Near-average harvests expected with normal seasonal progress

KEY MESSAGES

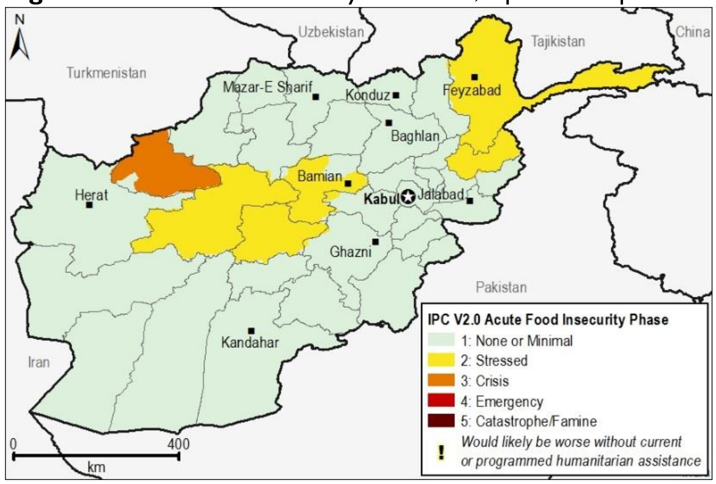
- Food security outcomes for the majority of poor households are likely to improve gradually throughout the country over the next six months, as the lean season comes to an end and the main harvests are collected. However, newly displaced households and those who may be displaced due to increasing insecurity and conflict will face higher levels of acute food insecurity.

- The 2015 cereal harvest starting in June is likely to be near-average, due to average area planted and normal progression of the wet season.

- Livestock prices are generally stable, with some markets reporting increased prices as compared to the same time last year, reflecting good pasture conditions. Sheep prices have increased year-on-year in some key markets, including by 16 percent in Nili and 14 percent in Faizabad. No change has been reported in agricultural labor wages.

- Wheat and wheat flour imports from Pakistan and Kazakhstan are likely to be normal over the course of 2015.

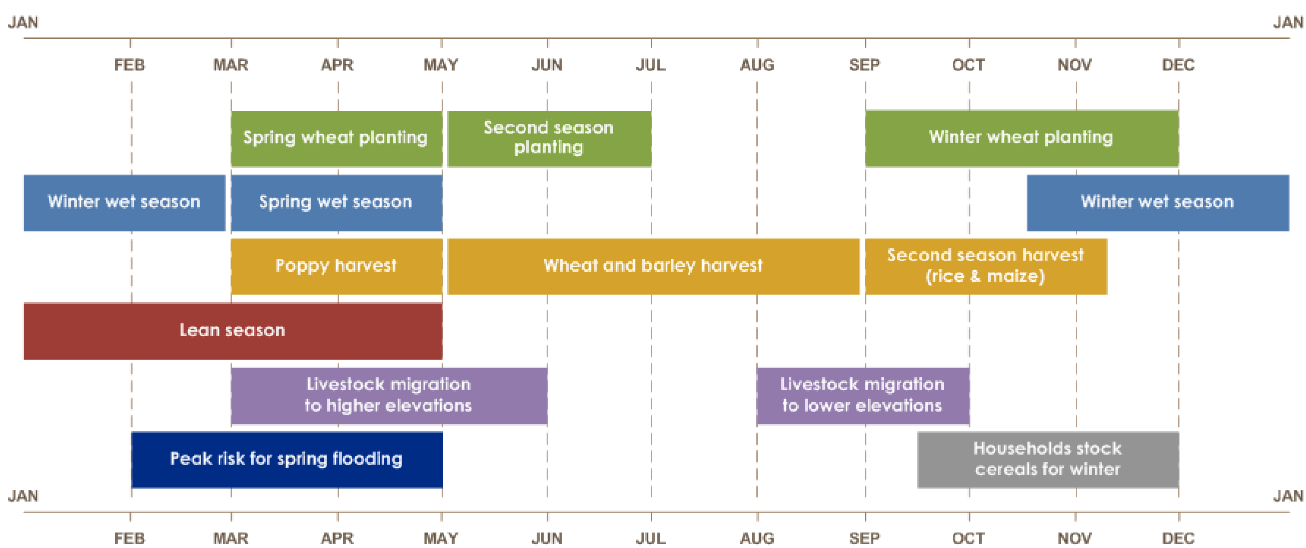
Figure 1. Current food security outcomes, April 2015April 2015



Source: *FEWS NET Afghanistan*

This map represents *acute* food insecurity outcomes relevant for emergency decision-making. It does not necessarily reflect *chronic* food insecurity.

