



Education in Adversity

How NGOs Providing Education
to Girls and Women in Afghanistan
Navigate Challenges

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ABSTRACT

In 2022, the Taliban prohibited girls and women in Afghanistan from attending secondary school. Still, a range of NGOs continues to provide educational opportunities. This study examines how these organisations navigate challenges and build organisational resilience in fragile and high-risk environments. Eleven interviews with NGO representatives were conducted. The findings reveal that NGOs rely on interlinked adaptive capacities, defined as resources and the ability to mobilise them, and resilience-building strategies, understood as concrete strategic actions enabled by these capacities, to respond to external challenges and build resilience. In practical terms, this study emphasises the importance of fostering intrinsic motivation and psychological well-being among volunteers and staff, promoting collaboration among organisations, and strengthening local grassroots efforts. It further highlights the role of local actors, especially women, in ensuring context-sensitive programme design and implementation. These insights contribute to a deeper understanding of how NGOs adapt to sustain education in crisis settings.

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FABIA JENNY

Fabia Jenny studied International and Development Studies at the Graduate Institute of Geneva, graduating in 2025. In her master's thesis, she explored how NGOs adapt to continue providing education for Afghan women and girls despite numerous challenges. Her work was recognised with the NORRAG Prize in Comparative and International Education.

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1. Introduction

“All we get to hear about Afghan women from the Western media is that they’re oppressed, they are helpless, they need saving. While they do need support, I don’t believe that Afghan women are any of those. If anything, they’re courageous, they’re resilient, and they’re eager to learn.” Anonymous interviewee.

- 1 In August 2021, the Taliban regained control of Kabul (BBC, 2021). Since then, they have been implementing a series of policies significantly curtailing girls’ and women’s rights (United States Institute of Peace, n.d.). They are being denied their freedom of movement, association, and expression, which amounts to the crime against humanity of gender persecution (Human Rights Watch, 2025) and a regime of “gender apartheid” (Amnesty International, 2024). Among these appalling restrictions is the ban on education for girls beyond sixth grade, making Afghanistan the only country in the world where girls are barred from secondary school (UNESCO, 2024). This has devastating repercussions on girls’ and women’s mental and physical health (Hamidi, 2024; Mohammadi et al., 2024).
- 2 Education is the main requirement for women’s empowerment and enables them to have full participation in their societies’ social, political, and economic affairs (Reshi et al., 2022). It likely leads to higher wages and economic security, while also increasing women’s political involvement. Moreover, educated women are better equipped to make decisions about their health and their families’ health. Women’s education is also linked to reproductive behavior, often leading to fewer children and better family planning practices (Castro Martín, 1995).
- 3 Further, educating women contributes to national progress as it enables them to acquire the cognitive skills to contribute to tackling a country’s challenges, while increasing the available human resources (Yadav, 2022). It further leads to returns in terms of intergenerational benefits to society, reflected in better schooling and health outcomes among future generations (Le & Nguyen, 2021). Thus, Afghan families and society as a whole will face disastrous consequences from the ban on girls’ education (Sharafat, 2024). All of this in the midst of a food security crisis and in a drought-plagued nation (Hadad-Zervos & Umali-Deininger, 2024).
- 4 In response, various non-governmental organisations [NGOs] across the globe have stepped in to support women and girls in Afghanistan with alternative education opportunities. They offer a range of educational activities such as online classes (Wong Sak Hoi, 2024) or underground schools (Begum, 2024; Sharafat, 2024), thereby

confronting severe security threats (Mukhtar, 2024). Previous literature has outlined the role and strategies of NGOs leading education programmes during crisis or serving underprivileged communities. While offering advantages such as fostering a sense of hope and normality, providing schooling material, and granting a chance to keep learning (Khan et al., 2018), these organisations also confront obstacles, including a lack of adequate infrastructure or qualified teachers (Hakimi et al., 2024), political restrictions, or traumatised students (Burde et al., 2017).

- 5 The volatile and insecure setting in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan means that NGOs must constantly adapt to frequent disruptions and security risks threatening their ability to operate and sustain their programmes. The concept of organisational resilience is key to understanding how NGOs navigate these challenges and survive. Although organisational resilience lacks a unified definition (Pradana & Ekowati, 2024), broadly speaking, it refers to an organisation's ability to withstand and adapt to adversities (Paluszak et al., 2021). Literature on NGO resilience remains limited (Fyffe, 2014), particularly on how resilience can be achieved in practice (Chen et al., 2021).
- 6 Adaptive capacities are crucial to building resilience (Singh et al., 2022). They include both the resources available to an organisation and an organisation's ability to mobilise and strategically deploy them (Brooks & Adger, 2005). When adaptive capacities are put into action, they enable adaptation (Singh et al., 2022). In this way, adaptive capacities form the foundation for resilience-building strategies, such as adaptability, diversification, and ecosystem building (Szemző et al., 2022), which translate potential into concrete measures that sustain operations in complex environments.
- 7 This study aims to analyse how NGOs offering education opportunities for women and girls in Afghanistan remain resilient in the face of challenges, such as high risks and volatility. Specifically, it examines their adaptive capacities, encompassing the resources they possess and their ability to mobilise and utilise them effectively. Furthermore, it explores into which concrete resilience-building strategies these adaptive capacities are translated, enabling NGOs' operational survival in a difficult context. For clarity and consistency, this thesis uses the term "NGO" to refer to a broad range of civil society organisations providing education for girls and women in Afghanistan, which may be both formally registered entities and community-based grassroots initiatives.
- 8 The subsequent research question will be answered: *How do NGOs providing education for women and girls in Afghanistan build organisational resilience in response to challenges?* Additionally, the following sub-questions will be addressed:
 1. Which resources do NGOs rely on to sustain and adapt their processes and programmes?
 2. Which adaptive capacities are essential for NGOs operating in Afghanistan to enable resilience-building?
 3. Which strategies do NGOs implement to strengthen their resilience and sustain their operations?
- 9 Thereby, this study contributes to the literature on NGO resilience in volatile and high-risk environments and sheds light on how education organisations navigate crises under Taliban rule.

- 10 The ePaper will proceed in the following way. First, it provides background information on the Taliban's ban on girls' secondary education, its consequences, and reactions by NGOs. The literature review then presents the role and challenges of NGOs providing education in conflict settings and to disadvantaged individuals. Moreover, adaptive capacities and strategies to build NGOs' resilience will be discussed. Based on the reviewed literature, the study establishes a preliminary conceptual framework that serves as a theoretical basis for the research. The methodology section details the qualitative approach used, including the selection criteria for interviewees, the data collection and analysis methods, and ethical considerations. Subsequently, the findings will be analysed and applied to refine the conceptual framework introduced, offering insights applicable to NGOs providing education in constrained and dynamic settings. Finally, the ePaper concludes with theoretical and practical implications and recommendations for future research.

2. Background

2.1 The Taliban's Ban on Girls' Secondary Education

- 1 Since the Taliban's return to power, women's rights and liberties in all areas of their public and private lives have been severely curtailed, including in education. In September 2021, girls and women were banned from attending school beyond sixth grade (Fetrat, 2024), and by 2023, this prohibition was extended to higher education and entrance exams at private universities (Reuters, 2023). In 2023, all international NGOs involved in education programmes in Afghanistan were forced to stop their operations within one month (Greenfield, 2023). As of 2024, over 2.5 million girls were out of school, which represents 80 percent of school-age girls (UNESCO, 2024). Thereby, girls and women with disabilities are disproportionately affected by a lack of access to education (UN Women, 2024a).
- 2 Initially, women took up medical training, but later this alternative was banned, too (Sirat, 2024). This restriction increases the burden on Afghanistan's fragile healthcare system, as female medical staff are desperately needed to provide healthcare services to female patients, especially in regions where women cannot be treated by male doctors unless accompanied by a male relative (The United Nations Office at Geneva, 2024).
- 3 The ban on girls' secondary education has far-reaching consequences across all areas of Afghan life. Psychologically and emotionally, girls face isolation, loss of educational opportunities and increased insecurity, leading to widespread depression and suicidal thoughts (Mohammadi et al., 2024). Marginalised and excluded from society, they experience stress, hopelessness, and the feeling of not being in control over their lives (Hamidi, 2024). The education ban also contributes to forced and early marriages, migration (Hamidi, 2024), and deteriorating public health (Abbasi, 2024). Economically, the World Bank outlines that the education restrictions may cost Afghanistan over 1.4 billion USD, constituting an annual two percent decline in the national income (Najam et al., 2024). Thus, under the Taliban's policy wage growth and national income growth will suffer. In conclusion, the education ban on girls and women beyond sixth grade has devastating impacts in the short- and long-run, affecting individual girls, their families, as well as their community and the nation as a whole.

- 4 Most private alternative educational activities, which women took up to stay active and combat isolation, have been banned over time (Sarwari & Adnan, 2024). Currently, only religious and online programmes remain as options.

2.2 NGOs' Reactions to the Ban on Education

- 5 Several NGOs continue to find loopholes to provide girls and women in Afghanistan with educational opportunities, defying the Taliban's education ban. Some offer online classes, for instance via WhatsApp (Wong Sak Hoi, 2024). Given that only 6 percent of women in Afghanistan have access to the internet, organisations often also cover students' internet costs. Others are running secret underground schools (Segran, 2025), with former teachers holding classes in their homes (Begum, 2024). Activists abroad frequently support them financially and with school materials (Mukhtar, 2024).
- 6 These organisations are operating in an uncertain environment and face security risks. Especially in provinces where the ban is strictly enforced, the Taliban run inspections and punish those involved in such operations. Thus, hidden schools implement security measures and protocols, such as warning their students not to carry their schoolbooks with them (Begum, 2024). In some other areas, implicit arrangements between the local Taliban representatives and teachers provide for safer conditions (Mukhtar, 2024).
- 7 These efforts take place within a broader NGO landscape in Afghanistan, where organisations vary widely in size and scope (Clark, 2023). Under the Taliban rule, space for civil society has shrunk, and many of them were forced to shut down or reconstitute themselves (Heinrich Böll Foundation, 2024). Aid to Afghanistan remains politicised (Clark, 2023), and the Taliban's mistrust of Western-supported civil society poses further challenges (Heinrich Böll Foundation, 2024). Donors' insistence on channeling funds through United Nations [UN] agencies limits support for NGOs directly engaging with the Taliban, despite arguments that such engagement may foster longer-term change (Clark, 2023).
- 8 The ban on female NGO staff restricts programme delivery to female programme recipients (Clark, 2023). Some NGOs have adapted by negotiating access to women without male relatives or implementing home office solutions for their female staff.
- 9 Given the decline in international funds, NGOs are required to rely to a larger extent on the local communities to function, with grassroots initiatives gaining importance (Heinrich Böll Foundation, 2024). Letting them lead programmes is essential to avoid confrontations with the Taliban, as they may know best where stretching boundaries is possible.
- 10 Thus, NGOs providing education opportunities for girls affected by the ban on education face a myriad of challenges. The following section dives into the role and challenges of NGOs in conflict-affected regions and introduces adaptive capacities and strategies for them to rely on in an effort to build organisational resilience.

3. Literature Review

3.1 NGO Education in Crisis-Affected Regions

- 1 Political conflicts decrease access to education (Burde et al., 2017). Thereby, the impact of conflict on education tends to be more pronounced for girls than boys, as well as for younger children than older ones (Burde et al., 2017; Verwimp & Van Bavel, 2014). Conflicts often lead to political instability, reducing a state's legitimacy and capacity (Nicolai et al., 2020). As a result, although the primary responsibility for education provision lies with governments (Tarricone et al., 2021), non-state actors, particularly NGOs, often step in to ensure educational continuity (Cambridge Education, 2017). International efforts, such as Education for All [EFA], have reinforced the role of NGOs and UN agencies in education in conflict-affected regions (Khan et al., 2018). Moreover, with the founding of the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies [INEE] in 2000, the crucial role of education in response to conflict has been acknowledged (Creed & Morpeth, 2014). Importantly, education is also recognised as the fourth pillar of humanitarian assistance during crises (Khan et al., 2018).
- 2 While there is a great variety of organisations providing education to disadvantaged groups, they generally share a nonprofit motive and are based on voluntarism (Rauf & Shahid, 2024). In the context of Africa, Brophy (2020) notes that larger organisations are often the providers of additional services besides education programmes, such as water and sanitation. Small organisations, on the other hand, tend to focus on a specific area of education, such as preschool education. In Afghanistan, during the first Taliban rule, around 50 NGOs were working in the education sector (American Research Institutes, 2006; as cited in (Khan et al., 2018). In rural areas, more than 250'000 children benefited from their initiatives, while in urban areas, around 60'000 children, predominantly girls, attended NGO-supported homeschools run by female teachers.
- 3 In terms of definition, Rose (2009) highlights that alternative or non-formal education is commonly associated with NGO education, whereas formal education refers to education provided by the government. Frequently, alternative education has a positive connotation, whereas formal education is associated with passive and ineffective learning. However, given the lack of data and other methodological problems, the cost-effectiveness of NGO-provided education cannot be confirmed with certainty. Additionally, there are limited studies on the livelihood outcomes and effects

of non-formal education programmes on employment opportunities. Recently, the focus of such programmes has shifted to preparing children for reintegration into the formal education system, which has been termed complementary education. For instance, in Afghanistan, the Education Cluster has been providing adolescent girls with alternative learning modalities to ensure that they can return to school once the ban on secondary education for girls is lifted (OCHA, 2024).

- 4 NGOs take on three different roles in supporting the delivery of education. Apart from stepping in as education providers, they may advocate for government accountability and increase the quality of education (Khan et al., 2018; Rose, 2009). By providing children with the opportunity to continue learning during conflicts, these initiatives offer hope and a sense of normality (Khan et al., 2018). They also strengthen peacebuilding and tackle long-term development needs. Thereby, their focus may be on children excluded from education.
- 5 Educational exclusion affects various marginalised groups due to systemic inequalities and socioeconomic barriers (Sayed & Soudien, 2003). Those most at risk include individuals from low-income backgrounds, racial and ethnic minorities, disabled students, and linguistic minorities. Women and girls in patriarchal societies also often face significant obstacles. Additionally, exclusion can occur through policies that reinforce existing power structures, thereby limiting access for those who do not conform to the dominant cultural or economic norms. In the case of NGOs providing education services in conflict situations, not only do the short-term needs require attention, but long-term support, reconstruction, and recovery are necessary (Creed & Morpeth, 2014).
- 6 Notably, community-based schools have increased access to education in Afghanistan, especially for girls (Burde et al., 2017). Collaboration with local communities, including women-led NGOs, and parents, has proven essential in enhancing reach and trust, as well as ensuring the sustainability of educational interventions (OCHA, 2024; Rauf & Shahid, 2024).
- 7 Emergency education management follows three phases: preparedness, response, and recovery (Tarricone et al., 2021). Additionally, the Education in Emergency Policy Framework identifies three key factors that shape the management of education systems during crises. These include systems, teaching and learning, and agents. Systems encompass the overarching structures, policies, and networks that shape and regulate education, including government initiatives, infrastructure, legislation, and sociocultural norms. Teaching and learning, or pedagogical factors, focus on the core educational processes, including instructional methods, assessment strategies, curricular content, and the platforms used to deliver education. Agents are individuals or organisations, such as teachers, students, families, NGOs, and government bodies, that actively influence and engage in decision-making within the education system. NGOs operate across all three phases mentioned above and should exhibit agility to adapt to evolving crises (Tarricone et al., 2021).
- 8 In crises, online and distance learning options may provide continuity to learning (Creed & Morpeth, 2014). In Zambia, distance learning was already implemented in the 1980s to serve Namibian and Angolan refugees. During the pandemic, NGOs distributed tablets to enable children to continue learning (Reza, 2022). Also, homeschool programmes, delivered, for instance, by parents and based on booklets aligned with the national curriculum, may provide an alternative if children cannot attend school due to security concerns (Creed & Morpeth, 2014). A report by USAID (2020) outlines the four

distance learning modalities of audio and radio, video and television, mobile phone, as well as online teaching and learning. A combination of all these efforts is deemed most effective; however, as access to technology varies widely by country and region, the chosen technology must be tailored to local conditions. Equity considerations should also include poverty, disabilities, language barriers, and illiteracy (USAID, 2020).

