NEEDS ASSESSMENT REPORT

SAIFROOD UNITY AND AID ORGANIZATION (SUAO)

Livelihoods, Climate Change and Market Constraints

Western Afghanistan – Herat Province

Item	Details
Organization	Saifrood Unity and Aid Organization (SUAO)
Assessment Location	Gozara, Karokh and Zanda Jan Districts - Herat Province, Western Afghanistan
Assessment Focus	Livelihoods, climate change and market constraints
Assessment Period	August 2026
Status	Final Draft for Program and Donor Use

Prepared for program planning, resource mobilization and donor/partner engagement

Executive Summary

Saifrood Unity and Aid Organization (SUAO) conducted a needs assessment in August 2026 in 3 districts of Herat Province, Western Afghanistan, focusing on livelihoods, climate change and market constraints. The assessment identified interconnected challenges affecting farmers, households, small businesses and local economic actors, including water scarcity and recurrent drought, reliance on traditional production practices, limited access to quality agricultural inputs and technical services, post-harvest losses, weak market linkages, inadequate storage and packaging facilities, market price fluctuations, and limited awareness of formal business registration and licensing processes.

The findings indicate that these challenges are mutually reinforcing and cannot be effectively addressed through isolated interventions. A more integrated, locally led and market-oriented approach is required, linking community organisation and local resource mobilization, vocational and technical skills development, local economic innovation, market development, and constructive engagement with relevant authorities, service providers and market actors.

At community level, strengthening local organisation and resource mobilisation can enable communities to identify shared priorities, mobilise available local resources and develop practical mechanisms for collective action, particularly around water management, agricultural infrastructure, livelihood development and market access.

Climate pressures are a major concern. Recurrent drought and water scarcity are placing increasing pressure on agricultural livelihoods, while traditional irrigation practices contribute to inefficient water use. The assessment therefore highlights the importance of climate-smart and water-efficient production, including improved irrigation practices, water management, climate-resilient farming techniques and farmer capacity development. Vocational, technical and entrepreneurship skills are also critical to strengthening household and local economic resilience. Farmers, women, youth and other economic actors would benefit from practical skills in agricultural production, post-harvest handling, packaging, marketing, digital tools and enterprise development. These skills can support livelihood diversification, employment and stronger participation in local value chains.

The assessment identifies opportunities for local economic innovation and value-chain development, particularly around saffron, honey, fruits and vegetables. Improved production, post-harvest handling, drying, storage, packaging, branding and value addition can improve product quality and help producers retain a

greater share of value. Stronger relationships among producers, traders, processors, wholesalers and other buyers are important for improving market access and reducing dependence on low-value sales.

Sustainable local economic development will also require constructive engagement with relevant authorities and market actors. Better coordination and referral can help communities and businesses understand registration and licensing processes, access technical and institutional services, strengthen commercial relationships and contribute to an enabling environment for lawful economic activity.

Overall, the assessment indicates that Herat has significant potential for resilient and sustainable livelihood development, but this potential is constrained by climate pressures, technical and financial limitations, weak value chains, limited market access and gaps in local services and infrastructure. Future programming should combine local ownership and resource mobilisation with climate-smart production, vocational and technical skills, local economic innovation, market development and constructive institutional engagement.

1. Introduction and Background

Agriculture and livestock remain important sources of household income and livelihoods in Afghanistan. In Herat Province, agricultural production has significant potential, including saffron, honey, fruits and vegetables. However, producers and households face climatic, financial, technical and market-related constraints that limit productivity, profitability and resilience.

The assessment also recognises the importance of sustainable and lawful livelihood opportunities following changes in the cultivation of illicit crops. Saffron is identified as a high-value livelihood opportunity in Herat, while production quality, post-harvest handling, value addition and market access remain important areas requiring support.

2. Purpose and Objectives

The overall purpose of the assessment was to identify priority livelihood, climate and market constraints in Herat Province and generate practical evidence to inform future humanitarian, recovery, resilience and livelihoods programming.

3. Assessment Scope and Methodology

SUAO conducted a community-level needs assessment in 17 communities across three districts of Herat Province - Karokh, Gozara and Zanda Jan - in August 2026. The assessment focused on key factors affecting household and community livelihoods, including climate change and water-related challenges, agricultural production, market access and development, local economic opportunities, and business-related constraints. A qualitative and participatory assessment approach was used to ensure that the perspectives and experiences of community members and local stakeholders were captured. The assessment employed three complementary data-collection methods: **Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), and direct field observation**. Using multiple sources of information helped the assessment team triangulate findings and develop a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges, opportunities and priorities identified across the targeted communities.

A total of **nine FGDs** were conducted, with approximately **6-8 participants in each discussion**. The FGDs provided an opportunity for community members to collectively discuss their experiences, priority needs, livelihood challenges, climate-related impacts, agricultural constraints, market conditions and potential opportunities for improving household and community resilience. In addition, **15 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)** were conducted with respected community elders and individuals identified as having strong knowledge of local community conditions, livelihoods, social dynamics and economic activities. Their perspectives were used to complement the information gathered through the FGDs and to provide additional contextual understanding of the issues identified during the assessment.