SEASONAL CALENDAR FOR A TYPICAL YEAR



Source: *FEWS NET Afghanistan*

NATIONAL OVERVIEW

Current Situation

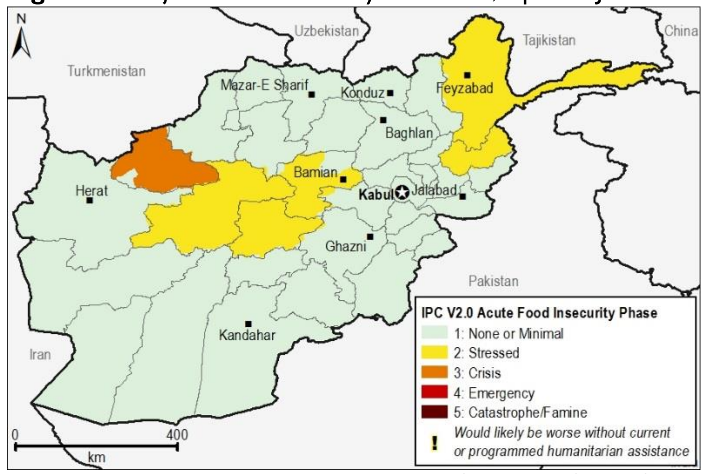
The 2014/15 wet season started earlier than usual in October 2014, with sufficient rains to start planting winter crops early in the season. Conditions were good for the planting of winter wheat from October to December 2014.

The good start of the season in October was followed by a temporary dry spell in December 2014 and January 2015. However, by the middle of March, snowfall returned to near-average levels, and it continues in the highest elevation areas of the central highlands and northeastern mountains.

As winter wheat is mainly planted on irrigated land, and water availability in 2014 was normal, planted area under winter wheat was near-average. As soils had some residual moisture from the previous season and from available irrigation water, land preparation and planting proceeded on schedule and at a normal level.

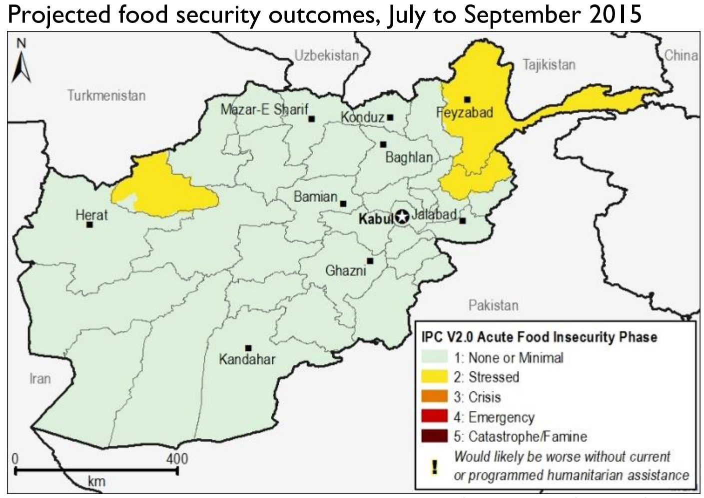
During late February and into March, there was a normal start to the spring rain season, and rainfall has continued at regular frequency and quantity throughout April. While the spring rains have been near-normal, total seasonal precipitation since October remains below the 2002 to 2011 average in some provinces of the northern, northeastern and southern parts of the country. However, the below-average cumulative precipitation in these areas is not of particular concern to 2015 agricultural seasons, due to the near-average snowpack and the normal progression of spring rains, which forecasts indicate are likely to remain average to above-average through May.