- 9 Studies on online learning approaches for women in Afghanistan mention that technological infrastructure remains a key challenge (Hakimi et al., 2024; Quraishi, Hashimi, et al., 2024). Also, low levels of digital literacy (Quraishi, Bayani, et al., 2024), unqualified teachers (Hakimi et al., 2024), and user-unfriendly platforms pose obstacles. Since mobile phones are more prevalent than computers in some Afghan regions, strategies should prioritise them (Quraishi, Bayani, et al., 2024). AI technologies, such as chatbots, have also been proposed as alternative learning opportunities for women and girls in Afghanistan (Karimy et al., 2024). Yet, while they may provide personalised learning, they lack context-sensitivity and do not allow for human interaction.
- 10 Importantly, cultural norms and gender discrimination influence access to technology, especially in rural Afghanistan, where women are often less likely to own a phone than men (Quraishi, Hashimi, et al., 2024). Hussain (2024) found that men are 1.52 times more likely than women to use digital tools for accessing information about health, education, and news. Additionally, women face more restrictions and supervision in their use of information and communication technologies [ICTs], especially since the Taliban takeover. As a result, while some erased their digital presence out of fear of surveillance, others found ways to use ICTs through secure apps to communicate, protest, or access education, thereby increasing their use of ICTs in the wake of the crisis. In general, ICTs can serve as a lifeline for women in crisis contexts, offering not only vital services such as education, healthcare, and economic resources but also access to support networks and information. Thus, digital solutions for organisations providing education to Afghan women can play a crucial role in ensuring continued access to learning (Wong Sak Hoi, 2024).
- 11 Apart from the challenges inherent in distance learning outlined above, education provided by international organisations during crises is subject to further problems. Rose (2009) emphasises the importance of enabling children to transition more smoothly from informal into formal schooling and have the same employment opportunities as their peers. It has also been demonstrated that NGO programmes are more easily accessible to those who have already received some successful education (Carron & Carr-Hill, 1991), as cited in (Hoppers, 2006). A study examining how six NGOs promote education in developing countries revealed that further challenges for NGOs include financial constraints, a shortage of quality teachers, and extreme poverty levels leading to child labor (Reza, 2022). Sometimes, language barriers also pose obstacles. Furthermore, in the context of an African NGO, Brophy (2020) highlights shifts in donors' priorities and the political situation, forcing organisations to adapt to changing circumstances. As a result, they had to balance adaptation and maintaining their core vision to avoid losing integrity (Mutongwizo, 2018). Also, donors and NGOs often leave after the immediate impact of an emergency has subsided, hindering long-term development efforts (Creed & Morpeth, 2014). Further, surveys have found that people in Pakistan saw education efforts by NGOs as diverting people away from Islam (Khan et al., 2018). There are also many risks associated with underground or secret schools, such as those in Afghanistan, where teachers and students may face punishments, such

as being beaten or imprisoned (Javdani, 2024). Lastly, in-person education in conflict settings carries inherent risks. Schools may become targets of violence, endangering students and teachers (Burde et al., 2017). Additionally, traumatised teachers may struggle to address students' emotional and psychological needs, while children who experienced conflict may require psychosocial support in addition to traditional classroom activities.

- 12 Given the various challenges faced by organisations providing education to the underprivileged and in conflict-affected states, as well as the volatility of crises, these organisations must demonstrate high levels of adaptability to build resilience. Therefore, the following section will explore adaptive capacities and strategies for building organisational resilience.

3.2 Adaptive Capacities and Strategies to Build NGO Resilience

3.2.1 Organisational Resilience

- 13 Resilience is a multidimensional concept that lacks a unified definition (Pradana & Ekowati, 2024). It has been defined in various disciplines (Chen et al., 2021). Broadly, it is the ability to recover from adversity and adapt over time to changing circumstances (Paluszak et al., 2021). Resilience can be analyzed at several levels, including individual, organisational, and infrastructural levels (Burnard & Bhamra, 2019). Organisational resilience is crucial for all types of organisations (Zaplata, 2024). In the case of NGOs, Paluszak et al. (2021) define organisational resilience as the capacity to respond to setbacks, uphold operations, and continue serving beneficiaries.
- 14 While research on organisational resilience has been growing, the literature on NGO resilience remains limited (Fyffe, 2014). Also, the question of how to achieve resilience remains unresolved (Chen et al., 2021). Notably, nonprofit organisations are diverse in terms of structure and type, such that it is mostly inappropriate to generalise (Alexander, 2000).
- 15 Chen et al. (2021) introduce four different perspectives on resilience, including the capability perspective, process perspective, functional perspective, and results perspective. While the former two view resilience as dynamic, the latter two take on a static understanding of resilience. From a capabilities point of view, “organizational resilience is the ability to anticipate potential threats, respond effectively to unexpected events, and learn from these events, resulting in dynamic capabilities designed to facilitate organizational change” (Pradana & Ekowati, 2024, p. 1586). For example, Karman (2020) defines it as a meta-capability consisting of various dynamic organisational capabilities. From a process perspective, resilience is centered on system dynamics, where an organisation's actions and behaviors emerge from continuous interactions within the organisation and with its environment, necessitating ongoing adaptation to internal and external demands (Witmer & Mellinger, 2016). If resilience is viewed from a results point of view, the sustained state of adaptation is emphasised (Chen et al., 2021). From a functional perspective, organisational resilience is understood as the result of, or the sum of, multiple interconnected capabilities that enable an organisation to adapt to dynamic and complex environments. Paluszak (2021) additionally introduces the perspective of organisational resilience as the extent to

which an organisation can withstand disturbances and the speed at which it recovers from disruptions.

- 16 Within the view of resilience as a dynamic concept, certain scholars define resilience as a gradable concept with the possibility of determining its degree (Paluszak et al., 2021). Paluszak et al. (2021) introduce progressive, sustainable, regressive, and downward resilience.
- 17 Further, resilience has been framed as a multi-stage model. Duckek (2020) conceptualises resilience as anticipation, coping, and adaptation, arguing that the resilience process takes place before, during and after a crisis. Building on this, Pradana and Ekowati (2024) expand the framework by adding absorptive capacity, confronting, and sustainability. The first relates to developing routines and processes to exploit new information and knowledge. The second one refers to an organisation's ability to actively engage with a crisis and learn from minor setbacks. The last one involves an organisation's long-term existence.

3.2.2 Adaptive Capacities

- 18 Singh et al. (2022) argue that organisational resilience, particularly in NGOs, is achieved through adaptive capacities. Adaptive capacity is defined as the ability of an organisation to mobilise resources, processes, and strategies to respond to environmental changes (Brooks & Adger, 2005). It represents the set of resources available for adaptation and the capability to use these resources effectively. This focus on adaptive capacities allows for a more nuanced examination of how adaptation is operationalised within organisations. Other scholars have also emphasised the importance of adaptation for the resilience-building of nonprofits. Szemző et al. (2022) note that civic initiatives must remain flexible and adaptable to stay resilient. Mutongwizo (2018) states that NGOs either build resilience and adapt to disruptions or struggle with them. Additionally, Paluszak et al. (2021) mention that organisational resilience encompasses an NGO's ability to adapt, recover, and either return to its original state (bounce back) or evolve and grow stronger (bounce forward) in the face of adversity and global uncertainty (Paluszak et al., 2021). In the latter case, they recognise new opportunities within the changed context and take advantage of them. Generally, the more adaptive a system is, the more resilient it becomes (Engle, 2011).
- 19 Singh et al. (2022) further argue that adaptive capacities interact and reinforce each other, forming a resilience-building mechanism. Their model of adaptive capacities encompasses the categories of culture, leadership, and people, tactical administration, and tactical planning and restructuring. The category of culture, leadership, and people relates to organisational culture, internal collaboration, leadership styles, and human resource processes. Similarly, Plaisance (2022) emphasises that human capital, including employees and volunteers, is key determinant of resilience in arts and cultural nonprofit organisations. Tactical administration focuses on day-to-day operational resilience, including programme management strategies, stakeholder engagement, and leveraging technology (Singh et al., 2022). Plaisance (2022) likewise argues that if stakeholder relationships deteriorate, resilience is affected and that digital tools can help organisations remain operational. The last category of tactical planning and restructuring concerns external collaboration, long-term strategic planning, and financial stability. In accordance, Plaisance (2022) finds that financial instability and loss of funding are significant threats to arts and cultural nonprofits.

- 20 Singh et al.'s (2022) framework explains the potential for adaptation across all resilience stages outlined by Duchek's (2020) multi-stage framework. Thus, adaptive capacities are transversal enablers of resilience-building, playing a crucial role for all resilience stages. In the anticipation stage, organisations rely on strategic planning and resource mobilization to prepare for disruptions. During the coping stage, adaptive capacity is expressed through operational flexibility and tactical adjustments. Finally, in the adaptation stage, organisations learn from the crisis and undergo structural changes (Duchek, 2020; Singh et al., 2022).
- 21 A critical component of adaptive capacity is the availability and mobilization of resources, which enable organisations to respond flexibly and effectively to crises (Rahi, 2018). The vital role of resources in enabling adaptation and resilience is underscored in previous literature. Duchek (2020) notes that spare time and unoccupied financial and human resources are necessary to anticipate crises and adapt effectively. In contrast, a lack of crucial resources can render an organisation immobile and restricted in its actions (Prysmakova & Pysmenna, 2024). However, NGOs often have to work with limited resources (Singh et al., 2022), thus potentially endangering their resilience. Fyffe (2014) especially underscores the importance of financial resources for NGOs' resilience. Furthermore, non-material factors such as a mission that appeals to the morals of potential funders are essential (Plaisance, 2022).
- 22 Plaisance (2022) emphasises the importance of not only owning resources but also possessing the skills to mobilise additional resources in times of crisis. Thus, adaptable organisations are characterised by their skill to access and deploy materials (Mutongwizo, 2018). Correspondingly, adaptive capacity involves the ability to utilise available resources effectively to transform its structure, culture and processes when faced with adversity, thereby ensuring its resilience (Rahi, 2018; Singh et al., 2022). It also includes the ability to prepare strategies to tackle uncertainty (Prysmakova & Pysmenna, 2024). Therefore, adaptive capacities enable organisations to change their strategies and behavior in response to crises and to build resilience.

3.2.3 Resilience-Building Strategies

- 23 Previous research has explored various activities and strategies for building NGO resilience. Szemző et al. (2022) mention three strategies for pursuing resilience: increasing adaptability, diversification, and ecosystem building. Adaptability focuses on how well an organisation can adapt internally to changing conditions, while diversification examines how organisations expand their reach and offerings. Ecosystem building focuses on collaboration and connection with other organisations to build collaborative resilience within a network of organisations. Importantly, ecosystem building is regarded as providing the most security, as organisations receive sustained support and resources from one another (Szemző et al., 2022). Also, Kim et al. (2020) stress the importance of network strategies in achieving organisational resilience during emergencies. Nevertheless, while collaboration may have advantages, it also demands investments in time, effort, and funding, which are resources that are not always available (Witesman & Heiss, 2017).
- 24 These resilience-building strategies, which require adaptation and flexibility (Szemző et al., 2022), complement Singh et al.'s (2022) framework by adding practical methods to operationalise adaptive capacities. Importantly, adaptive capacities interact and reinforce each other (Singh et al., 2022), and thus, these strategies and activities always

combine various adaptive capacities. Plaisance (2022) establishes a link between resources and strategies by highlighting the importance of reform strategies in restoring the vital resources of cultural nonprofits during the COVID-19 pandemic. To sustain human resources, organisations adapted to digital tools, enabling remote engagement with volunteers and staff. Additionally, internal management and governance reforms were implemented to enhance financial stability. Lastly, to maintain relational resources, organisations adjusted their relationships with beneficiaries, members, and volunteers.

- 25 Generally, resilience-building activities by NGOs can be categorised as specific or non-specific (Paluszak et al., 2021). An organisation's structure and functions may constitute an automatic safeguarding mechanism in the wake of external disturbances. Thus, they are referred to as non-specific or passive resilience-building areas. This response is reactive behavior that ensures survival but does not constitute any proactive practices. In contrast, specific or active resilience-building areas are proactive measures to strengthen resilience and adapt to crises. Correspondingly, Plaisance (2022) distinguishes between activity continuity and organisational persistence. The former refers to an organisation's ability to maintain operations during crises, while the latter refers to its ability to sustain in the long run by adapting to transformations.
- 26 Likewise, the areas of resilience-building activities identified by Paluszak et al. (2021) include crisis management, human resources, finance, activity forms and scopes, cooperation, and planning. Lastly, "no change" (Paluszak et al., 2021) is the only passive resilience-building activity. In contrast, Szemző et al. (2022) emphasise that resilience depends on proactive strategies, which suggests that inaction limits organisations' ability to respond to crises. Interestingly, among the organisations studied by Paluszak et al. (2021), most relied on crisis management, followed closely by inaction in the wake of a crisis. Such passiveness aims at returning to a pre-crisis state and avoids transformation and adaptation to a new reality. Yet, solely trying to maintain operations without further adaptation may lead to failure (Paluszak et al., 2021; Plaisance, 2022).
- 27 Mutongwizo (2018) notes that in response to external and internal pressures, NGOs not only shift their strategies but also their identities. However, while shifting their identities to secure their existence, NGOs may lose their integrity. Thus, a balance between adaptation and identity preservation is crucial.
- 28 The following section outlines a preliminary conceptual framework based on the reviewed literature. This framework serves as the theoretical foundation for analysing how organisations offering educational opportunities to girls and women in Afghanistan build resilience through adaptive strategies, as well as uncovering the main challenges to which they are responding.