Finally, **direct observation by the field assessment team** was used to complement information obtained through FGDs and KIIs. Field observations provided an opportunity to verify and contextualise reported conditions, including aspects related to agricultural practices, water availability, infrastructure, market conditions and other livelihood-related factors.

Assessment Element	Available Information
Assessment period	August 2026
Geographic scope	Herat Province, Western Afghanistan
Primary themes	Livelihoods, climate change, agriculture, markets and business constraints
Respondent/sample size	17 Communities in 3 districts (9 FGD, 15 KII)
Data collection methods	Focused Group Discussion, Key Informant Interview and Field Team Observation

4. Key Findings

Water Scarcity, Drought and Climate Vulnerability

Recurrent drought and water scarcity are identified as major constraints to agriculture in Herat. Reduced availability of water resources affects farmers' ability to sustain production and can lead to reduced cultivation. Traditional irrigation systems and open, non-standard channels also contribute to inefficient water use and uneven distribution. Water-efficient irrigation, improved water management and climate-smart agricultural practices are therefore priority areas.

Agricultural Production and Saffron Livelihoods

Saffron represents an important high-value livelihood opportunity in Herat. However, production remains heavily dependent on traditional practices. Farmers have limited technical knowledge related to planting spacing, corm depth, irrigation, soil nutrition and improved production practices, affecting productivity and quality.

Access to Quality Inputs and Technical Services

Limited financial capacity constrains access to quality fertilisers, improved planting materials and appropriate crop-protection products. The assessment also identifies gaps in specialised agricultural services, including technical advice, soil testing, quality-input information and timely identification of pests and diseases.

Post-Harvest Management and Product Quality

Challenges during harvesting, processing, drying and packaging can reduce product quality and market value, particularly for saffron. Traditional drying and handling practices, inadequate hygiene and weak packaging are important constraints. Fruits and vegetables face additional risks where appropriate storage and cold-chain facilities are unavailable.

Market Access, Pricing and Value Addition

Farmers face limited access to higher-value markets and limited knowledge of modern marketing. Inadequate packaging, weak branding, limited understanding of market requirements, price fluctuations and dependence on intermediaries can reduce producers' bargaining power and their share of value.

Storage and Cold-Chain Constraints

Lack of adequate storage and cold-storage facilities is a major constraint for perishable agricultural products. Limited storage can contribute to losses and may force producers to sell during periods of high supply and lower prices.

Business Formalization and Licensing

Limited awareness of business registration and licensing procedures affects returnees, farmers, youth and other local business actors. Practical information, referral and administrative guidance could help businesses understand formalisation processes and operate more effectively.

Women and Youth Economic Participation

Women are involved in saffron cleaning and other agriculture crop processing but have limited access to specialised training, appropriate tools and marketing opportunities. Youth have potential in technology, design, packaging, digital marketing and entrepreneurship that could strengthen local value chains.

Community Organization and Local Resource Mobilisation

Local economic resilience can be strengthened by supporting community organisation and locally led resource mobilisation. Collective identification of priorities and mobilisation of appropriate local resources can support shared solutions to water management, agricultural infrastructure, livelihood development and market-related challenges.

5. Root Cause Analysis

Root Cause	Observed / Identified Implication
Traditional production practices	Limited technical knowledge and exposure to improved agricultural practices.
Financial constraints	Limited purchasing power restricts access to quality inputs and productive investment.
Water scarcity and inefficient irrigation	Drought and traditional irrigation systems reduce reliable water availability and efficiency.
Pests and diseases	Limited early identification and weak access to specialised services increase production risks.
Post-harvest losses	Traditional drying, handling, packaging and limited storage reduce quality and market value.

Weak market linkages	Limited direct access to buyers, weak branding and dependence on intermediaries reduce producer bargaining power.
Business formalisation barriers	Limited awareness of licensing and administrative procedures constrains formal economic activity.
Limited inclusion of women and youth	Training, equipment and market opportunities are not sufficiently accessible to these groups.
Limited local coordination	Weak links among communities, authorities, service providers and market actors can constrain collective and market-based solutions.

6. Priority Needs and Recommended Response Areas

Priority Area	Need Identified	Recommended Response Direction
Community organisation & resource mobilisation	Limited mechanisms for collective action around shared livelihood constraints.	Strengthen community structures, participatory planning and mobilisation of appropriate local resources.
Climate-smart & water-efficient production	Water scarcity, drought and inefficient irrigation.	Promote efficient irrigation, water management and climate-resilient production practices.
Vocational & technical skills	Gaps in production, post-harvest, enterprise and marketing skills.	Provide practical, demand-driven technical, vocational and entrepreneurship training.
Quality inputs & services	Limited access to quality inputs and specialised services.	Facilitate appropriate market-based access, extension and referral services.
Post-harvest management	Losses and quality reduction during drying, handling, storage and packaging.	Improve processing, drying, hygiene, grading, packaging and storage practices.
Local economic innovation	Limited value addition and diversification of local enterprises.	Support locally appropriate business models, value addition, innovation and enterprise development.
Market development	Weak market linkages, price volatility and dependence on intermediaries.	Strengthen market information, buyer linkages, branding, aggregation and value-chain relationships.
Business formalisation	Limited understanding of registration and licensing processes.	Provide information, referral and constructive engagement with relevant authorities.
Women & youth	Limited access to skills, tools and market opportunities.	Create safe, meaningful and context-appropriate economic opportunities.