Figure 2. Projected food security outcomes, April to June 2015



Source: *FEWS NET Afghanistan*

Projected food security outcomes, July to September 2015



Source: *FEWS NET Afghanistan*

This map represents *acute* food insecurity outcomes relevant for emergency decision-making. It does not necessarily reflect *chronic* food insecurity.

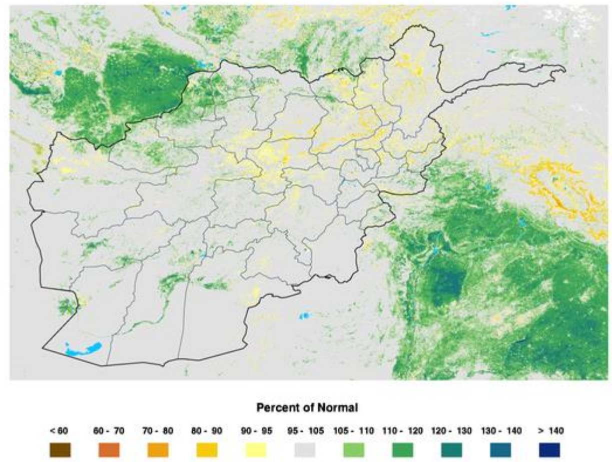
While temperatures remain below-average in the higher elevations, temperatures at lower elevations in northern Afghanistan were generally above-average from as early as late January. With regular rains and above-average temperatures, land preparation and sowing for spring wheat occurred 15 to 20 days earlier than normal in rainfed areas of northern Afghanistan. The regularity and continuity of the spring rains through early April encouraged farmers in northern, rainfed areas to plant spring wheat. Early estimates are that planted area for spring wheat is near-average.

Crop conditions for both winter and spring crops are normal at this stage, with most areas having winter or spring wheat crops in the vegetative, emergence, or flowering stages, depending on elevation and local conditions. FEWS NET has not received information or reports of adverse factors significantly affecting the normal growth of staple crops. As NDVI indicates, vegetation conditions, including croplands and rangelands, are normal or slightly better than normal (Figure 3).

The near-average wet season precipitation has resulted in adequate irrigation water availability throughout most watersheds in the country. The timing and distribution of the precipitation during the planting season for both winter and spring crops was very good, giving farmers the opportunity to plant more areas than last year. This was especially true for poorer wealth groups, who use oxen instead of renting tractors for land preparation.

Poor households move out of the lean season in most parts of the country by the end of April, although this does not typically take place until June in some higher-elevation areas. During this time, poor households in agricultural and agro-pastoral livelihood zones remain highly dependent on market purchases for food, primarily of wheat or wheat flour. In general, households fund these purchases by performing agricultural day labor for better-off households within their area of residence.

Figure 3. Afghanistan eMODIS 250m Percent of Normal NDVI Map. Period 21 / Apr 6 – 15, 2015.



Demand for agricultural labor resumed from its winter hiatus earlier than normal in lowland areas. With spring livestock births, milk production resumes, and the availability of milk and milk products increases. Currently, labor wages are similar to last year at around AFN 300 (USD 5.19) per day in many areas of the country. Livestock moved into spring grazing areas up to a month earlier than usual in many areas, helping households preserve some fodder for next winter. In more remote, higher elevation areas, improved road access during the spring has reestablished physical access to markets and to labor opportunities for migrants.

A normal early vegetable harvest has been completed in irrigated areas at lower elevations, where intensive agriculture is practiced. These harvests allow households who grow or buy vegetables to increase their dietary diversity. Income from vegetable sales is mostly normal. However, in eastern Afghanistan, competition with low-cost vegetables imported from Pakistan may suppress profits as compared to previous years.

Spring flooding affects some households every year, primarily in eastern and northern Afghanistan. The regular rains in March have led to some flooding in eastern Afghanistan. Households affected by natural disasters, including those displaced by flooding or who have lost valuable assets, are currently Stressed (IPC Phase 2), though many of these households are receiving some assistance.