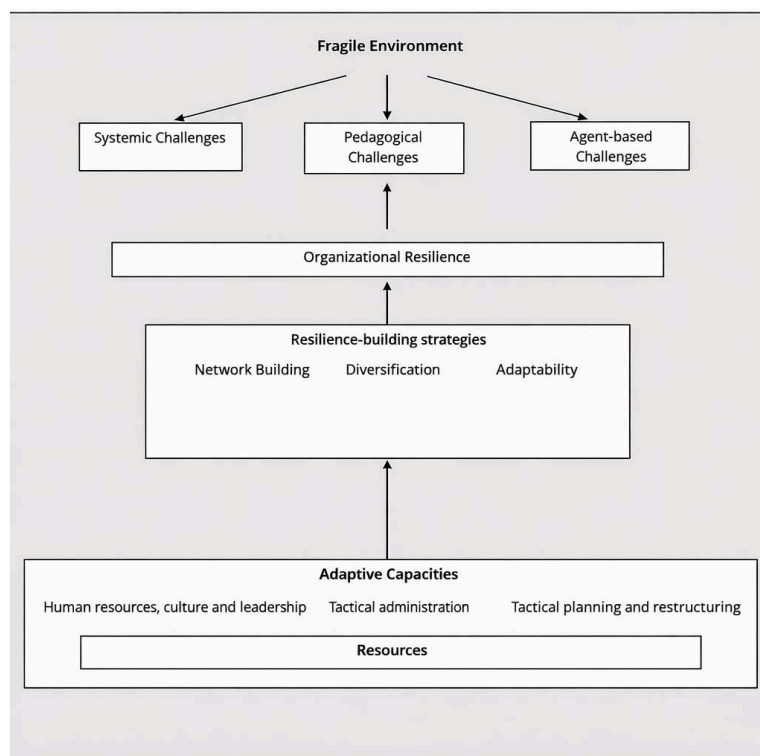
4. Conceptual Framework

- 1 This study explores how educational NGOs adapt to remain resilient while navigating challenges in fragile settings. While some existing models of organisational resilience explain how NGOs develop strategies to remain resilient (e.g. Singh et al., 2022; Szemző et al., 2022), they do not fully account for the dynamic adaptations NGOs must undertake in volatile and high-risk environments such as Afghanistan in order to ensure their organisational resilience.
- 2 Drawing on organisational resilience theory and adaptive management literature, this study begins with a preliminary conceptual framework that outlines these themes. Based on a qualitative study, the framework is then refined and expanded to better capture the lived realities of NGOs running educational initiatives for female students in Afghanistan. This helps to shape the understanding of organisational resilience in this context.
- 3 The conceptual framework combines the insights outlined above on adaptive capacities by Singh et al. (2022), resilience-building strategies as suggested by Szemző et al. (2022), and the factors potentially influencing and thereby posing challenges to emergency education management by Tarricone et al. (2021). To build their resilience and ensure their survival, organisations providing education in complex settings need to adapt to external challenges, which include systemic, pedagogical, and agent-based factors, as outlined by Tarricone et al. (2021).
- 4 Adaptive capacities are crucial for maintaining resilience, ensuring continuity of operations, and aligning with an organisation's mission in the face of disruptive events (Dutra et al., 2015). The three categories of NGOs' adaptive capacities outlined by Singh et al. (2022) - culture, leadership, and people, tactical administration, as well as tactical planning and restructuring - are used as reference points.
- 5 As mentioned, adaptive capacities refer to both the resources available and the ability to mobilise and use them (Brooks & Adger, 2005). Thus, adaptive capacities, which reflect organisations' ability to adapt, serve as the foundation for resilience-building (Singh et al., 2022). Strategies or resilience-building activities, on the other hand, are concrete actions enabled by adaptive capacities. In other words, while adaptive capacities provide the necessary conditions for building resilience, through strategies organisations activate and apply these capacities in practice.
- 6 Szemző et al. (2022) describe the resilience-building strategy of adaptability as deploying existing resources, while the strategy of diversification involves securing

resources, such as alternative funding streams or service areas. Lastly, ecosystem building is about pooling and redistributing resources. Thus, these strategies involve the acquisition, allocation, and leveraging of resources. Building on this, this ePaper will investigate which specific strategies are most important to NGOs running education programmes for girls and women in Afghanistan. Additionally, the ePaper aims to investigate which resources - human, financial, or relational (Plaisance, 2022), among others- are underpinning the adaptive capacities of NGOs operating in the field of Afghan girls' education.

- 7 Drawing on the work of Singh et al. (2022), Szemző et al. (2022), and Duchek (2020) as a point of departure, this study adopts a dynamic conceptualization of organisational resilience. This perspective aligns with the volatile context of Afghanistan and other crisis settings, where constant adjustments to emerging constraints and opportunities are necessary.
- 8 Furthermore, Plaisance (2022) argues that during the COVID-19 pandemic, nonprofits had to rely on short-term reactive strategies, which is why he refrains from analyzing certain resilience stages, such as recovery and restoration, as well as thriving and transformation, as outlined by Fyffe (2014), since these stages require a longer time horizon. Instead, only the ability of organisations to adapt and sustain operations and external relations while preserving their identity is analyzed (Plaisance, 2022). Similarly, the unpredictable and dynamic nature of the Afghan context is exemplified by the fact that the United Nations Institute of Peace (n.d.) lists 35 new policies related to schools and universities by the Taliban since their takeover in 2021. Given this volatility, NGOs often need to implement several adaptive responses simultaneously rather than following a structured, step-by-step resilience-building process such as those proposed by Duchek (2020) and Pradana and Ekowatti (2024). In light of these dynamics, this study does not rely on a multi-stage resilience framework. Instead, the focus is on the interaction between adaptive capacities and strategic actions to understand how NGOs achieve resilience-building in high-risk, volatile settings. The preliminary framework established is depicted below in *Figure 1*.

Figure 1: Preliminary conceptual framework



Source: Adapted from Singh et al. (2022), Tarricone et al. (2021), and Szemző et al. (2022).

- 9 In conclusion, this preliminary framework conceptualises NGO resilience as a process in which adaptive capacities serve as the foundation, while resilience-building strategies operationalise them into concrete actions, leading to adaptation, as suggested by Singh et al. (2022). These strategies enable NGOs to effectively navigate challenges by leveraging and mobilising resources. Importantly, NGOs must strike a balance between managing a crisis in the short-term and maintaining their identity (Mutongwizo, 2018).
- 10 Using this framework, the study aims to analyze how organisations adjust to challenges, handle crises, and continue to deliver education in an unstable, risky environment. This study will contribute to a deeper understanding of the adaptive mechanisms NGOs employ and provide insights into how resilience can be strengthened in contexts of educational disruption and crisis. Since research on the organisational resilience of NGOs remains limited, this extends to research on the organisational resilience of NGOs providing education in volatile and fragile situations, such as in Afghanistan under Taliban rule.

5. Methodology

- 1 This qualitative study includes eleven semi-structured interviews with representatives from various NGOs that provide education to girls that are banned from school in Afghanistan to explore how these organisations build resilience and adapt to challenges. As suggested by Merriam and Tisdell (2015), this research employed a two-tier purposeful sampling strategy to identify organisations and individuals best positioned to provide pertinent insights.
- 2 In the first step, relevant organisations were selected. Organisations had to meet the following criteria: First, they offer education programmes for girls in Afghanistan, either through online platforms or secret schools. Second, they have been operating for at least ten months prior to the data collection period, ensuring they have experienced and responded to policy shifts and disruptions. Even organisations established in mid-2024 have encountered significant external fluctuations, such as the December 2024 ban on medical education for women (The United Nations Office at Geneva, 2024) and the August 2024 morality law restricting women’s public presence (UN Women, 2024b). Third, they are non-governmental and grassroots organisations.
- 3 Organisations were identified through online searches and recommendations. To expand the respondent pool, a snowball sampling approach was employed in the next step. To mitigate selection bias, initial outreach was made to a diverse range of organisations across different networks. Selecting various organisations offering different types of education programmes is a strategy known as maximum variation, which increases the transferability of the research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).
- 4 In the second step, individuals within the organisations were selected. Interview participants had to have been with the organisation for at least six months and possess substantial knowledge of its programmes and strategies. An individuals’ hierarchical position was not a determining selection criterion. While founders and leaders often have more extensive knowledge about strategic decision-making, non-leadership staff members may offer valuable external perspectives. Practical factors such as availability were also considered. Relying on multiple perspectives and cross-checking information from various individuals is a method of triangulation that increases the internal validity of the research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).
- 5 In total, eleven semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives from different NGOs offering education programmes for girls and women in Afghanistan. While these included both leadership and non-leadership staff members, the latter was

only the case for two interviews. Two of the interviews were conducted in written form, while the rest were virtual discussions. All organisations can be described as small-sized, except for two cases, which are more accurately described as small- to medium-sized. This categorization is based on Fyffe's (2014) revenue-based definition of organisational size, with small organisations characterised by average annual revenues of up to a maximum of 499'999 USD. Medium-sized organisations are defined to have an average revenue between 500'000 USD and 1'500'000 USD. However, since not all organisations have publicly accessible financial reports, available information on staff members without volunteers was also analyzed as a secondary criterion. According to Slatten et al. (2021), small NGOs have up to 10 employees, while mid-sized organisations have up to 50 full-time staff members. Still, given the lack of publicly available data, in some cases, the characterization is based on informed estimation, using information gathered from interviews and other available indications such as organisational structure and scope of operations.

- 6 Moreover, five of the organisations included in this study already existed before the Taliban's return to power. Six NGOs, on the other hand, were only founded in direct response to the ban on secondary education for girls and women. Two of them are based in Afghanistan, while the rest work from abroad. Lastly, all interviewed organisations exclusively focus on the education of girls and women in Afghanistan, apart from two organisations. One of these exceptions also works in other contexts and on broader thematic issues. However, the individuals involved in this organisation's work in Afghanistan solely work on this specific issue. The other organisation works exclusively in Afghanistan, yet it also offers capacity-building for human rights activities and food distribution apart from education opportunities.
- 7 The data collected was analyzed thematically following the approach of Naeem et al. (2023). The analysis was conducted continuously, as in qualitative research, data analysis and data collection typically occur in parallel (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This strategy allowed hunches, emerging patterns, and themes from one interview to inform the questions of the following interview.
- 8 The data analysis was conducted as follows. First, an initial understanding of the data was gained through transcribing each interview and reviewing the collected material (Naeem et al., 2023). Then, the data was coded using descriptive labels based on concepts related to the research questions. The coding process combined both inductive and deductive approaches, allowing for deductive codes based on the reviewed literature while remaining open to inductive codes that emerged from the data. The codes were subsequently grouped into emerging themes, which were re-evaluated and refined iteratively. According to Naeem et al. (2023), this stage relies on sense-making and the abstract interpretation of codes, moving beyond surface-level descriptions. In the next step, emerging concepts were defined, and their relationships were analyzed. Finally, the findings were used to build upon the preliminary theoretical framework outlined in the previous section, establishing a more comprehensive understanding of the resilience-building processes undertaken by NGOs operating in fragile contexts. This approach aligns with Naeem et al.'s (2023) argument that existing theories often guide the development of a conceptual framework.
- 9 Given the sensitive nature of the research context, stringent ethical protocols were maintained at all times to protect the privacy and well-being of interview participants. These measures included obtaining informed consent from all interviewees, ensuring strict confidentiality, and keeping them anonymous in the final output. Additionally,

participants were informed about their right to withdraw from the study at any stage and how their data would be handled to ensure their privacy and security. This also includes the fact that any recordings from the interviews were accessible only to the researcher and were deleted after the completion of the study.

6. Findings

6.1 Building and Sustaining Human Resources

- 1 For organisations working on girls' and women's education in Afghanistan, team members, as well as teachers in underground schools and online classes, are the engine that sustains the initiative. The interviews showed that being able to rely on a highly motivated team plays a pivotal role in navigating various challenges that emerge from the volatile and insecure Afghan context. A leader of an NGO offering underground and online classes captured the dynamic nature of this environment and the role of team members by stating: "Things are changing rapidly, and [our team members] are just taking on these challenges [...] trying to find solutions." Given limited financial resources, often mission-driven volunteers prove to be a solution to the absence of means to compensate staff.
- 2 Further, highly motivated team members are necessary in the wake of heightened security risks. Given the fact that the Taliban prohibit girls above the age of twelve from going to school, NGO staff and students involved in underground schools risk punishments, imprisonment, and potentially their lives. Online education, on the other hand, is not explicitly forbidden. Thus, team members of organisations offering online classes are not as much in danger. However, one interviewee of an organisation that publishes educational content on YouTube expressed acute security risks for the female teachers who record the videos in secret locations in Afghanistan. Consequently, the ability to maintain teams that are motivated, skilled, and especially that are willing to work in a context of high personal risks and emotional burdens ensures operational continuity. This ability reflects a critical adaptive capacity in terms of culture, leadership, and people, which enables organisations to build and maintain human resources under constraints.
- 3 Intrinsic motivation emerged as a major driver of volunteer engagement. All interviewees stated that team members, including themselves, are motivated intrinsically by their organisations' missions. "They all have one common goal: To support these women and girls in Afghanistan with their education," was expressed by the founder of an NGO which offers online education. The leader of an Afghan-based NGO placed special emphasis on having an explicit, streamlined mission: "[O]ur organisation has a very clear mission, which empowers us [...] and that keeps us very

motivated.” This perspective was echoed by several other respondents. Notably, all interviewees except for two are part of NGOs that have the sole purpose of providing education for girls and women in Afghanistan.

- 4 Ten out of eleven interviewees emphasised their connection to Afghanistan, which potentially strengthens their identification with the organisation’s mission and bolsters their intrinsic motivation. Equivalently, locally recruited teachers and team members may draw their motivation from personal experiences and the direct impact of the crisis on their lives. According to two members of organisations that offer in-person classes, for Afghan teachers who receive payment, also this remuneration constitutes a strong incentive to tolerate the security risks, as it allows them to sustain themselves and their families financially. However, in one case, teachers initially worked without pay, with the NGO only later securing the resources to remunerate them. This observation suggests that, in their case, intrinsic motivation plays a key role, too.
- 5 Importantly, nurturing team members’ motivation needs deliberate work. For instance, according to at least three interviewees, an important driver of volunteer motivation is the visibility of their work’s impact. “Knowing that our work has a real impact on the lives of thousands of people in Afghanistan keeps us going,” a member of a foreign-based NGO said. However, as a founder of an NGO providing online schooling explained, while teachers witness the impact of their work in their daily interactions with students, other team members mostly do not. Consequently, it was essential for this respondent’s organisation to establish mechanisms for communicating student feedback to the entire team “to show them that [...] this is the result of your work”, which helps to “keep the team engaged.”
- 6 Furthermore, supportive team dynamics that value mental health and mutual understanding strengthen motivation and may alleviate the emotional burden that comes with working in conflict environments. Two interviewees highlighted their team meetings where open communication about emotional challenges is fostered. As one respondent stated, “It’s essential to talk about the difficult situations we may face and provide a space for people to express their feelings.” An NGO leader also shared how their co-leader’s encouragement has helped them get through tough times. One organisation reported offering team members the opportunity to choose self-care activities with funds provided by another organisation. Two heads of an organisation expressed that they manage their teams with intention, which includes “encouraging my team to take their time off” and meeting them eye to eye to avoid hierarchical relationships. One organisation implements formal psychological support services for teachers, while another one is working towards providing the same. These practices demonstrate the resilience-building strategy of adaptability, which includes shifts in organisational activities or behavior in response to challenges (Szemző et al., 2022). The findings show that, in the case of the described practices, adaptability relies on NGOs’ adaptive capacity under culture, leadership, and people to recognise and respond to the emerging emotional and psychological needs of team members.
- 7 To maintain these supportive and motivated team dynamics, as well as to ensure the safety and quality of classes, organisations must also adjust recruitment and onboarding processes, which is supported by adaptive capacities. This allows organisations to engage skilled, mission-aligned, and reliable team members. Depending on the type of education, organisations may choose different recruitment strategies.

- 8 Most online schools purportedly rely on foreign teachers, who may be subject-matter experts and thus attract students, as one interviewee suggested. Many organisations aim to guarantee mission alignment of teachers during recruitment, for example, via specific interview questions. A founder of a US-based NGO emphasised the importance of carefully onboarding international teachers for online classes to sensitise them to the cultural norms in Afghanistan. Language barriers may also present problems, as many foreign teachers do not speak Dari or Pashto, the two predominant languages of Afghanistan. To still effectively leverage the skills of these teachers, a Swiss-based organisation relies on them to teach Afghan women with a high level of English. Then, it proposes that these Afghan women teach students with a lower level of English. Another solution to overcome language barriers implemented by an NGO offering online classes is to work with diaspora members as teachers. Additionally, the schedules of international teachers may be less flexible due to their full-time jobs. Consequently, one NGO recruits backup teachers to guarantee that classes continue even if one of the original teachers is no longer available. Lastly, it is important not to overwhelm these teachers with information and use manageable ways of communication with them.
- 9 In contrast, two NGOs offering online classes rely on local female teachers who lost their jobs under the current regime. These teachers do not face the same time constraints as foreign teachers and are able to provide culture-sensitive online classes. Nevertheless, as one interviewee emphasised, they face high personal risks, including imprisonment, when recording online content. The strength of their motivation is exemplified by their willingness to work under insecure conditions in the absence of functional safeguards against the dangers they face.
- 10 Conversely, the interviewed organisations running underground schools exclusively recruit local teachers, who usually teach within the communities they are part of. Importantly, trustworthy teachers are indispensable in high-risk environments to ensure confidentiality and the safety of students. As explained by the leader of an NGO offering underground classes, “Afghanistan is a very close-knit culture,” which means that “the community, the people inside the community, the community elders, and the leaders of the community, they are with us because their daughters are studying with us, so they mostly support us against the Taliban [and] when the Taliban come [...] to find out if there are schools or not, the community leaders stand against them and they tell them that there is no schooling going on.” Further, several interviewees explained that they rely on the knowledge of local teachers and staff members to deal with risks. These individuals also understand students’ needs best, such that they can ensure that educational opportunities respond to contextual realities. Thus, organisations give their teachers the autonomy to structure and implement their classes independently. Still, all organisations with in-person classes demonstrate the capacity to provide context-responsive support to local teachers, including finances, materials, technology, and, upon request, curriculum development. Additionally, local teachers can usually get hold of the students they were teaching before the ban and ensure that they can keep studying. Since they have the trust and support of the community, including students’ parents, NGOs’ reach is further increased.
- 11 According to four interviews, local teachers are often recruited via existing contacts, reflecting organisations’ use of their social and community resources. Social resources encompass connections and collaborations with stakeholders, including other

organisations, donors, team members, volunteers, and local communities (Fredette & Bradshaw, 2012).

