



Research Highlights

This month, participants felt that owing to the reopening of schools, universities and government offices, they felt the situation is going 'back to normal'. For those who believed this more strongly, they were less likely to be practicing preventive measures against COVID-19. However, for some (such as IDPs) lack of uptake of practices such as physical distancing and effective handwashing was also down to lack of access to and affordability of resources such as clean water and soap. Although participants felt they were seeing a return to normalcy, they still felt concerned about a possible second wave and a rise of positive cases of Covid-19. But they are more worried about the economic impact due to restrictions on their lives and livelihoods rather than the impact on their health. They were also concerned about the lack of support from government and NGOs to cope with the impact of COVID-19. While TV and Radio remained as the main and most reliable sources of information about Covid-19, participants also reported that their children are becoming an additional source of information as they share with family members what they learn about Covid-19 at school. Concerns over women's physical and mental wellbeing remained along with lack of Covid-19 healthcare support in the districts and rural areas. Participants also felt that local health workers lack the adequate knowledge and training to deal with COVID-19 and as such they either refuse to treat people or approach cases with a lot of concern.

"We cannot find water; we do not have money to buy face mask and finding a loaf of bread is difficult for us. We rely on God as we have no other choice." (A displaced man, Maimana, Faryab)

Key findings

Back to business and 'Back to Normal'

Although research suggests that there is recognition and acceptance of Covid-19 as a disease, with the reopening of schools, universities, sports leagues, government offices and marketplaces, most men and women respondents in urban and rural areas now believe that the situation is going or has gone back to normal in everywhere. This was especially the view of rural male respondents.

They also reiterated their perception that the virus has less impact on Muslims as they felt there had been fewer casualties in Afghanistan and other Muslim majority countries.

"Few months ago, I did not go to mosque for prayer to avoid getting infected with Coronavirus, but now I go to mosque, university and work. In the city, everything looks normal and I do not see any sign of people's concerns about Covid-19." (Male, Nad Ali district, Helmand)

Schools' Vulnerability

Although men and women felt that there was a marked return to normality with the reopening of educational institutions, they are still worried about the impact this would have on the spread of the virus. Many believe that schools and universities do not have the capacity to follow physical distancing guidelines or resources to distribute masks for students or provide them other facilities such as clean water and soap.

"Today I heard that we lost one of our schoolteachers. He was infected after the school reopening and he died yesterday. I do not know how many of his colleagues and students are infected as there are 40–50 in each class and due to lack of resources, it is not possible to observe social distancing in the school." (Female, Journalist, Faryab)

Fear of further economic constraints

Men and women in all six provinces were worried about a possible second wave of Covid-19 and its subsequent impact on their livelihoods. Most participants reported unemployment and poverty as a result of COVID-19 continue to be an issue for them. They fear that another lockdown will not only intensify poverty and unemployment but also limit access to basic resources and healthcare which is already limited to many remote communities in the winter. All internally displaced men interviewed raised similar

concerns about lack of access to basic services and healthcare in the winter months.

Most study participants believe that the government has failed to support people during the pandemic as government interventions were marred by corruption and did not reach and benefit the most vulnerable families. Research participants also thought the support from non-governmental organizations was not enough as all. For example, only one participant from Kunduz could recall Covid-19 related support provided by NGOs in the last few months.

"People are worried about second wave of Covid-19. A probable lockdown [will] increase economic problems. I am responsible for earning for my family. If lockdown is enforced [again], I might lose my job and my family would have nothing to eat." (Journalist 24, Faryab)

Additionally, some participants say that the negative economic impact of Covid-19 abroad means that families in Afghanistan who rely on remittances from family members abroad have a reduced income. Therefore, a second wave in neighbouring countries and around the globe is concerning for them too.

Rural men commonly expressed the opinion that they do not believe in a second wave of Covid-19 with some men even denying Covid-19 as an infectious disease.

"I observed all preventive measures such as wearing mask, washing hand, avoiding gathering like weddings, but never missed prayers in the mosque or going to funerals or other religious ceremonies. I did not get sick and never got infected by Coronavirus." (Male, Community Elder, Helmand)

Women are bearing more physical and mental burdens as a result of COVID-19

Male and female participants reported that Covid-19 and restrictions imposed during lockdown has caused psychological problems for women. They also felt that violence against women has increased during this period. A man in Daikundi reported that his cousin was treated badly when she fell sick during early months of pandemic and was forced to stay at home. She did not receive any treatment as the family lives far from the provincial centre and her husband did not want to take her to hospital.

"My cousin was ill before the pandemic, but her illness intensified during Covid-19 or she might have been infected by Covid-19. Her family did not take her to hospital....The reasons were that they lived far away from the provincial centre, and her husband was not concerned about her illness." (A male radio listener in Daikundi)

Compared to men, Covid-19 has increased women's economic problems and has limited their means of income generation.