The average current wheat grain price across the main cities monitored is AFN 23.8/Kg, which is 2.7 percent above the same time last year and 20.6 percent higher than the five-year average for March (2010 – 2014). Retail prices for wheat flour (High Price) decreased slightly from September 2014 to March 2015. The current retail price of AFN 28.6/Kg is 1.4 percent lower than the same month last year (March 2014), and 12.3 percent higher than the five-year average price for the same months.

Above-average wheat prices are the primary factor influencing the moderate decline in terms of trade (ToT) for casual labor to wheat flour (low quality). In Nili, Daykundi Province, the value of a day of casual labor in terms of wheat flour has declined from 7.65 Kg to 6.62 Kg between March 2014 and March 2015, and is nearly 18 percent below the five-year average. In Faizabad, Badakhshan Province, these ToT have improved slightly in the past year, from 10.34 Kg in March 2014 to 11.32 Kg in March of this year. However, the current value of labor in terms of wheat flour is approximately 11 percent below the five-year average.

Terms of trade (ToT) between sheep (one year old female) and wheat flour (low quality) are generally improved from the same time last year. In comparison to the five-year average, current ToT varies by market. For example, in Nili, Daykundi Province, current sheep to wheat flour ToT is 120 Kg/head, nearly 14 percent below the average ToT for March from 2010 to 2014. In Faizabad, Badakhshan Province, the current sheep to wheat flour ToT of 156 Kg/head is nearly 16 percent higher than the March 2010 – 2014 average.

Assumptions

- The **March to May spring rains** are expected to continue at above-average levels and continue to be well distributed, tapering off between now and May.
- **June to August Indian monsoon** rains in eastern Afghanistan and northern Pakistan are expected to be near-average.
- Both the winter wheat harvest in May/June and the spring wheat harvest in June/July in lowland areas are expected to be near-average.
- The cost of imported wheat flour from Pakistan is unlikely to decrease between April and June, due to the tight wheat market in Pakistan and seasonally high demand for market purchases in Afghanistan. However, domestic wheat grain prices are likely to decrease with the harvests starting in May and lasting into September at the highest elevations. Prices may start to rise slightly in September as demand for market purchases of imported wheat flour from Pakistan begins to increase.
- Following the wheat harvest, seeds and other inputs for the second plantings will remain available at their seasonally usual levels. Only fertilizer will be at a seasonally high price during the second planting from June to September 2015.
- Agricultural day labor rates will remain near their current levels throughout the production season, and demand will remain seasonally normal. Peak agricultural labor demand will be during the wheat harvest in June and during the spring crop harvest in August.
- In some areas of the central highlands, the wheat harvest may be up to two weeks later than usual due to slow growth and low temperatures in March and April.
- Military operations and civil insecurity will continue in many parts of Afghanistan throughout the scenario period. Conflict is not expected to significantly alter access or travel to high mountain pasture for normal pastoral and transhumant migrations. Resource-based conflict during migration will not be above typical levels.
- Afghan refugees currently living in Pakistan and Iran will remain in camps or among host populations in those countries.
- The March to June *Rabi* winter wheat harvest in Punjab and Sindh provinces of Pakistan will be average to above-average, though smaller than last year's bumper harvest. Pakistan is not expected to institute any new restrictions on wheat and wheat flour trade with Afghanistan.
- Prices for livestock and livestock products will follow normal seasonal patterns, remaining at seasonally high levels until September, when they will decline with the increase in sales as livestock return from high mountain pastures.

Most Likely Food Security Outcomes

The remainder of the spring rainy season is likely to have above-average precipitation, with normal timing and distribution. The main harvest, primarily for wheat, will begin in May and continue through September at the higher elevations. Many rural households in the northern and western regions still have food stocks from the near-average 2014 harvest, and will be able to replenish stocks during this year's harvest. Some households will sell some grain, replenishing market supplies.

In higher elevations, poor households' food stocks are likely to run down by May. As is typical, these households will sell some of their livestock in order to purchase food between May and local grain harvests in September. With livestock prices largely favorable and an anticipated peak in demand for livestock with Ramadan in June, it is expected that most poor households will be able to procure sufficient quantities of food during this period. Ongoing humanitarian assistance, including cash and food voucher programs, will also benefit some of the poorest households.