- 12 Furthermore, seven organisations have local staff, including teachers, as well as other personnel. For leveraging the contextual expertise of these local team members, as well as teachers, effective communication is vital. A member of a foreign-based NGO explained that to ensure smooth communication across borders, team members are paired with one person working from abroad and one person based in Afghanistan. As explained in the interview, “This setup allows for continuous communication and the direct exchange of information between the two individuals.” Thus, functional cross-border collaboration is crucial for the successful implementation of programmes. Such flexible strategies rely on adaptive capacity in terms of culture, leadership, and people, as they involve the ability to effectively collaborate internally.
- 13 These examples show organisations’ ability to strategically recruit skilled and trustworthy teachers in correspondence with their educational delivery method, keep them motivated, and support them emotionally, as well as communicate effectively with them and other team members. These abilities demonstrate their adaptive capacity in terms of culture, leadership, and people and illustrate the relevance of human and community resources in navigating several challenges, including linguistic, cultural, and security challenges, that emerge in the Afghan context.
- 14 Together, the findings reveal how adaptive capacities in terms of culture, leadership, and people enable NGOs to respond effectively to challenges through strategic action. They underpin the resilience-building strategy of adaptability, which manifests as concrete adjustments enabled by mobilised human and community resources.

6.2 Adapting Delivery Models to Contextual Constraints

- 15 While motivated, qualified, and reliable teams serve as the foundation for the realization of NGOs’ educational efforts, the interviews revealed that their concrete implementation is also shaped by contextual constraints, predominantly security risks that affect “the girls, the teachers, the staff, [and] everybody around the [education] centers.” Also, the volatility of the environment with frequently changing rules, demands rapid actions as explained in another interview: “We prioritise adaptability, especially when it comes to our radio station. For example, when [new] restrictions [...] are imposed, we listen carefully to the regulations and adjust accordingly. Our goal is to continue our work, even if it means making compromises in order to persist.” Thus, organisations must show the ability to adjust their internal processes and daily operations in response to external challenges, reflecting their adaptive capacity in terms of tactical administration. This adaptive capacity also includes organisations’ ability to strategically utilise ICT.
- 16 For example, underground schools show adaptability by operating under the guise of religious classes to remain under the radar. In the case of a hidden school, whenever the Taliban run an inspection, students “bring out their holy Quran, their Islamic books, and then they throw away their English books.” The ability to perform such transformations hinges not only on having the right materials available but also on the knowledge of what inspectors look for, as well as the ability to follow a shared internal protocol and to establish a high level of trust and communication within the team. Thus, while material resources such as staff and infrastructure form the foundation of

security adaptations, they only contribute to resilience through adaptive capacities that mobilise local knowledge and trust-based communication. A founder of in-person classes reflected that “I think our experiences are giving us what [we need to protect us]; what is protecting us is ourselves,” demonstrating the importance of contextual awareness and the need to learn from past events to build shared internal knowledge. This example further underscores the value of intrinsically motivated human resources, who are willing to put themselves at risk to provide education. One interviewee explained that for teachers in underground schools, certain technologies, such as the ability to archive chats on WhatsApp or put pictures into locked folders, lower security risks. This adaptability strategy also depend on contextual knowledge, including the fact that at security checks, phones are being searched more frequently. Additionally, the ability to effectively communicate between the team and the teachers to ensure that this safety measure is strictly adhered to is critical. These abilities reflect adaptive capacities under tactical administration and culture, people, and leadership.

- 17 Moreover, to further navigate external threats and deal with financial constraints, eight organisations offer online classes, out of which three exclusively rely on virtual education. As explained above, security risks are generally lower when providing online education instead of in-person schooling. Consequently, technological resources play an important role in the daily work of NGOs that offer education opportunities for girls in Afghanistan. Especially ICTs, which can be defined as “technologies used by people and organisations for their information processing and communication purposes” (Zhang et al., 2008, p. 628), are essential. NGOs rely on platforms like WhatsApp, Signal, YouTube, and Zoom among others, to conduct their classes online. Several interviewees mentioned that they could draw on their knowledge from the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in terms of online education and communication, when establishing their current online programmes. One interviewee reported relying on YouTube as a delivery platform for their educational content as, due to financial constraints, developing their own platform is not feasible. With another organisation, students have the chance to access Coursera classes. Lastly, one NGO is utilising AI in education, where students initially self-study with AI tools and then present the content to their peers. This approach enables the organisation to leverage limited human and technological resources and offers a suitable alternative in response to a shortage of qualified teachers. In sum, these examples illustrate how NGOs tactically adapt their educational delivery methods by leveraging existing platforms and emerging technologies in response to contextual constraints.
- 18 The downside of online learning, however, is that in Afghanistan, internet costs are high, and connectivity is bad. Especially in winter, electricity cuts occur regularly, with electricity sometimes working only four hours a day, as described by an interviewee who had lived most of their life in Afghanistan. To navigate this challenge, organisations are adopting the strategy of adaptability by covering the costs for girls’ internet access and providing educational content on hard drives or PDF books. In this case, the adaptive capacity of tactical administration, more precisely, the ability to react to infrastructural constraints and reconfigure the delivery method such that students can continue their education, enables adaptability. Again, these adjustments hinge primarily on the contextual understanding of how students can access the classes and on the availability of and the capacity to use technological resources. The same holds for creating educational content that is accessible from mobile phones, given that, as one respondent overserved, “the majority of our students (90%) access our

content via mobile phones.” Organisations also demonstrate strategic use of their contextual comprehension by instructing students to download videos at night, when the internet connection is better, and to purchase daily instead of monthly internet packages to save money.

- 19 Consequently, being able to leverage ICTs, coordinate discreet actions, and adjust educational offerings to meet contextual constraints, which reflects tactical administration, is vital. In combination with adaptive capacities in terms of culture, leadership, and people, such as being able to promote trust, flexibility, and ICT skills among teams, these abilities enable strategic adaptability, as outlined by Szemző (2022), in the context of education initiatives in Afghanistan.

6.3 Responding to Learners’ Evolving Needs

- 20 In addition to tackling security threats, organisations must also tailor their programme offerings to students’ emotional, academic, and skill-related needs. As stated by a programme manager: “We have a lot of initiatives going on internally, but it’s important to prioritise and understand where we can really make an impact – especially in our students’ lives. We prioritise those.”
- 21 The interviews revealed that most organisations have been adjusting or expanding their services over time as a reaction to learners’ necessities, demonstrating the resilience-building strategies of adaptability and diversification (Szemző et al., 2022). Their ability to assess students’ challenges and react by integrating adequate activities is yet another expression of the adaptive capacity of tactical administration. Interviewees described relying on direct feedback from students and parents when adjusting and expanding their offerings. One respondent also explained visiting families in Kabul to inquire about the educational needs of girls.
- 22 A recurring theme across interviews was the psychological toll that the ban on education, the ensuing isolation, and the lack of hope for the future have taken on female students’ psychological health, with many experiencing symptoms of depression. Echoing others, one interviewee stated that “the girls [...] are traumatised because of what happened to them.” In response, four organisations have diversified to include psychosocial care in their offerings. Two others explicitly highlighted working towards providing mental health services.
- 23 Beyond psychological support, two organisations in this study offer mentorship programmes to help guide students on how to access higher education and obtain scholarships. These programmes represent a proactive response to the absence of future opportunities, which causes students to be less motivated to pursue educational opportunities. Similarly, some organisations provide vocational training or enable secret online business initiatives to create a continuative educational experience with opportunities for the future. For the latter, an Afghan-based NGO providing in-person education leveraged businesswomen who have the knowledge on how to sell handmade products online. Lastly, one organisation launched a programme to change men’s patriarchal perspectives and engage them as allies who support women’s rights, tackling the societal resistance to girls’ education. These programmatic diversification strategies are underpinned by the availability of motivated and qualified staff, as well as technologies and knowledge on how to access additional opportunities, which must be mobilised strategically through adaptive capacities to provide relevant support.

- 24 To assist students without prior experience in online learning, an organisation offering online classes created instructional videos on how to use the various tools provided and set up a chatroom to answer students' questions. In that way, NGOs may foster inclusion and enhance digital literacy via technological tools. This ability to identify and address students' gaps in digital literacy again demonstrates tactical administration and enables strategic adaptability in the face of barriers.
- 25 Thus, the interviews revealed that the integration of additional programme offerings and organisational adjustments in response to students' evolving emotional and academic needs are facilitated by the adaptive capacity of culture, leadership, and people, which ensures context-sensitivity and qualified staff for new programmes through appropriate human resource practices, and the adaptive capacity of tactical administration.
- 26 Lastly, some organisations monitor their programmes, for instance, through online check-ins during classes or via periodic learning assessments with the aim of reviewing their quality and relevance. At least two organisations regularly produce reports of their activities. As one respondent noted, "[this] is crucial for our donors and for us to understand how we can improve." Such strategic adjustments exhibit adaptability enabled by tactical administration. Although it was stated that these testing methods are relatively basic, the adaptive capacity here lies in the organisation's ability to implement adequate and feasible measures to assess the quality and impact of its programmes despite limited resources.
- 27 Given a lack of financial means, most internal adaptations are only feasible with the support of external resources. The following sections thus, first examine how NGOs tackle financial pressures, before exploring how they establish strategic partnerships to diversify their offerings and embed themselves in networks to build joint resilience.

6.4 Navigating Financial Constraints

- 28 Financial constraints constitute a significant challenge for ten out of eleven organisations in this study. As many explained, this has intensified under the administration of US-President Donald Trump. Even among organisations not directly funded by the US government, competition for other donors' support has increased due to the suspension of US aid. One interviewee explained that "Fundraising has been a major challenge for not only our organisation but other organisations who are working in Afghanistan for girls' education. The international community has lost interest, or they just don't want to be involved anymore. There are very few grants available for organisations that are working with women's education in Afghanistan." Respondents highlighted that with more financial resources, programmes can be expanded and additional activities offered. Teachers and staff can be paid, thereby reducing the reliance on volunteers who only work in their free time. The quality and content of online programmes can be increased, and internet costs for girls without internet access can be covered. With funding, additional materials and technology can also be purchased. Thus, increased financial resources expand NGOs' potential to react to new challenges. These findings highlight the relevance of financial resources to these organisations.
- 29 While almost all organisations in this study report economic problems, some of them have been able to diversify financially. For instance, given their original donors' preferences for funding school buildings over other programmes, one organisation is

diversifying its financial portfolio and is increasingly applying for grants. Another organisation entered into a joint venture with two other organisations, combining their various offerings including curriculum development, online classes, and internationally recognised accreditation, which contributed to their success in securing funding. Cross-sectoral collaboration also proved effective for a US-based organisation that partnered with a private company to run a fundraising event. Also, another organisation was unable to secure sufficient financial means through fundraising, which is why it had to establish partnerships with larger organisations to obtain the necessary funding. These cases illustrate how NGOs are able to adjust their financial strategies, reflecting the adaptive capacity of tactical planning and restructuring.

- 30 Others have developed a donor base over time, often relying on individual philanthropists. These are organisations that were already established before the ban on girls' secondary education, as reflected by an interviewee representing one of these NGOs: "[O]ver the past 23 years, [our organisation] has established connections with its donor base. We mostly rely on individual donors." Conversely, two organisations interviewed, which were founded after the Taliban's return to power, are dependent on the private savings of their founder. Thus, financial diversification is enabled by adaptive tactical planning and restructuring capacities, which include the ability to strategically form partnerships and donor relationships, as well as identify alternative opportunities, such as project calls.
- 31 Furthermore, organisations showed that they were able to turn their reputation into a strategic asset to attract additional resources. "[W]e place great importance on communicating our efforts through the international media, which helps raise awareness about our work, attract funding, and sustain our activities. This visibility is crucial for maintaining our operations and expanding our reach." In total, four interviewees mentioned using social media channels such as Instagram to showcase their impact to donors. Thereby, security considerations cannot be neglected, as mentioned by the director of a US-based NGO: "When we post about our programmes on social media, we don't mention students' names. We blur out any faces and we blur out any logos from partners." The ability to use digital tools to enhance financial viability demonstrates adaptive capacities at the intersection of tactical administration and tactical planning and restructuring. A representative of a mid-sized organisation outlined that they had published a compilation of their major projects as a book, which serves well to communicate their work to externals.
- 32 Moreover, the official registration of the organisation is essential for its ability to access funding as many donors only provide funding to registered organisations. As stated by an NGO founder who had recently left Afghanistan: "[W]e just started to register [our organisation], so that I can have funding."
- 33 Since many funders refuse to send money directly to Afghanistan, it is a strategic adaptation to maintain a registered partner abroad who can receive the funds and channel them to the implementing partner in Afghanistan. Thereby, the foreign-based, registered NGO can also gain access to contextual information and local knowledge about the security situation and current student needs through partnering with a local grassroots organisation, which they can use to adjust their security measures and programme delivery methods.
- 34 Contrastingly, some interviewees mentioned that their donors insisted on them having a registered entity within Afghanistan, sometimes in addition to a registered organisation abroad. Thus, some organisations are registered with the Taliban under an

alternative name and claim to offer activities unrelated to girls' education. In that way, they can circumvent security risks associated with not complying with the Taliban's policy of registration while avoiding the Taliban dictating their activities. Such arrangements illustrate organisations' capacity to manage regulatory ambiguity and remain operational in fragile environments.

- 35 These findings demonstrate that organisations can diversify financially by leveraging their adaptive capacity of tactical planning and restructuring in combination with other capacities, especially tactical administration. However, financial challenges persist, prompting them to rely on volunteer workers, compromise on their offerings, and engage in mutually beneficial partnerships, which will be discussed in the following section.

6.5 Strategically Expanding Through Collaboration

- 36 The interviews revealed that organisations encounter several constraints when operating individually. On the one hand, they often lack the resources or expertise to diversify their programmes independently. For instance, a founder of an online initiative explained that they were not able to offer mental health programmes to students since they could not find any voluntary therapists and lacked the financial resources to employ paid staff. Similarly, the leader of an NGO offering virtual classes mentioned that due to a lack of funding, their organisation is unable to create its own online platform to upload educational content. On the other hand, a major structural challenge in the Afghan context is the lack of recognised certification. Not only do the Taliban refuse to accredit programmes for girls, but the international community also often does not formally recognise certificates issued by NGOs.
- 37 Collaborative efforts have emerged as a viable solution to tackle these individual constraints. Organisations show the ability to strategically engage in partnerships in order to be able to diversify their programme offerings and provide certification for their classes, which reflects their adaptive capacity in terms of tactical planning and restructuring, as suggested by Singh et al. (2022). All organisations interviewed established collaborations with external partners, including grassroots organisations, community members, and universities. While for some, this includes a large number of different partners, one organisation only had a single partner in the past, the common project with whom had already ended. Often, these are complementary partnerships, where one organisation provides technological expertise or certificates, while another one works in curriculum development. As a project manager of an Afghan French organisation shared: "To combat the lack of internet connectivity, we are collaborating with an NGO that is developing devices, or "boxes," that will enable students to access our content offline."
- 38 An observation shared by many organisations is that "partnerships are often established through word of mouth or existing contacts," as one interviewee reflected. Four organisations in this study also relied on cold outreach to build their collaborations; "however, it can sometimes be challenging to get a response." Most importantly, as explicitly mentioned by three interviewees and implicitly revealed in the practices of organisations partnering with underground schools, alignment of missions is a prerequisite for a successful collaboration. The founder of an NGO which established a joint venture with two other organisations stated, "We have the same

mission, accurate viewpoints and we are like-minded people. We share our mission [...], that's why we easily came together to build this joint venture.”

