources and realigned its priorities to oversee the use of these funds through access to information and through conducting of social audits."

Mr. Khalilullah Hekmat, Director of Public Health for Balkh Province, welcomed the group's initiative to oversee the use of public funds to assist COVID-19 patients and informed the group that the government has taken several measures to prevent the spread of Coronavirus and to assist patients. He said that 16 million AFN allocated by the Central Government to help prevent and fight the Coronavirus in Balkh Province, is not yet processed and has not yet been sent to the Public Health Directorate. Mr. Hekmat added that a joint committee to fight and prevent the spread of the Coronavirus, which includes representatives from the Department of Public Health, the municipality office, the Provincial Governor office, etc. has been formed. He said crowded and busy areas, such as fabric markets, porcelain, gold, construction and other non-food markets are closed starting from April 2nd. He also said a number of businessmen have pledged to support 5,000 families with food packages for 15 days during the quarantine.

The Balkh Integrity Network will request the necessary information through the Access To Information Law from the government. Additionally the Network will prepare checklists and will start monitoring the use of these funds as soon as they become available.

The Balkh Integrity Network, comprises a dozen group of civil society activists, and is a platform with the objective of ensuring transparency and accountability of government to the public. The group was established in 2015 by Integrity Watch and since then has worked on access to information, social accountability and with assisting victims of corruption.

Integrity Watch scales up its community monitoring program to fight COVID-19



Integrity Watch's provincial coordinator meets with health monitoring volunteers. Photo: Integrity Watch

Naser Timory, Integrity Watch Afghanistan

In late March 2020, Integrity Watch decided to scale up its existing community monitoring of health services to cover an approximate additional number of seventy health facilities including those providing health services to COVID-19 patients. The community monitoring of health facilities has also introduced a new checklist that includes preventative measures against COVID-19 in health clinics.

As a result of the COVID-19 outbreak, schools have been closed across the country. Integrity Watch consulted with community members who monitor over 160 schools in Herat, Balkh, Kapisa, Nangarhar and Kabul Provinces about shifting to monitoring of health facilities in their respective provinces. The response was overwhelmingly positive and the program staff of Integrity Watch then identified an additional seventy health facilities and provided basic trainings to the new volunteers.

Ajmal Khaliqi, the head of the community-based monitoring program of Integrity Watch, said, "This move also comes with programmatic and financial challenges." Mr. Khaliqi explained that they need to provide masks and hand gloves to monitoring volunteers to ensure they are not affected by the virus as well as providing them with transport assistance in a time of lockdown is complicated. "However, with a decade of

community-based monitoring of public services, we have developed flexibility in our programming, thanks to our volunteers and donors, to re-align our resources to cover these additional health facilities.”

“We have developed a COVID-19 checklist,” said Mr. Ali Ahmad Mashalafroz, program coordinator for the community-based monitoring of health facilities. He explained, “The checklist includes checking the availability of sanitizers, mask and gloves at the health facilities and checking measures such as social distancing.” According to him these measures are added to the program to ensure that the volunteers, non-COVID-19 patients and healthcare workers are not affected by the COVID-19.

Furthermore, Integrity Watch’s research department has started to mobilize its resources to conduct a technical assessment of the preparedness of those health facilities that provide specialized COVID-19 treatment. According to Ezatullah Adib, head of research at Integrity Watch, the objective is to assist the government to know its strengths and weaknesses based on evidence so that it can make timely and appropriate decisions.

Integrity Watch’s community monitoring of health facilities started in late in 2018 and currently covers 70 health facilities in Kabul, Kapisa, Herat, Nangarhar and Balkh provinces. The number has been doubled in response to COVID-19 outbreak. Volunteers elected by local community council and trained by Integrity Watch monitors the health facilities. The problems identified are first reported to the head of the health facility and the community council and as a result many of the issues are solved at that level. For issues not solved at health facility level, these are reported to the sectoral monitoring group meetings on a monthly basis. Based on compiled results of monitoring health facilities, 72% of the issues are solved now.

Is rural Afghanistan ready to fight COVID-19? Lessons from a Field Study



Bangi Comprehensive Health Center in Takhar Province. Photo: Integrity Watch

Naser Timory, Integrity Watch Afghanistan

Integrity Watch Afghanistan conducted a survey of 184 health facilities in 8 provinces in 2017. The survey found out that Afghanistan has improved in terms of existence of health facilities in rural areas but these facilities were in urgent need of essential assistance.

The survey found out that 99% of the health facilities were active with healthcare personnel and patients present at the premises. But, the assessment in 2017 also revealed that the health facilities faced both structural and maintenance problems, operational needs, ranging from the supply of electricity, medications and medical equipment to the availability of vehicles and ambulances, hygiene and sanitation issues, accessibility of staff and patients to facility grounds, adequacy of personnel, especially female medical personnel and finally, management oversight issues.

Considering the World Health Organization's emphasis on hygiene and sanitation to cope with COVID-19, the rural health facilities themselves could be prone to further spreading of the virus. According to the survey, poor hygiene was visible in 45% of the health facilities with a quarter of them having no toilets. Furthermore, since the availability of an ambulance is an issue in health facilities in rural areas (64% of health facilities have no vehicles) alternative measures including providing the necessary

equipment to utilize ordinary vehicles for emergency purposes could be a solution in an emergency situation.

The [World Bank Afghanistan Office](#) has reported that it has allocated \$100 million to support Afghanistan's emergency response to COVID-19. While a major focus of the program is on healthcare support, it is not clear how the fund will be used for rural areas. The Afghan government has not announced any specific program to fight COVID-19 in rural areas but there are reports of restrictions on movement and preparing the health facilities to cope up with potential COVID-19 patients from the rural areas. With 99% of health facilities active in Afghanistan, this shows that rural Afghanistan has some basic facilities to respond to COVID-19 if mobilized and supported in time and efficiently by the Government, the international community and other key stakeholders.

About the survey:

The [survey](#) included physical inspections of the facilities and interviews of personnel and community members. The survey focused on the operational status and efficiency of the facilities, including their capacity to deliver the needed services and identification of existing and potential issues that are likely to adversely affect service delivery. The survey included Badakhshan, Ghazni, Kandahar, Takhar, Herat, Nangarhar, Kabul and Baghlan Provinces.