As a result of primarily normal seasonal progress and in the absence of large-scale shocks, most areas are expected to be in Minimal (IPC Phase 1) acute food insecurity throughout the period. Internally displaced persons (IDPs) and households affected by natural disasters who have lost access to land will be Stressed (IPC Phase 2).

Areas of exception include the Central Highlands, where poor households will remain Stressed (IPC Phase 2) until the ongoing lean season comes to an end with the local wheat harvests, mostly in July and August. In Badghis Province, the area remains in Crisis (IPC Phase 3) as many poor households entered the lean season with below-average stocks after poor 2014 harvests of grains and cash crops resulting from cumulative rainfall that was approximately 65 percent of normal during the 2013-2014 wet season. However, food security outcomes will begin to improve in May with increased milk production and labor opportunities, and will improve further with the main harvests beginning in June. By July, Badghis Province is likely to improve to Stressed (IPC Phase 2) acute food insecurity. In the northeastern region, outcomes are likely to be Stressed (IPC Phase 2), as described below.

AREA OF CONCERN

Livelihood Zone 17: Northeastern Highland Agro-Pastoral

Current Situation

Most households in this hilly and mountainous livelihood zone rely on livestock as a key resource for food and income. Sheep, goats, cattle, and donkeys are the main livestock owned by households. Crop production is also important for the livelihoods of all wealth groups in the zone. Though there is some rain dependence, most households rely on irrigation from snow melt for wheat, barley, beans, maize, and potato production. Market access is limited due to poor road conditions, remoteness, and seasonality. The majority of households use local district markets to sell and buy goods, traveling on foot or by donkey.

The last harvest in this zone, in July and August 2014, was mostly average. Although the wet season in these areas started more or less on time around November, cumulative precipitation began to drop below-average by December. While total rainfall and snowfall have not recovered to average, precipitation since February has been regular and in near normal amounts. Land preparation and planting for spring crops including wheat began in late February, as temperatures were higher than normal and spring rains started early. With frequent and timely spring precipitation, particularly during March, area planted under spring crops was greater than usual.

Early planting also resulted in the resumption of local demand for agricultural labor earlier than normal. Wages this year have been broadly similar to last year, at around AFN 300 (USD 5.19) per day.

In March/April, livestock give birth, pasture becomes available, and milk production resumes. The resumption of milking effectively ends the lean season, contributing to higher dietary diversity. The price for a one year old female sheep in March was 30 percent above the five-year average.

Assumptions

- Ten percent of the population is currently employed by the Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan National Police (ANP). It is expected that this level of employment in the ANA and ANP will continue for the entire April to September period, ensuring steady, uninterrupted income from formal employment for some households in this region.
- Agricultural labor demand from nearby, irrigated areas is expected to be above-average due to the expected good availability of irrigation water. This is expected to maintain agricultural labor wages near or above their current levels, with wages both inside and outside of this livelihood zone peaking between June and July.
- Targeted households will continue to benefit from humanitarian assistance programs, such as cash transfers and food vouchers.
- Domestic migration, primarily to larger cities in Afghanistan, is a key source of income for some households. These remittances are likely to continue near their current, stable level.

Most Likely Food Security Outcomes

The barley harvest is expected to start in May and the wheat harvest in June. As indications are that these harvests will be mostly average, many households will be able to replenish their grain stocks. Other households will be able to sell their surplus grains into the market at fairly favorable prices, as wheat prices are not expected to fall significantly. Poorer, landless households will depend more on agricultural labor, and the near-average harvest should support adequate wages both within the zone and in nearby irrigated areas, with the highest wages and highest demand for labor during the latter part of the harvest in June and July. Cash crops, including but not limited to cumin and sesame, are likely to continue being harvested through September, providing additional labor opportunities and sources of income.

With milk more widely available through August, households will be able to supplement their grain consumption with milk, purchased foods, and vegetables and fruit from their home gardens. Dietary diversity should thus remain seasonally normal through September. Due to pasture and fodder availability, livestock prices are likely to remain well above their five-year averages. Households who sell livestock in September will likely purchase cereals at prices lower than current levels. This should allow both households who sell livestock and landless households to purchase stocks for winter at a time of year when prices are more favorable.