- 39 In the high-risk environment of Afghanistan, partnerships often require a high level of confidentiality as well. “Nobody knows who our implementing partners are; we don't name them, we don't use their logos anywhere on our website, and we also encourage them not to talk about their partnership with [us] to anybody. Because as soon as there's an international organisation or an American organisation's involvement in the picture, there's more sensitivity towards it.” Besides the quoted interviewee, who is the director of a US-based organisation offering underground classes in collaboration with Afghan grassroots partners, three more organisations outside Afghanistan emphasised the urgency of keeping their local partners' names secret to maintain their safety. Thus, the adaptive capacity of tactical planning and restructuring includes the ability to ensure mission alignment and confidentiality.
- 40 For two Afghan-based organisations, the safety risks do not allow for engaging in collaborations. The founder of one of the NGOs explained that if someone were to get arrested, they would be questioned about their partner organisations, which would endanger everyone. As they put it, reflecting on the times when they personally were still in Afghanistan, “The less we knew about each other, the safer we were.” Their limited ability to engage in partnerships illustrates how external factors influence adaptive capacities.
- 41 Additionally, superficial partnerships should be avoided as they drain organisations' time and resources. As highlighted by two interviewees, it is important to prioritise partnerships based on their operational relevance. This goes both ways, as organisations must also ensure that they bring the right resources to the partnership. The leader of an online initiative partnering with local organisations said that “having the right [educational] content will be really crucial to partnering with lots of other organisations,” underscoring the need to tailor their educational videos to the needs of students, for instance, in terms of the language of instruction, such that local partners show interest.
- 42 Some interviewees mentioned the obstacles they faced in trying to establish partnerships with organisations that did not respond to their messages. One interviewee also said, “We don't actually have the resources to outreach to those organisations.” Conversely, others receive frequent requests for collaborations, which can potentially be led back to their reputation or media presence, such as participation in conferences, being featured in TV, or radio programmes, or their activity on social media. As one founder explained, “After I started being invited to international conferences — in Qatar, Washington D.C., and California — more and more offers started coming in.” Such visibility relies on NGOs' ability to use ICTs to their advantage and establish their reputation, reflecting the adaptive capacity of tactical administration and its interdependence with tactical planning and restructuring. As discussed, using social media always involves security considerations to protect other individuals and organisations involved in an organisation's operations.
- 43 In summary, in the Afghan context, characterised by limited resources and high security risks, partnerships facilitate programmatic diversification and help NGOs survive, as suggested by Szemzó et al. (2022). The ability to establish and maintain these collaborations based on tactical planning and restructuring, including the ability to rely on networked staff, reflecting culture, leadership, and people capacities, strategically select partners, maintain effective workflows and communication across

borders through tactical planning, and ensure confidentiality, reflects dynamic interactions among adaptive capacities. Such collaborative efforts may also be expanded to establish more sustained ecosystems of mission-aligned NGOs, as discussed below.

6.6 Embedding into Organisational Networks

- 44 By participating in an ecosystem of like-minded organisations, NGOs gain access to knowledge, resources, and capacities, allowing them to better respond to challenges in their environment. This effect in turn contributes to their resilience-building process. As stated by an interviewee, “Individually providing service is very tough, but when you are gathering together, it’s more effective, and the efficiency is higher.” Szemző et al. (2022) highlight that ecosystem building is a resilience-building strategy that provides extensive safety to NGOs in times of crisis.
- 45 The most salient example of ecosystem building among the interviewees is an organisation that represents a network of organisations that offer education to girls and women in Afghanistan. This network fosters an active exchange, both in-person and online, among its member organisations and facilitates capacity building. The representative of this network expressed that member organisations collaborate on projects, manage to reach more beneficiaries, develop the capacity to access new funding streams, and share resources. This demonstrates that ecosystem building relies on collaborative capacities to position organisations in a mutually beneficial network, including the ability of organisations to form strategic partnerships, manage them purposefully, and communicate effectively within the partnership. These abilities reflect adaptive capacities of tactical administration and tactical planning and restructuring. Importantly, the network has also developed learning quality standards applicable to all education offerings by member organisations, ensuring effective and sustainable learning experiences for students. By enhancing the quality of their programmes, organisations can reach more students, attract donors, and in turn, become more resilient.
- 46 To be admitted to the network, organisations need to undergo a review to ensure that their activities and missions align with those of the network. However, as stated in the interview, most organisations that show interest in joining are also accepted. Three of the interviewed organisations form part of this network, all of which already existed before the ban on education and offer relatively diversified programmes. Conversely, younger and smaller organisations are not participating. Moreover, a member of a medium-sized organisation mentioned that their organisation belongs to a different network of organisations but that they did not find the time to participate in the group’s regularly held discussions. This shows that ecosystem building and maintaining an active exchange among members is reliant on NGOs’ resources and time.
- 47 Security concerns add a layer of complexity: “Some of [the members] are still in Afghanistan. But they don’t want to show that they are part of [the network] because there are some risks, especially the security risks.” As discussed above, some organisations interviewed are hesitant to expose themselves to partnerships or such networks, constraining their adaptive capacities.
- 48 While the interviews did not reveal that NGOs were embedded in any further ecosystems, most organisations formed complementary partnerships or joint ventures with other organisations. These alliances may lay the foundation for and grow into

established ecosystems over time. Also, in some interviews, conferences and exchanges among organisations were mentioned. While these also do not serve as ecosystems, they constitute platforms for information exchange, which may evolve into structured networks over time.

- ⁴⁹ In summary, ecosystem building emerges as a strategic response to resource scarcity, information gaps, and capacity limitations, relying on adaptive capacities in terms of tactical planning and restructuring and tactical administration. The interviews revealed that, although beneficial, this strategy remains underdeveloped among organisations offering education to girls and women.

7. Discussion

7.1 Motivated Teams and Trusted Communities

7.1.1 Fostering Motivation, Leadership, and Flexibility

- 1 Organisations' ability to recruit and maintain motivated and reliable teams in Afghanistan's high-risk context constitutes the backbone of their survival and strengthens their resilience. As the findings suggest, this ability does not depend on financial resources but is rather enabled by NGOs' ability to foster trust, intrinsic motivation, staff well-being, internal collaboration and community embeddedness. To understand how human resource practices contribute to NGOs' resilience-building, this section examines how these efforts rely on and refine the concept of adaptive capacity, particularly in terms of culture, leadership, and people, as suggested by Singh et al. (2022).
- 2 The findings reveal that NGOs grapple with limited financial resources, which can be understood as a systems-based challenge within the typology of Tarricone et al. (2021), and are thus largely unable to hire paid staff. Previous literature, however, suggests that unutilised resources, such as human and financial resources, allow organisations to navigate unexpected challenges and build resilience (Duchek, 2020). NGOs, which generally operate under constrained resources, especially in terms of finances (Prysmakova & Pysmenna, 2024; Reza, 2022; Singh et al., 2022; Witmer & Mellinger, 2016), have less potential to develop slack resources (Prysmakova & Pysmenna, 2024). Instead, they tend to fully utilise the already available resources (Ab Samad & Ahmad, 2022). In this context, volunteers are essential, offering expertise and labor that organisations otherwise could not afford, as suggested by Englert and Helmig (2018). Consequently, rather than being grounded in unoccupied resources, NGOs' resilience-strengthening characteristic thus lies in volunteers' mission alignment instead (Witmer & Mellinger, 2016), which fosters intrinsic motivation and engagement and makes up for the lack of paid staff.
- 3 The findings reveal that a clear and coherent mission strengthens motivation among team members. Similarly, previous literature has shown that specialist NGOs increase volunteers' motivation by providing a limited but focused range of activities with

which volunteers and staff may identify themselves more closely (Betz & Judkins, 1975). A unified mission enhances an organisation's ability to mobilise staff under difficult conditions, which include high personal risks, emotional strain, and little or no remuneration. This bolsters its adaptive capacities, such that with motivated volunteers, NGOs can compensate for limited resources in their resilience-building process.

- 4 However, nurturing volunteer motivation requires intentional work, such as communicating student feedback to staff members. The need for volunteers to see the impact that their work has created can be explained by the Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), which states that volunteers' motivation increases when their basic psychological needs of competence and social relationships are fulfilled (Lorente-Ayala et al., 2019). Echoing the wish to create a visible impact, competence refers to the "need to feel fulfilled by activities while achieving the desired results" (Lorente-Ayala et al., 2019, p. 203). The desire for social relationships includes the need to feel connected to others (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Equivalently, most organisations are engaging in regular team meetings and exchanges, which increases the feeling of connection to others. Thus, the ability to nurture intrinsic motivation, for instance, via beneficial team dynamics, is a crucial adaptive capacity in the culture, leadership, and people category discussed by Singh et al. (2022). Additionally, it is highly probable that personal experiences increase intrinsic motivation among NGO staff and volunteers, thereby contributing to organisational resilience. Therefore, further research may explore the effect of personal connection to the crisis on motivation.
- 5 Beyond nurturing a sense of belonging, supportive team dynamics, alongside formal trauma support, address agent-based challenges (Tarricone et al., 2021) related to the emotional and psychological well-being of staff and volunteers. The implementation of such activities demonstrates NGOs' ability to adjust to the emotional and mental burden that workers in conflict contexts face, highlighting an adaptive capacity within culture, leadership, and people. Correspondingly, Denhardt and Denhardt (2010) identify the promotion of mental and psychological health as one of the characteristics of a resilient organisation, arguing that individual actors' behavior is an essential driver of or obstacle to organisational resilience. However, it is essential to note that organisations are more than the sum of their staff members. Resilience at the organisational level is based on complex systemic interactions, such that a direct inference from individual to organisational resilience is not always possible (Fyffe, 2014).
- 6 Even though "emotional trauma is really, really big," as highlighted by the founder of an online school employing local Afghan teachers to record educational videos, none of the interviews explicitly mentioned psychological support for teachers on the ground. This lack of initiatives to mitigate the mental burden of Afghan female teachers likely stems from financial constraints and security risks. Resultingly, the ability to support staff mental health, which previous literature has identified as crucial (USAID, 2020), is limited for those who may suffer most. This reveals a deficiency in adaptive capacity. Importantly, further research may explore how NGOs operating in fragile contexts can support the mental well-being of local staff and in that, strengthen their adaptive capacity.
- 7 Despite facing emotional and mental challenges, interview participants revealed a positive mindset by referring to plans for programme expansion and diversification.

Similarly, optimism for the future has been identified as an essential indicator of organisational resilience (Witmer & Mellinger, 2016).

- 8 Apart from staff members and teachers, team leaders play an equally relevant role. The interviews demonstrated that team leaders were actively searching for innovative solutions, such as implementing AI for education or encouraging their students to become teachers for girls they could reach due to language barriers. Their proactive behavior reflects adaptive capacity driven by leadership, which fosters a culture of resilience within the organisation (Singh et al., 2022). This capacity enables organisations to navigate uncertainty effectively, informed by shared values and guiding strategic decisions (Pryce, 2021). Importantly, Liang and Cao's (2021) research has demonstrated that team leaders' resilience, referred to as managerial resilience and characterised by the acquisition of new knowledge, a positive and proactive attitude, and the ability to leverage new resources, plays a crucial role in promoting employees' resilience. Employees' resilience, which is further shaped by human resource practices that promote creativity, professional growth, and crisis responsiveness, is, as outlined above, positively correlated to organisational resilience, even though a direct inference is not given.
- 9 Moreover, previous literature suggests that decisive and proactive leadership, which is solution-oriented, plays a crucial role for staff flexibility in conflict zones (Laws et al., 2022). As mentioned earlier, Afghanistan's dynamic environment necessitates high flexibility. An interviewee stated that "you have to be very alert, and then just see what's going on the floor, on the ground and based on that you have to adapt it." Strong leaders need to be complemented by a motivated and supportive team. In one interview, a leader mentioned ensuring flat hierarchies within the team, which, according to Prysmakova and Pysmenna (2024), enables agile reactions. The relatively small teams of the studied organisations thereby potentially mitigate the risk of slow decision-making due to horizontal hierarchies, a problem suggested by previous literature (Prysmakova & Pysmenna, 2024). Staff flexibility is further fostered by appropriate training in general skills, while an organisational culture that views new information as an opportunity for change also promotes flexible adaptations (Lee, 2023).
- 10 These adaptations, in terms of internal processes and programme delivery, implemented by the interviewed organisations require ongoing learning, flexible leadership, and a culture of adjustment. Together, these abilities reflect the adaptive capacities of culture, leadership, and people, as well as tactical administration and underpin the strategy of adaptability. The study's findings reveal how human resources are effectively leveraged and nurtured by organisations, which underscores the relevance of adaptive capacity in terms of culture, leadership, and people, particularly concerning organisations' ability to foster motivation and flexibility, promote mental health, and practice supportive leadership.
- 11 Attention to strategic human resource practices also serves to attract, onboard, and retain new team members. Interviewees stressed the importance of selecting teachers whose values align with the organisation's mission. Through emphasising their principles in these processes, NGOs can guarantee that new employees and volunteers are committed to organisational goals (Kellner et al., 2017). As discussed above, a shared purpose also fosters volunteers' motivation. Additionally, onboarding foreign teachers effectively is important to increase their cultural sensitivity, while it also strengthens their capacity in distance learning as suggested by USAID (2020).

7.1.2 Leveraging Local Knowledge and Community Trust

- 12 In terms of local teachers, NGOs demonstrate the adaptive capacity of culture, leadership, and people by carefully selecting trustworthy teachers who taught prior to the Taliban's return. This approach is important not only to ensure the safety of students and the confidentiality of the organisation but also to guarantee that contextual understanding informs programme delivery. These practices address agent-based and pedagogical challenges (Tarricone et al., 2021), particularly the need to protect individuals operating under personal risk while maintaining programme relevance. They reflect an organisation's ability to mobilise mission-aligned and operationally effective human resources in a high-risk environment, which further contributes to organisational resilience-building (Singh et al., 2022).
- 13 Many NGOs integrate these trusted teachers directly into the design and implementation of education initiatives. Similarly, previous literature suggests that emergency-affected community members should participate in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of education programmes (Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies, 2008). Such participatory strategies reflect adaptive capacities at the intersection of tactical administration and culture, leadership, and people, as they draw on community and human resources in order to adapt operations. By hiring individuals from within the community, NGOs strengthen trust between themselves and the communities (Witmer & Mellinger, 2016). Such harmonious relations give organisations access to essential knowledge that ensures context-sensitive programming and strengthens the resilience of their initiatives (Tarricone et al., 2021).
- 14 These arguments also reveal a relevant trade-off in the context of online schooling. As online courses often involve teachers based abroad, the ability to respond to students' realities may be lower than with in-person education. However, some online teachers are diaspora members, such that they can provide culturally relevant and context-sensitive classes. Nonetheless, the ability to detect emerging needs and respond to student feedback becomes even more important in online settings.
- 15 Especially in cases of weak state capacity, community-based education can create culturally sensitive educational opportunities and provide access to education for rural and remote communities (Kayen et al., 2025). Importantly, short-term community mobilization may lead to disempowerment in the long run if it is treated as a substitute rather than a complement to state responsibility (Burde, 2004). Under the current Taliban rule, this is less applicable as the state is not trying to implement inclusive education for girls and women but rather restricting it deliberately. Thus, organisations are filling a vacuum left by the state rather than trying to replace state efforts.
- 16 Organisations reported implementing basic monitoring and quality assurance mechanisms in their community-based education offers, which demonstrate an adaptive response to previously identified quality deficiencies in community-based settings (Kayen et al., 2025). These are particularly pronounced in terms of teacher qualifications and inadequate learning environments. Such limitations of community-based education, which are pedagogical challenges (Tarricone et al., 2021), underscore the importance of continued support and adaptation to ensure that community-based education remains accessible and effective in fragile settings such as Afghanistan.