7. Potential Program Interventions

- Support community-led identification and prioritisation of livelihood needs and strengthen local resource mobilisation for feasible community initiatives.
- Promote climate-smart and water-efficient agricultural production, including improved irrigation, water management and drought-resilient practices.
- Deliver practical vocational, technical and entrepreneurship skills training linked to local market demand.
- Improve access to quality agricultural inputs, technical extension, pest and disease management and other relevant services.
- Support improved saffron production, drying, grading, hygiene, packaging, branding and value addition.

- Strengthen fruit and vegetable value chains through improved post-harvest management, storage and feasible cold-chain solutions.
- Facilitate producer-market linkages and constructive engagement among farmers, traders, processors, wholesalers and buyers.
- Promote local economic innovation, enterprise development and market-oriented livelihood diversification.
- Provide information and referral support on business registration and licensing, while maintaining constructive engagement with relevant authorities.
- Ensure meaningful participation of women and youth in skills development, value-chain activities, enterprise opportunities and decision-making where feasible.

8. Cross-Cutting Considerations

- Gender, inclusion and safeguarding: interventions should identify participation barriers and promote safe, dignified and meaningful participation.
- Youth engagement: programme design should leverage youth capacities in technology, design, marketing, entrepreneurship and other locally relevant areas.
- Do No Harm and conflict sensitivity: livelihood and resource-related interventions should consider local power dynamics, access to resources and potential tensions.
- Accountability to Affected Populations: communities should participate in programme design and implementation and have access to appropriate feedback and complaints mechanisms.
- Environmental sustainability: water efficiency, climate resilience and responsible use of natural resources should be integrated throughout agricultural interventions.
- Market sensitivity: interventions should be based on market evidence and designed to minimise unintended market distortion.
- Constructive institutional engagement: coordination with relevant authorities and service providers should be transparent, practical and focused on improving access to services and enabling lawful economic activity.

9. Conclusion

The assessment indicates that livelihoods in Herat are affected by interconnected climate, production, financial, post-harvest and market constraints. Water scarcity and drought are particularly important pressures, while traditional production methods, limited access to quality inputs and technical services, post-harvest losses, weak market linkages and limited storage further constrain income and resilience.

Herat also has opportunities for sustainable livelihood development through high-value agricultural commodities such as saffron, improved fruit and vegetable value chains, efficient water management, local economic innovation, skills development, stronger market connections and increased participation of women and youth. Future programming should therefore adopt an integrated, locally led and market-oriented model.

10. Recommendations

1. Adopt integrated livelihood programming connecting production, water management, skills, post-harvest handling, enterprise development and market access.
2. Strengthen community-led planning, organisation and mobilisation of locally available resources.
3. Promote climate-smart and water-efficient agricultural practices in water-stressed areas.
4. Strengthen practical vocational, technical and entrepreneurship skills linked to local market demand.
5. Improve access to quality agricultural inputs and specialised technical services.
6. Reduce post-harvest losses through improved drying, processing, packaging, storage and quality control.
7. Strengthen market development through market information, producer-buyer linkages, aggregation, branding and value addition.
8. Promote local economic innovation and livelihood diversification, with attention to women and youth.
9. Provide information and referral support for business registration and licensing and maintain constructive engagement with relevant authorities.
10. Undertake additional quantitative analysis before programme design to establish the scale, geographic distribution and severity of identified needs.

Annex 1. Summary of Assessment Findings

Theme	Key Issue	Priority Implication
Water & climate	Water scarcity, drought and inefficient irrigation	Improve water-use efficiency and resilience
Production	Traditional practices and limited technical knowledge	Strengthen technical training and extension
Inputs & services	Limited access to quality inputs and specialised services	Improve access to productive inputs and services
Post-harvest	Drying, packaging and storage gaps	Reduce losses and improve product quality
Local economic innovation	Limited value addition and enterprise opportunities	Support innovation, diversification and value addition
Markets	Weak linkages, price fluctuations and intermediaries	Strengthen market development and value-chain relationships
Business	Limited awareness of formal registration/licensing	Provide information, referral and institutional engagement
Inclusion	Women and youth opportunities underutilised	Increase meaningful and safe economic participation
Community	Limited collective mechanisms for shared livelihood issues	Strengthen local organisation and resource mobilisation

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Annex 2. Reporting and Evidence Note

Image: SUAO team visiting local markets to assess market access for farmers and seasonal variations in crop prices and values.

IMAGE: SUAO field team visiting farmers field to assess traditional agricultural practices.