Food security outcomes in the Northeastern Highland Agro-Pastoral livelihood zone are expected to be Stressed (IPC Phase 2) from April to September. This depends heavily on continued, regular spring rain into May.

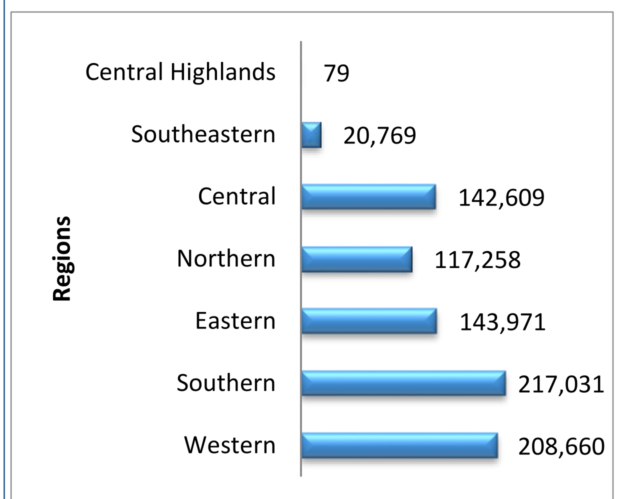
Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and Natural Disaster-Affected Households

Conflict is likely to continue to displace households in 2015. In 2014, 805,409 individuals became displaced from their places of origin, mainly in southern, western, and eastern Afghanistan. There are indications that conflict-related displacements could be greater this year as compared to 2014.

In March, 21,086 individuals were registered across the country as newly displaced by conflict. This represents a 48 percent increase compared to the previous month. The Northern Region registered the highest number of displaced and profiled IDPs, followed by the Central and Southern Regions. There was ongoing fighting between Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) and opposition groups in all three of these regions.

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) there are over 850,377 IDPs in Afghanistan as of 31st March 2015 (Figure 4).

Figure 4. IDPs in March 2015, by region



Source: *UNHCR*

Levels of displacements due to conflict are assumed to increase from March to August, when conflict typically intensifies. As IDPs are often in unfamiliar environments, many have not established their livelihoods or found new sources of income following displacement. Although most IDPs live in camps, a large number live among host populations either in informal settlements or in the homes of hosting communities.

IDPs are likely to remain Stressed (IPC Phase 2) from April to September, as they will depend heavily on humanitarian assistance and on support from host communities.

EVENTS THAT MIGHT CHANGE THE OUTLOOK

Table 1: Possible events over the next six months that could change the most-likely scenario.

Area	Event	Impact on food security outcomes
Northeast and Northwest	Below-average precipitation during May and June	If there are inadequate rainfall totals and/or poorly distributed rainfall from May to June 2015, the rainfed cereal crops, primarily wheat, could suffer from moisture stress, resulting in a much smaller, national cereal harvest. Import needs for wheat would increase, and this often results in higher prices for net consuming households, which reduces household purchasing power—both by increasing prices for wheat and wheat flour and by reducing incomes from labor associated with the rainfed harvest. If the rainfall is low enough, pasture conditions can be affected, and as livestock body conditions deteriorate, livestock prices drop.
Urban Areas	Pakistan and/or Iran forcibly repatriate Afghan refugees	If Iran and Pakistan forcibly repatriate Afghan refugees, then urban food security outcomes would likely deteriorate as the supply of casual labor increases along with the demand for external wheat supply.
Nationwide	Significant increase in conflict and related insecurity	If conflict intensifies during the May to July harvest, there may be areas where the security situation inhibits households from harvesting. This would reduce opportunities for agricultural labor and likely reduce the total size of the harvest, reducing both household stocks and market supplies of less expensive domestic wheat for the remainder of 2015.

ABOUT SCENARIO DEVELOPMENT

To project food security outcomes, FEWS NET develops a set of assumptions about likely events, their effects, and the probable responses of various actors. FEWS NET analyzes these assumptions in the context of current conditions and local livelihoods to arrive at a most likely scenario for the coming six months. Learn more here.