- 17 In sum, the ability to leverage and integrate community resources reflects an essential adaptive capacity at the intersection of tactical administration, which involves adapting programme delivery to local conditions, as well as culture, leadership, and people, through the capacity to rely on mission-aligned, trusted individuals. By involving local actors in the planning and implementation of education programmes, NGOs enhance their ability to sustain operations, remain context-sensitive, promote local participation, and ensure the safety of everyone involved.
- 18 The adaptive capacity of culture, leadership, and people additionally involves the ability to foster resilience through leadership, nurture staff motivation and well-being, and recruit and onboard reliable, qualified teachers. These capacities enable organisations to strategically adjust to the complex context of Afghanistan and respond to agent-based and pedagogical challenges, manifesting the strategy of adaptability, as discussed by Szemző et al. (2022).

7.2 Adapting Delivery: A Strategic Imperative

- 19 In Afghanistan, widespread security threats, which constitute a challenge that can be categorised as systemic (Tarricone et al., 2021), not only influence human resource practices but also force NGOs to adjust their programme delivery for girls' and women's education. Similarly, Burde et al. (2015) highlight the importance of security-informed delivery models in conflict-affected settings. While physical infrastructure once offered protection against attacks on girls' education (Burde et al., 2015), under the current ban on girls' secondary education, such infrastructure often poses risks. Only when reconfigured, such as to resemble a religious school, may it still provide some degree of safety.
- 20 This study confirms the viability of alternative infrastructure, such as home-based and community schools, as previously suggested by Cambridge Education (2017). While prior guidance points to the need for emergency exists in schools (Cambridge Education, 2017), the findings of this study emphasise the additional need for backup facilities that can be used should the primary ones be uncovered by the Taliban. These adjustments in programme delivery are enabled by tactical administration, which involves the ability to adapt programmes and organisational workflows, communicate effectively with relevant stakeholders, and strategically utilise ICTs to respond to external challenges (Singh et al., 2022). The actual adjustments are a manifestation of adaptability (Szemző et al., 2022).
- 21 Local knowledge, combined with the ability to assimilate and learn from new observations, further underpins NGOs' capacity to adjust their programmes in response to security threats. For instance, one NGO realised that the Taliban searched WhatsApp chats and responded by implementing security protocols, reflecting organisational learning. Similarly, Duchek (2020) stresses the capability of organisations to reflect on and learn from past and current events to implement necessary organisational changes.
- 22 Beyond these adaptations for in-person teaching, many organisations reconfigured their broader programme delivery models to deal with the high-risk environment in Afghanistan. A central element of these adaptations is the strategic and creative use of digital tools. Organisations show the ability to deploy adequate online education offerings, enhancing the safety of teachers and students, which constitutes an adaptive tactical administration capacity. As suggested by previous literature, they rely on

existing technology and platforms, such as Zoom, to transmit educational content, which enables them to respond more quickly (USAID, 2020). However, these education modalities are subject to their own impediments, especially in a setting like Afghanistan, marked by systemic challenges such as inadequate internet coverage and limited access to devices, as well as pedagogical challenges, including digital literacy gaps.

- 23 In response to internet connectivity challenges, organisations rely on offline-compatible apps, alternative modalities, and radio programmes to maintain operations. For example, recognising that most girls own a smartphone rather than a laptop, as previously found (Quraishi, Hashimi, et al., 2024), NGOs have developed mobile-friendly educational solutions. Similarly, Tarricone et al. (2021) argue that mobile learning and social media approaches are practical in emergency contexts, helping students stay engaged and retain learning material. Further, blended learning, which involves integrating digital learning solutions with other modes of education delivery, helps overcome access challenges (Tarricone et al., 2021). As it is always necessary to adapt learning modalities to local conditions (USAID, 2020), the need for multiple modalities is especially critical in regions where access to digital devices and technology is limited. Radio programmes, as offered by one organisation in this study, are another low-cost option with great potential to increase access to education (USAID, 2020). They may be designed in a gender-responsive way to consider the specific needs of female and male listeners. Correspondingly, the radio programme by the mentioned organisation is recorded by women and addresses specifically Afghan girls and women's educational, psychological, and health needs.
- 24 Lastly, to enhance platform accessibility, an important factor for mobile learning success (Alrasheedi et al., 2015), NGOs have created instructional videos to ensure inclusivity despite low levels of digital literacy, a point also noted by Quraishi et al. (2024). A report by USAID (2020) outlines the importance of supporting students in their transition to online learning. These practices demonstrate organisational adaptive capacity of tactical administration through their ability to recognise feasible digital options to circumvent security constraints and provide adequate gender-responsive alternatives to address access and inclusivity challenges.
- 25 Digital tools not only help navigate security risks but also compensate for limited human resources as seen in the case of NGOs implementing self-learning apps or AI tools. Karimy et al. (2024) cautions against limited social interaction as a drawback of AI-powered education methods. Conversely, the interviewee described their organisation's strategy in response to this pedagogical challenge (Tarricone et al., 2021), where students initially learn content by themselves and then come together with other students to discuss it. In that way, social interaction can be upheld, which fosters learning engagement and motivation among students (Karimy et al., 2024). Likewise, in the case of the US-based organisation implementing a self-study app, teachers regularly follow up with students to ensure that they understand the content, which still requires fewer human resources than providing live classes. Previous studies have confirmed the effectiveness of educational apps when paired with guidance by an educator (USAID, 2020). These examples demonstrate that NGOs can implement innovative solutions when faced with resource constraints, as well as recognise and address unwanted side effects. These abilities further evidence adaptive capacity in terms of tactical administration.

- 26 While much of the existing literature on ICT adoption by NGOs revolves around their voluntary uptake and the barriers thereto (e.g., Godefroid et al., 2024), for many organisations in this study, adopting ICT solutions was an imposed necessity rather than a decision to innovate. The concept of *imposed service innovation*, proposed by Heinonen and Strandvik (2021) about the push for innovation driven by the COVID-19 crisis captures this phenomenon. In the context of NGOs in Afghanistan, this shifts the focus for organisations from whether ICTs should be adopted to how to adopt them under the constraints described above.
- 27 Singh et al. (2022) categorise innovation as an adaptive capacity in terms of culture, leadership, and people, which emphasises its dependence on an organisational culture that fosters innovative habits and creativity. This study demonstrates that, in Afghanistan's security-constrained context, innovation is only partially reliant on nurturing a corresponding culture. Additionally, the ability to integrate innovations into daily operations under pressure comes into focus, which is why, in this case, innovation is closely tied to the adaptive capacity of tactical administration. These findings underscore the complex, mutually dependent relationship between adaptive capacities.
- 28 Notably, most organisations in this study are small in size and demonstrate limited technological expertise, as well as constrained financial resources. Thus, forming partnerships with more technologically skilled actors proves an effective strategy for implementing suitable solutions, such as the development of devices that allow offline access to content. Equivalently, previous literature has found that the inclusion of additional stakeholders strengthens organisations' innovation capacity (Wehnert et al., 2018). The ability to establish strategic external collaborations points to the adaptive capacity of tactical planning and restructuring (Singh et al., 2022). The fact that this adaptive capacity reinforces the adaptive tactical administration capacity of NGOs' ICT implementation underscores the interrelated nature of adaptive capacities, as described by Singh et al. (2022).
- 29 NGOs not only reconfigured their programme delivery methods, but they also expanded their activities in response to students' emerging needs. They implemented psychological support programmes for students, which previous literature related to crisis contexts has identified as important (USAID, 2020). Further, in response to lack of future opportunities, NGOs integrated mentoring and scholarship programmes. Such modifications in services require the ability to recognise students' needs and adapt programming accordingly, an adaptive capacity under tactical administration. Often, they also depend on collaborations with external partners, as will be discussed below, which are underpinned by tactical planning and restructuring capacity.
- 30 Tactical administration further involves an organisation's ability to communicate with various stakeholders (Singh et al., 2022). As communication tool, ICTs can bolster resilience-building and potentially save time and money, as suggested by Fyffe (2014). Most organisations in this study attract and communicate with students, teachers, other organisations, and donors through social media channels, such as Instagram or WhatsApp. Internally, digital tools may facilitate flexible workflows by supporting decentralised internal collaboration, which is a component of culture, leadership, and people. As discussed earlier, if some team members are based in Afghanistan and others work from abroad, organisations' ability to navigate systemic challenges posed by the Afghan context may be strengthened. To ensure effective coordination and smooth communication, one organisation paired each team member on the ground with a

counterpart abroad. These flexible workflows depend on ICTs, which reveals the need to mobilise technological and human resources in parallel. The fact that all participating organisations are relatively small may positively influence organisational flexibility, as suggested by Fyffe (2014). Smaller organisations usually have less rigid administrative structures, which allows them to adjust workflows more swiftly.

- 31 Moreover, many organisations use social media channels to present their work to the public. In this sense, ICTs enable NGOs to attract additional resources and become more competitive (Singh et al., 2022). Through their online visibility, they may build their reputation and appeal to donors. Thus, there is a positive correlation between ICTs, the adaptive capacity to build and communicate an organisation's brand, and the ability to achieve financial sustainability. The latter points to capacities in terms of tactical planning and restructuring.
- 32 In sum, while the ability to strategically deploy ICT assumes a prominent role in this study's findings, tactical administration also manifests through the ability to provide non-digital programme adjustments in response to systemic security challenges, such as maintaining backup facilities or expanding programme offers. Additionally, the findings highlight that resilience-building relies on cross-cutting adaptive capacities, which are further strengthened by organisational learning and context-awareness. In addition to adjusting programme delivery and countering systemic and pedagogical challenges, adaptive use of ICT and flexible workflows also contribute to enabling organisations to attract funding and establish beneficial partnerships. Together, these abilities enable strategic adaptability. The following section examines organisational capacities related to tactical planning and restructuring, which enable NGOs to respond to financial pressures and engage in strategic collaborations, allowing for the strategic outcome of diversification (Szemző et al., 2022).

7.3 Financial and Collaborative Capacities under Constraints

7.3.1 Tackling Increasing Financial Pressures

- 33 Interviewed organisations described the financial strain, a systems-based challenge (Tarricone et al., 2021), as a constant companion shaping a range of their decisions and operations. They pointed to increasing competition among donors, given US aid cuts under the second Trump administration in 2025. Already, the COVID-19 pandemic led to funding shortages for the nonprofit sector (Plaisance, 2022; Singh et al., 2022). Interviewees mentioned that other crises are more in focus for the international community, further explaining the decreases in funding, which previous literature has specifically noted in the case of Afghanistan (Fazli, 2024). Given that the number of NGOs has been increasing while government support has been declining, competition in the nonprofit sector in general has become fiercer over recent decades (Topaloglu et al., 2018). However, financial means are crucial for building organisational resilience (Duchek, 2020). Consequently, NGOs responded by adapting their financial practices in ways that help them navigate uncertainty, including strategic financial diversification, as suggested by Szemző et al. (2022). These adjustments reflect adaptive capacity in terms of tactical planning and restructuring, which include the ability to implement financial practices to manage financial uncertainty (Singh et al., 2022).

- 34 Interviewed organisations explained a range of strategies pursued to secure funding. To diversify its funding base, one NGO demonstrated the ability to build strategic partnerships by forging a cross-sector collaboration with a for-profit company. This partnership, with the purpose of organising a fundraising event, illustrates the organisation's adaptive capacity to identify and leverage new funding avenues, as well as to select partners whose missions align with the organisation's. Such mission alignment is critical for cross-sector collaboration (Ab Samad & Ahmad, 2022). For another NGO, diversification meant forming a joint venture with two others to qualify for a grant. This adjustment demonstrates that organisations must be capable of adapting to changing prerequisites to access funding, such collaborations, which are increasingly required by funders (Witesman & Heiss, 2017).
- 35 Other organisations pursued a different path, identifying suitable project calls and grants to apply for. Some organisations combine this type of funding with other funding streams, such as individual donors, as suggested by Fyffe (2014). In that way, dependence on such mechanisms can be reduced, as overreliance on them is risky should funding become scarce (Duchek, 2020). This shows NGOs' ability to identify, access, and combine funding sources. Such adaptive tactical planning and restructuring capacities enable NGOs to pursue the strategic diversification of their funding streams.
- 36 The ability to cultivate long-term donor relationships built on trust and value alignment proved beneficial and constitutes another important dimension of tactical planning and restructuring. Two organisations, which, unlike most others already existed before the Taliban's return to power, have established reliable donor bases over the years based on trust and a common commitment to and understanding of their mission. Such alignment can help prevent donors from demanding adaptations that divert organisations from their core vision, thereby risking the loss of their integrity, as highlighted by Mutongwizo (2018). Investing resources into cultivating a good NGO-donor relationship, including regular reporting, which shows adaptive capacity within tactical administration, has become increasingly urgent in the Afghan context (Fazli, 2024). If a donor has sent funds to an organisation already once, they are more likely to donate again, as they feel more connected to the organisation's purpose. The relatively longer lifespan of the two organisations with stable donor bases likely contributed to their ability to build these relations, which enhances their adaptive capacity in terms of tactical planning and restructuring. Some organisations also used their reputation and social media to attract donors, reflecting tactical administration. Contrastingly, one NGO lost previous donors, leaving it with funding shortages for internet costs, illustrating that NGOs may remain vulnerable despite investing in donor relations.
- 37 Many NGOs also demonstrated adaptive restructuring capacity by being able to flexibly configure their organisations, particularly to handle legal registration with the purpose of safeguarding access to financial resources. Donors have been reluctant to send money through official channels to Afghanistan as they wish to avoid acknowledging or cooperating with the Taliban government (Fazli, 2024; Shimada, 2025). To address this systems-based challenge (Tarricone et al., 2021), NGOs register outside Afghanistan and deliver programmes through implementing partners or local team members. This approach has proven to be an effective strategy at the intersection of adaptability through internal restructuring, as well as diversification through establishing partnerships with cross-country partners to secure funding for organisations that provide in-person opportunities. This adjustment shows that resilience-building strategies are often interdependent and work in parallel. Also, cross-border

arrangements with external partners rely on effective communication through ICTs, enabled by tactical administration.

- 38 Some organisations are registered with the Taliban under a false name and claim to offer activities other than education. With this adaptability strategy, organisations circumvent a systems-based challenge described by previous literature (Fazli, 2024): The tension between the need to comply with certain regulations imposed by the Taliban to remain operational, on the one hand, and donors' reluctance to fund any projects that are dictated by the Taliban's policies, on the other hand. Other NGOs work undercover or focus on online classes, which minimises interactions with the de facto authorities and thus allows them to avoid complying with the Taliban's rules. Still, the described dilemma may contribute to NGOs' struggles to find donors. This inability to attract funding highlights the limits of adaptive capacities under systems-based challenges and shows that NGOs are often unable to prepare for all political and financial constraints.