"Covid-19 has affected several aspects of women and girls' lives in Khawaja Sabzposh district. We had a vocational centre teaching women tailoring. Unfortunately, with the spread of Coronavirus was closed down." (Female, Reporter, Faryab)

Health workers lack knowledge and training

Most participants in the districts say that they do not have access to a dedicated Covid-19 health facility; health workers have not received training regarding Covid-19 and are not aware of how to deal with Covid-19 patients. Most of study participants from rural areas have witnessed individuals who have visited clinics or have not received any support from doctors or health workers.

"My child got sick. I took him to the clinic. No doctor checked him as they were afraid of getting infected." (Female, Khulm district, Balkh)

School children act as an additional source of Covid-19 information

While media (TV, radio and social media) remain main sources of information, many participants mention that school children are another source of information. As they get a lot of information from schools and universities, they share it with rest of the family members. Doctors and health workers are the main sources of information for the IDPs, and some also have access to radio and get information through radio.

During the lockdown, respondents reported that the government had established Covid-19 information centres in rural areas which were also a source of information for men in particular. However, flow of information and Covid-19 awareness is limited in some insecure districts of Kunduz, Helmand, Nangarhar and Faryab. People do not have access to TV or radio and any public awareness campaigns have to be checked by the government they are not promoting an anti-government message first.

“Door to door awareness campaign is very useful for us because we do not have access to TV and do not have enough time to listen to radio as we are busy with housework.”
(Female, Radio listener, Helmand)

Not complying with guidelines anymore

Despite knowing of the preventive measures and being aware of their importance in stopping spread of Coronavirus, most people say they do not practice them. The preventive measures they say they know include physical distancing, washing hands frequently with soap and wearing face masks. Many including IDPs blamed lack of access and unaffordability. However, perception that the pandemic has ended, or the virus become weaker are also among reasons for lack of practice.

Some common rumours

Respondents shared rumours that they had heard about COVID-19 which included:

- Coronavirus is like flu and is not dangerous.
- A lot of non-Muslims converted to Islam to be safe from Covid-19 and they asked fellow Muslims to pray for their survival.
- A second wave of Covid-19 is more dangerous than the first wave; it will infect more young people and children and the mortality rate is high.
- Chemical material was diffused unintentionally in a Chinese laboratory which caused Covid-19.
- Coronavirus is human-made and created for political purposes.
- A traditional therapist in Faryab believes that natural herbs such as root of *Zark Abran* tree, ginger, *Sia Dana* and *Khakshir* help Covid-19 patients recover. He claims that himself, his wife, and their neighbours, who were infected by Coronavirus recovered by using these herbs.

Major information needs

Study participants want to know:

- The difference between flu and Covid-19;
- The effect of weather on the spread of the virus;
- How to protect themselves from the virus during the winter; and
- Why there have been reportedly fewer Covid-19 casualty in Afghanistan in comparison to other countries.

Research methodology

We have conducted 38 in-depth interviews during the first week of October in six provinces including Faryab, Balkh, Kunduz, Daikundi, Nangarhar and Helmand provinces.

These interviews were conducted with:

- Nine female and six male listeners of local radio stations;
- Four female and eight male Community Development Council (CDC) members; and
- Eight male and three female active journalists.

We have also conducted two face-to-face qualitative focus group discussions (FGDs) with 10 internally displaced people (IDPs) in Balkh and Faryab.

To understand better how communities are experiencing Covid-19, we asked people what

are their main current concerns; their knowledge on Covid-19; what information they currently have, what information they need; and what are their sources of information. Radio listeners were asked to share their own experiences and practices; while CDC members and journalists were asked to share their own experiences as well as to reflect on their communities' experiences. In addition to these interviews, data has been triangulated with other research findings from other ongoing BBC Media Action in Afghanistan projects looking at Covid-19.

Prior to conducting the research, we consulted with some members of Risk Communications and Community Engagement (RCCE) Working Group to incorporate their information needs in our research tools.

About Community Voice

This Monthly Research Paper is produced based on feedback collected from communities around Afghanistan affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. It aims to provide a summary of community perceptions, worries and concerns, to assist the health and humanitarian community to better plan and implement activities with communities' needs and preferences in mind. It is a product of BBC Media Action with funding from Global Affairs Canada and World Health Organization. Its content is the responsibility of BBC Media Action, and any views expressed herein should not be taken to represent those of the BBC itself, or any donors supporting the work of the charity.

We welcome further collaboration from other organisations who would like to share feedback they are receiving in areas where they work; or contribute to the analysis and production of the bulletin. If you would like to get involved, please contact Ahmad Rashed Hayati at rashed.hayati@af.bbcmmediaaction.org.