7.3.2 Collaborative Adaptation

- 39 The ability to build effective relationships and communication channels is not only critical for donor collaboration but also for partnering with other actors, including international NGOs, local grassroots organisations, and universities. Relying on a range of resources, including human, technological, and community resources, organisations in this study demonstrate the ability to initiate, nurture, and mobilise relationships with diverse entities, which constitutes another essential dimension of tactical planning and restructuring (Singh et al., 2022). Organisations that regularly interact with key partners (Fyffe, 2014) and that invest in external relationships have proven to be better equipped to adapt (Prysmakova & Pysmenna, 2024).
- 40 In Afghanistan's security-constrained environment, according to interviewees, the adaptive capacity to establish beneficial collaborations hinges on organisations' ability to foster trust and identify reliable, mission-aligned partners. Equivalently, previous literature has highlighted that value alignment contributes to the success of partnerships (Ab Samad & Ahmad, 2022; Witesman & Heiss, 2017). Moreover, trust at both the organisational and interpersonal levels affects the decision to collaborate and is crucial for the separation and execution of tasks (Malik, 2022). Many interviewees mentioned partnering with organisations led by individuals whom they knew and trusted. Some NGOs foster organisational trust based on their reputation, established through conference participation, media features, or award wins, which shows tactical administration capacity.
- 41 For many organisations in this study, trust also means being able to rely on the confidentiality of partner organisations for their own safety. This security challenge is systems-based in origin but manifests as an agent-based constraint (Tarricone et al., 2021), underscoring the interpersonal dependencies involved in collaboration in this context. Relying on grassroots organisations or other local individuals to deliver education increases NGOs' safety, since community members are unlikely to report one another to the Taliban. Nevertheless, for NGOs in Afghanistan, security concerns are often too high to risk collaboration with other actors, constraining their adaptive capacity of tactical planning and restructuring. This insight contradicts previous findings that partnerships are beneficial for all NGOs regardless of their location (Fyffe, 2014).

- 42 Interviewees emphasised that collaborative arrangements not only require strategic selection of trusted partner organisations but also the prioritization of partnerships that are beneficial, reflecting adaptive planning capacity. This observation aligns with previous studies that have shown that collaborations enhance organisational resilience if they provide knowledge advantages or additional resources (Witesman & Heiss, 2017). Otherwise, investments of time and resources may outweigh the benefits of partnering with external actors. Similarly, Fyffe (2014) argues that forming mutually beneficial partnerships is a characteristic of resilient nonprofits.
- 43 For any organisation, effective communication capacities are another vital enabler of functional partnerships. Several interviewees reported relying on digital tools to facilitate communication with their partners, reflecting tactical administration. Furthermore, NGOs manage their collaboration by establishing a *Memorandum of Understanding* and requesting reports to assess the effectiveness of their collaboration with local partners. Correspondingly, previous literature finds that communication underpins effective work coordination and ensures a shared understanding of collaborative processes (Malik, 2022).
- 44 The organisations in this study often coordinate their work processes through complementary partnerships, dividing tasks between, for instance, content creation and technological infrastructure. In some cases, interviewed organisations exchange funding opportunities and provide each other with capacity-building support. By partnering, NGOs may also share overhead costs or infrastructure to compensate for the lack of capacity to do the same individually, which may especially affect smaller organisations (Fyffe, 2014). For example, local NGOs stream online content developed by an interviewed organisation that lacks the resources to build its own platform.
- 45 Cross-sectoral collaborations may be especially beneficial in providing organisations with additional resources (Malik, 2022). However, as mentioned, only one organisation partnered with a private company for a fundraising event. Consequently, future research may analyze the factors inhibiting education NGOs in Afghanistan from engaging in more cross-sector collaborations.
- 46 Lastly, as outlined earlier, some NGOs extend their collaborations to create an ecosystem of organisations, allowing for more sustained resource-sharing and information exchange. These ecosystems, which enhance collective resilience (Szemző et al., 2022), will be discussed further below.
- 47 According to Singh et al. (2022), the adaptive capacity of tactical planning and restructuring further involves the ability to develop a succession plan and engage in strategic governance practices, which did not play a role in the interviews. Limited funding and resources, as well as high uncertainty about the future, may complicate such long-term planning or even make it futile. Thus, given that strategies such as succession planning may constitute a waste of resources, not engaging in them may reflect strategic prioritization of limited resources. However, this absence may also be a result of the low number of organisations interviewed, which are all relatively small-sized and mostly recently established. More established and institutionally embedded NGOs may indeed rely on these adaptive capacities.
- 48 Ultimately, the findings demonstrate that tactical planning and restructuring for NGOs providing education to girls and women in Afghanistan involve both financial and collaborative dimensions. On the financial side, it constitutes the ability to strategically identify and combine funding sources, establish and invest in long-term donor relations, and effectively adapt to donor requirements. On the collaborative side,

tactical planning and restructuring also involve the ability to build and maintain external collaborations based on mission alignment, confidentiality, and mutual benefit. These adaptive capacities involve the strategic mobilization of human, technological, financial, and social resources and are dependent on iterative interactions with other adaptive capacities. Such abilities enable strategic diversification of funding streams and partnerships, which in turn enhances resilience-building by reducing financial uncertainty. The subsequent section analyzes the interactions between adaptive capacities and strategies in more detail.

7.4 Interactions Between Adaptive Capacities and Strategic Outcomes

7.4.1 Capacities Enabling Strategic Outcomes

- 49 When faced with security constraints, funding challenges, and evolving student needs, organisations responded in diverse ways. Some quickly adapted through strategic recruitment practices, shifts in programme delivery methods, and adjustments to internal workflows. Others reached out and expanded by implementing new programme offerings, entering into partnerships, and securing additional funding. Some even joined broader networks representing more formalised exchange platforms. These varied resilience-building strategies, as suggested by Szemző et al. (2022), are enabled by a dynamic interplay between NGOs' adaptive capacities.
- 50 In response to systems-based security and financial challenges, organisations showed adaptability by adjusting their programme delivery, undertaking covert actions, and restructuring their human resource processes, such as recruiting trustworthy local teachers. Similarly, to navigate agent-based challenges, NGOs fostered supportive team dynamics through regular team meetings. Thus, while Szemző et al. (2022) primarily discuss examples of adaptability in terms of shifts in programme delivery, the implementation of context-sensitive human resource practices illustrates how adaptability is also applicable to internal organisational processes, enabling them to remain functional in complex environments.
- 51 Team members' flexibility emerged as an important enabler of adaptability, which is confirmed by Prysmakova and Pysmenna's (2024). Thus, adaptability relies on adaptive capacities in terms of culture, leadership, and people, as well as tactical administration.
- 52 Although adaptability is defined as a strategy depending primarily on internal resources (Szemző et al., 2022), interviews revealed that it may also be indirectly supported by previously established partnerships, which reflect the adaptive capacity of tactical planning and restructuring. The resources obtained through such collaborations may enhance an organisation's capacity to act autonomously, thereby facilitating the conditions under which adaptability can emerge. For example, based on the knowledge gained through the exchange with local partners, an organisation may implement more security measures and adapt its programmes. This further demonstrates that adaptability arises from interactions among adaptive capacities.
- 53 Diversification reflects how organisations leverage internal and external capacities to navigate insecurity. Diversifying their connections, as well as their activities and income streams, allows organisations to strengthen their resilience-building capacity by creating alternative pathways for impact and support (Szemző et al., 2022). To

navigate systems-based financial pressures, organisations leveraged grants, project calls, fundraising, and individual donors. After losing some donors, one organisation was able to remain operational by relying on its diversified donor base. In contrast, other organisations struggled to continue certain activities due to a lack of alternative funders. Thus, a diversified donor base helps spread financial risks (Ebenezer et al., 2020). Additionally, relying on diverse sources of funding, such as government funding, earned income, and private funding, increases resilience (Fyffe, 2014). These practices are enabled by organisations' underlying adaptive capacities in terms of tactical planning and restructuring, which include the ability to identify and sustain varied income sources and donor relations.

- 54 In other cases, organisations had to ensure their legal registration and maintain partnerships with implementing partners on the ground to secure additional donor support. These findings suggest that financial diversification may require internal restructuring, as well as smooth communication flows across borders, both of which are reliant on tactical administration and tactical planning and restructuring.
- 55 As discussed, despite efforts to diversify funding streams, many organisations are still struggling to access sufficient funding and rely on volunteers, online modalities, or shared resources with partners.
- 56 Organisations also diversified their programme offerings to address students' mental health problems, an agent-based challenge, and the systems-based challenge of students' limited access to future opportunities. New programmes emerged in response to students' needs and after community consultations, reflecting how programme diversification is reliant on local knowledge and contextual embeddedness (Szemző et al., 2022). Community dialogues help prioritise initiatives in vulnerable contexts (Laws et al., 2022). As discussed earlier, programme diversification leverages the interrelated adaptive capacities of tactical administration and culture, leadership, and people, enabling organisations to tailor programmes in a context-sensitive manner. Simultaneously, in some cases, financial means are indispensable for achieving programmatic diversification, as evidenced by the fact that an NGO cannot offer mental health support due to a lack of funds. In such cases, establishing partnerships can supply the required resources to implement new activities.
- 57 From the interviews, it became clear that by implementing new activities, organisations intended to navigate the challenges related to their core mission, namely bringing education to girls in Afghanistan, and not to satisfy donor requirements. For instance, additional programmes aimed at making future opportunities accessible are addressing pedagogical challenges, such as low learning motivation. Therefore, the concern of mission drift when altering their programmes (Mutongwizo, 2018) appears less applicable to the organisations interviewed.
- 58 New partnerships may not only support programmatic diversification but also represent strategic diversification themselves. The interviews revealed that complementary collaborations with diverse entities provide organisations with access to a pool of resources and knowledge, thereby broadening NGOs' capacity to adapt further to the changing context. The adaptive capacity of tactical planning and restructuring, including an organisation's ability to selectively establish and maintain mutually beneficial partnerships, enables the diversification of partnerships. Fyffe (2014) confirms that partnering with a range of partners increases organisations' resilience. The interviews demonstrated that diversifying partnerships may lead to enhanced adaptability, as access to new resources, such as digital tools, enables NGOs to

respond more flexibly to changing conditions. These reinforcing effects highlight how resilience-building strategies are interrelated and dynamically co-construct one another. Similarly, as collaborations deepen and expand, they may also lay the groundwork for more sustained and structured forms of cooperation, representing the strategy of ecosystem building.

- 59 One interviewee described a platform that brings together multiple mission-aligned NGOs and facilitates exchanges about concrete offers, support services, and viable strategies. In that, as suggested by Holmén (2002), this platform, like other networks of organisations with a shared purpose, significantly increases the information available among organisations. These NGOs often join forces to establish collaborative projects, expanding their reach and capacities. As such, networks are beneficial for fostering relationships among organisations and developing shared activities related to a specific goal (Østergaard & Nielsen, 2005).
- 60 Broader networks of interdependent actors facilitate the sharing of information, resources and capacities, ensuring long-term resilience (Szemző et al., 2022). Drawing on the adaptive capacity of tactical planning and restructuring to engage in joint initiatives, NGOs can reduce operating costs and increase efficiency to make projects more feasible.
- 61 A steering committee consisting of numerous organisations coordinates the interviewed network's activities. This committee serves as the ecosystem's focal point, ensuring smooth information flows, as suggested by Holmén (2002). Lastly, ecosystems may also offer longer-term benefits, including strengthening advocacy efforts and creating network-wide education standards.
- 62 As discussed earlier, while one prominent example of a network emerged from the interviews, other efforts to build ecosystems remain at best, at their initial stages, with only very few actors included so far. Szemző et al. (2022), however, highlight that ecosystems are constituted of a diverse range of actors with different levels of institutionalization. Below, the discussion will turn to the factors inhibiting NGOs' ability to further consolidate their collaborations into more sustained networks.

7.4.2 Reciprocal Reinforcement: Strategies Generating Capacities

- 63 Notably, the findings reveal a dynamic and iterative relationship between adaptive capacities and resilience-building strategies. For example, implementing security protocols at underground schools is an expression of adaptability. This strategy is enabled by the ability to mobilise team members' contextual knowledge, an adaptive capacity in terms of culture, leadership, and people. Putting such safety measures into practice reinforces internal capabilities, including coordination, communication, and flexibility, which in turn enhance adaptive capacities. Similarly, tapping into new funding sources through financial diversification may strengthen an NGO's adaptive capacities in terms of tactical planning and restructuring, as it improves the organisation's ability to expand its programme offerings. These cases demonstrate how strategic outcomes generate additional resources, capacities, and knowledge. Such reciprocal dynamics underscore Singh et al.'s (2022) suggestion that adaptive capacities can reinforce each other but they also add to it by showing that strategies may retroactively create new capacities.
- 64 Ecosystem building, too, is a strategy that paves the way for building resources and developing new adaptive capacities. Through participation in networks, NGOs can

access additional resources including finances, information, and materials, and develop the ability to leverage these strategically. For instance, given new information received through a contact in a network, an organisation may enhance its ability to assess security threats in its programme delivery, thereby strengthening its adaptive capacity of tactical administration. By implementing new security protocols, the NGO manifests the resilience-building strategy of adaptability. Similarly, an organisation may rely on financial support or shared material resources to diversify its programme offerings, thereby relying on tactical planning and restructuring to facilitate diversification.

- 65 Organisational learning contributes to these dynamics of building capacity through strategic actions. When implementing resilience-building strategies, NGOs accumulate knowledge through learning from experiences and interactions with their environment, as exemplified in an interview: “So maybe you can call it streamlining the process. [...] the beginning was a little bit hard, but then the more we worked on it, the better the process got.” This continuous learning and the resulting knowledge strengthen NGOs’ adaptive capacities over time and in that way, enhance the ability to implement new resilience-building strategies. Similarly, Duchek (2020) emphasises that learning is central to resilience-building, enabling organisations to take strategic action.
- 66 These interactions underscore the iterative nature of resilience-building, aligning with Singh et al.’s (2022) and Duchek’s (2020) theoretical accounts of resilience-building and adaptation as continuous and dynamic processes. Importantly, this study shows that through their reciprocal interactions, capacities and strategies co-construct one another over time. However, in highly constrained environments, these processes are influenced by temporal and contextual factors, rendering resilience-building fragile. These limitations will be discussed in the following section.

7.5 Limits of Adaptive Capacity and Unequal Access to Resilience Pathways

- 67 While the preceding section outlined the dynamic interplay between adaptive capacities and strategies that underpin resilience-building, the interviews also revealed limitations that may constrain this process for certain NGOs. Especially the strategies of diversification and ecosystem building are affected by these constraints.
- 68 For instance, organisations that operated before the ban on girls’ secondary education showed relatively diversified donor bases. Conversely, several younger NGOs have not been able to diversify their financial resources, with some relying on a single donor and others without any consistent funding at all. Similarly, the interviews showed that engagement in a network of organisations is more frequent among organisations that already existed prior to the ban on education.
- 69 According to Szemző et al. (2022), both diversification and ecosystem building require time to develop, with ecosystem building demanding an even longer period to evolve. Thus, organisational age may affect the likelihood of these strategic outcomes by enabling the development of the necessary adaptive capacities over time. Age is often closely related to NGOs’ size, as older organisations had more time to expand and build resources (Foster & Meinhard, 2002).
- 70 Guo and Acar (2005) confirm that older NGOs are more likely to engage in formal collaborations, which include for instance, joint programmes. Additionally, characteristics related to larger organisations, including more financial resources and

government funding (Guo & Acar, 2005), as well as more technological resources, allowing for communication, and more staff lead to more collaboration (AbouAssi et al., 2016). These characteristics not only facilitate partnerships but also indicate higher levels of adaptive capacity. By contrast, younger and smaller organisations may lack the resources to cultivate and maintain multiple funding relationships or effectively manage external collaborations, restricting their adaptive capacity in terms of tactical planning and restructuring. Thus, they tend to show less diversified partnerships (Foster & Meinhard, 2002).

- 71 Moreover, financial diversification is related to administrative and fundraising costs (M. Kim & Mason, 2020). Small NGOs may struggle to fulfill administrative requirements linked to some funding sources (Fyffe, 2014). For example, regular reporting required by donors requires time and resources that smaller or younger organisations may lack, revealing deficiencies in tactical administration. The constrained ability to access new funding streams proves missing adaptive capacity under tactical planning and restructuring.
- 72 Furthermore, previous literature confirms that larger organisations are better equipped to utilise networks, while smaller organisations tend to focus more on responding to challenges using their own resources (Østergaard & Nielsen, 2005). Østergaard and Nielsen (2005) note that small organisations are more likely to show an underdeveloped culture of networking, which highlights missing necessary resources and adaptive capacity under culture, leadership, and people, particularly in fostering openness to collaboration.
- 73 Additionally, an organisation's adaptive capacity of tactical administration, including its ability to absorb and utilise knowledge obtained through networking (Østergaard & Nielsen, 2005) determines its participation in networks. Members should not only passively receive information but contribute to knowledge sharing. Given the small size and limited resources of most interviewed organisations, they may not have these enabling capacities.
- 74 Nevertheless, this study revealed a more nuanced picture. According to the interviews, there are smaller organisations in the network, sometimes run by only one individual, which, for instance, want to learn more about funding strategies. In such cases, the need to receive more information outweighs concerns about a lack of time and resources to participate. This confirms that the necessity to survive may be a determinant of collaboration (Oliver, 1990). As Holmén (2002) suggests, it is critical that the disseminated information is interesting to member organisations.
- 75 Another more established organisation is part of a formal network but has not found the time to participate in any of the discussions. This finding reveals that the timing and format of activities are relevant for making networks attractive to members (Østergaard & Nielsen, 2005). Thus, if they are managed well and offer relevant and suitable activities, as suggested by Østergaard and Nielsen (2005), even the most constrained organisations may participate.
- 76 Lastly, it has also been noted that competition among organisations, especially among smaller, less established ones, for limited funds may lead to a reluctance to share information within a network (Holmén, 2002). This observation could not be confirmed in the interviews, as most interviewees mentioned being open to supporting other organisations.
- 77 Beyond structural features like size and age, contextual threats, particularly the systems-based challenge of security concerns, emerged as critical inhibitors of adaptive

capacity and strategic outcomes. For instance, by constraining the ability to establish external collaborations, security risks limit the adaptive capacity of tactical planning and restructuring. This, in turn, inhibits the strategy of diversification, restricting NGOs, especially those based in Afghanistan, from expanding their partnerships. Similarly, in some cases, security concerns determine whether organisations want to expose themselves to an ecosystem with other organisations. Additionally, the interviewed representative of a platform of organisations had to keep the partner organisations based in Afghanistan anonymous to ensure their safety. This challenges the assumption that ecosystem building is desirable in all circumstances and that it provides the most complex safety net for organisations (Szemzó et al., 2022).

- 78 As mentioned above, the strategies of diversification and ecosystem building may generate resources that, when leveraged through adaptive capacities, lead to new strategic outcomes. However, smaller or younger organisations may struggle to pursue resource-generating strategies as they lack institutional embeddedness and resources. This finding suggests that the dynamic interaction between strategies and adaptive capacities may lead to a downward spiral, keeping those organisations that are fragile in a vulnerable position. This reflects Duchek's (2020) argument that resource-constrained organisations may struggle to anticipate and respond to a crisis, implying they are less likely to develop resilience.
- 79 However, while smaller or younger organisations may not always be able to manifest diversification or ecosystem building, the findings suggest that they are not necessarily less capable of pursuing adaptability. In fact, several demonstrated creative adjustments, such as mobilising intrinsic motivation, adjusting workflows, implementing digital tools, or leveraging community trust. As discussed above, smaller organisations tend to be more flexible and quicker to make decisions (Fyffe, 2014), which may even enhance their adaptability in relation to larger organisations.
- 80 Also, all organisations in this study demonstrate the ability to substitute scarce resources with more accessible ones, such as financial with human resources. Additional volunteers may be leveraged through effective human resources practices, demonstrating adaptability. This compensation has allowed smaller and younger ones to remain operational, offset certain disadvantages, and begin to benefit from positive feedback loops in resilience-building. This aligns with Singh et al. (2022), who argue that NGOs can reduce their dependence on specific resources by strategically accessing and utilising those that are more readily available. Future studies may explore whether such organisations can convert early compensatory strategies into long-term resilience pathways over time as they become more embedded and experienced.
- 81 In summary, while these findings indicate that smaller or younger organisations may lack certain adaptive capacities and face greater obstacles in pursuing diversification and ecosystem building, the interviews also revealed that these strategies are not out of reach for them. They may engage in them in more modest forms, such as by ad hoc fundraising or occasional collaborations. Over time, they may evolve these initial efforts into more comprehensive engagements, such as sustained partnerships and diversified funding models. Most interviewees expressed such intentions to expand and grow. Importantly, these findings are based on a limited number of interviews, which may constrain the generalizability of the results. Thus, future studies should include a broader range of organisations with more diverse profiles to confirm and extend these conclusions.

8. Theoretical Implications

- 1 This study empirically supports and extends the frameworks of Singh et al. (2022) and Szemző et al. (2022) by demonstrating how adaptive capacities can function as enablers of resiliencebuilding strategies. *Figure 2* shows the conceptual framework established based on the findings of this study.
- 2 Adaptive capacities entail an organisation’s ability to mobilise and deploy resources effectively. These abilities manifest as concrete resilience-building strategies in response to contextual challenges, which are systems-based, pedagogical, or agent-based (Tarricone et al., 2021), faced by organisations in fragile and volatile environments. For instance, the adaptive capacity of tactical administration to adjust programme practices according to the systemic challenge of security risks is a manifestation of the strategy of adaptability. This capacity relies on various resources such as human, technological, and community resources.
- 3 A key theoretical contribution of this study is the emphasis on feedback loops between adaptive capacities and resilience-building strategies, showing that strategic actions can generate new capacities over time. For instance, the adaptive capacities to strategically engage in external partnerships and foster an organisational culture open to collaboration enable the strategy of ecosystem building. Through information exchange within an ecosystem, an organisation can acquire new expertise in volunteer recruitment. This novel knowledge translates into the adaptive capacity of effective human resource management. Ultimately, the NGO is better equipped to pursue the strategy of adaptability by being able to implement new volunteer recruitment practices, thereby navigating constrained financial resources. This ability to tap into new resources echoes Fyffe’s (2014) argument that distinguishing between the immediate loss of organisational resources during a crisis and an NGO’s ability to mobilise new resources in response is essential. Even if a crisis substantially decreases, for instance, financial resources, mobilising untapped resources in the aftermath may still be feasible.
- 4 The bi-directional process outlined in this study and depicted in *Figure 2* also corresponds to the feedback described in organisational resilience theory, where strategic actions reinforce and expand adaptive capacities over time (Duchek, 2020). Duchek (2020) primarily highlights feedback loops in terms of organisational learning, which occur in response to experiences and give rise to new adaptive capacities. The findings of this study add to this by suggesting that iterative processes may also

generate material resources. In sum, the strategies not only rely on adaptive capacities but also actively build them through direct and indirect resource generation, as well as organisational learning.

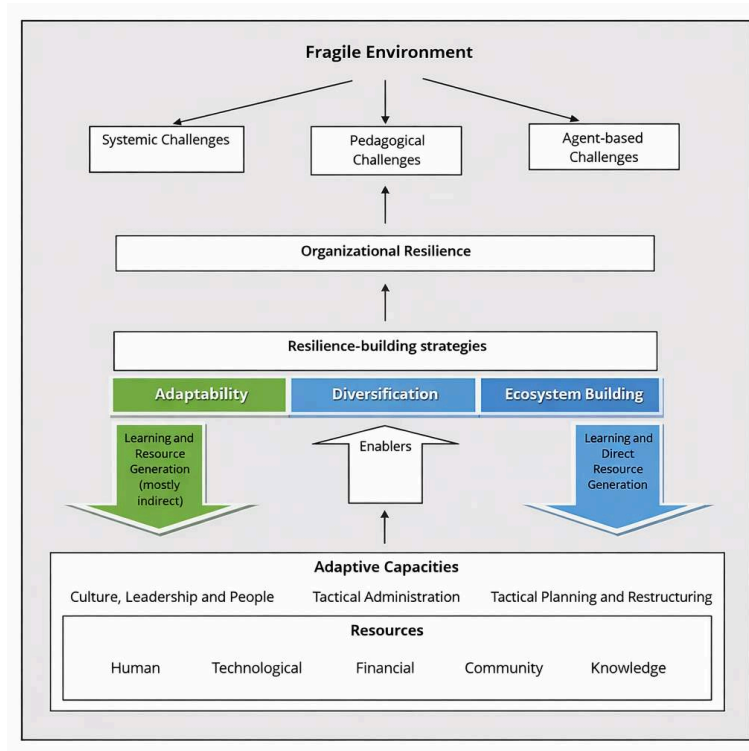
- 5 From this perspective, diversification and ecosystem building emerge as resource-generating resilience strategies. By pursuing alternative partnerships, offerings, and income sources, the strategy of diversification leads to new community and social resources, funding, and delivery infrastructure. Ecosystem building embeds an organisation in a network of organisations, which fosters resource sharing, information exchange, and capacity building. Ecosystems not only provide organisations with the knowledge and capacity to tap into new resources but also generate sustained access to previously untapped resources.
- 6 Adaptability, in contrast, is understood as a strategy relying on existing internal resources to adjust processes and structures (Szemző et al., 2022). Yet, this study shows that adaptability can also contribute to new resources, particularly human resources, by implementing effective recruitment and onboarding processes to attract and retain motivated volunteers and staff. Beyond human capital, however, adaptability does not directly generate new resources but mainly contributes to indirect resource acquisition. For example, by implementing new security strategies or better IT tools, organisations may gain credibility in the eyes of donors or potential partner organisations. This “intangible capital” (Plaisance, 2022, p. 1025) can, in turn, enhance their potential to build collaborations, obtain funding, or attract additional volunteers. In this way, adaptability outcomes can generate a latent capacity to acquire new resources. Thus, the main contribution of adaptability to resource generation lies in its indirect, enabling effects. Diversification and ecosystem building, too, may foster credibility, trust, and further aspects of intangible capital, laying the foundation for future opportunities. This underscores the importance of combining the different strategies to effectively build resilience, as they complement and reinforce one another. Hence, while Szemző et al. (2022) discuss these strategies only distinctly, this study extends their framework by showing that continuous resilience-building in fragile settings relies on the interaction among them. This observation is reflected in practice: None of the organisations solely rely on a single strategy, confirming Prymakova and Pysmenna’s (2024) assertion that organisations must seek resources internally and externally to strengthen their resilience.
- 7 The findings further demonstrate that resilience-building strategies are inherently shaped by contextual factors and resource constraints. Younger or smaller organisations may lack the resources and capacity to benefit from the positive feedback loops of resilience-building. Furthermore, diversification and ecosystem building, which are presented as ideal for strengthening resilience, may pose security concerns for organisations in high-risk environments, such that some NGOs may not pursue them. In such contexts, security constraints are a major barrier to adaptation and resource building. Resilience-building strategies may thus not only be shaped by what is desirable but by what is feasible. Consequently, this study extends the two original frameworks by highlighting the limits of adaptive capacities and unequal distribution of access to resilience pathways.
- 8 In response to these constraints, organisations may substitute limited resources with those that are more widely available, such as a lack of financial resources with motivated volunteers. This observation aligns with prior literature, which states that NGOs may work towards decreasing their dependence on a particular resource (Singh

et al., 2022). As explained above, these initial substitute resources can serve as a starting point to generate further resources through strategic actions in response to external constraints, thereby alleviating certain capacity limitations. In sum, the availability of internal resources, as well as the degree of external threat, influence which capacities are activated and which strategies are feasible and suitable.

- 9 This study also reveals that, in terms of adaptive capacities, the ability to nurture motivation and foster psychological well-being among NGOs' teams is important for culture, leadership, and people. This is often achieved through supportive leadership practices and flat hierarchies. The ability to recruit trustworthy in-person teachers and to carefully onboard foreign ones, as well as to effectively communicate and collaborate internally, especially across borders, is equally important. For tactical administration, the capacity to adjust and extend offerings and their delivery, in response to students' needs and contextual challenges emerged as crucial. The effective use of ICTs has proven to be essential for both programme implementation and communication. To that end, given security and financial constraints, NGOs have to be especially innovative. While Singh et al. (2022) categorise innovation under culture, leadership, and people, emphasising the importance of an organisational culture that fosters innovation, this study suggests that in the Afghan context, innovation rather emerges through the need to adjust programme delivery. Thus, it should be categorised under tactical administration. Lastly, in terms of tactical planning and restructuring, the ability to establish and maintain effective partnerships, as well as to identify sustainable financial practices, is key.
- 10 Confirming Singh et al.'s (2022) findings, these categories are not as clear-cut; they are inherently interlinked and mutually dependent. For instance, the ability to respond to the emerging needs of students and design additional mental health support programmes is dependent on an organisation's capacity to rely on effective recruitment practices of suitable therapists. This shows the overlap between culture, leadership, and people, on the one hand, and tactical administration, on the other hand.
- 11 Certain adaptive capacities suggested by Singh et al. (2022) played a limited role for organisations in the Afghan context. These include aspects under tactical planning and restructuring, such as succession planning, governance restructuring, and mergers. Given the volatile, restricted context and the need for immediate programme delivery, strategic planning for the long-term future may not be an organisation's priority. However, this absence may also be a result of the limited number of organisations interviewed and their specific profiles. Future studies may investigate more in-depth how these adaptive capacities with a long-term focus are expressed in other organisations and different contexts.
- 12 Lastly, while this study analytically distinguishes between systems-based, agent-based, and pedagogical challenges (Tarricone et al., 2021), the interviews showed that the challenges encountered by education NGOs in Afghanistan are interconnected. Often, agent-based challenges, such as students' mental health problems, as well as pedagogical challenges, including a lack of suitable devices and internet coverage problems, can be attributed to broader systems-based constraints, as they mostly emerge from widespread security risks and financial pressures. This observation reinforces the finding that addressing the problems in the Afghan context requires layered, interconnected strategies to not only respond to immediate pedagogical and individual-level barriers but also overcome underlying structural conditions. Further,

it points to the limits of what individual NGOs can achieve, especially when navigating systemic challenges. Thus, their efforts require complementary support from other actors offering integrated responses that address the structural roots of fragility in Afghanistan.

Figure 2: Iterative relationship between adaptive capacities and resilience-building strategies in constrained environments



Sources : Adapted from Singh et al. (2022), Tarricone et al. (2021), and Szemző et al. (2022).

9. Practical Implications

- 1 The findings suggest several practical implications for education organisations operating in volatile and fragile contexts such as Afghanistan.
- 2 This study highlights the importance of implementing effective human resource practices to nurture volunteer and staff motivation and promote mental well-being. Special attention should be given to scaling up initiatives that provide psychological support to local teachers. Given security concerns, the recruitment of trustworthy teachers and team members, alongside the inclusion of local knowledge in programme design, is essential. Co-creation of educational programmes with beneficiaries and consultation with local actors, especially women, further enhances contextual relevance and legitimacy. International volunteer teachers must be carefully prepared to enhance their contextual sensitivity. Communication with volunteers should be manageable and concise.
- 3 Digital solutions help navigate security and financial constraints, but they must be implemented with careful consideration of access limitations and digital literacy gaps among students. Providing suitable gender-responsive offline alternatives or context-sensitive blended learning modalities may enhance inclusiveness. Further, careful protection of students' and teachers' identities must be ensured at all times.
- 4 In-person schooling should follow context-sensitive security protocols, which are informed by local actors' knowledge. Measures to ensure confidentiality among all actors are necessary to guarantee safety, discretion, and operational survival.
- 5 Financial sustainability can be strengthened through cultivating stable relationships with multiple donors, applying for project calls and grants, and, in some cases, engaging in collaborations with private actors. Still, financial constraints remain a salient obstacle limiting organisations' potential to respond to external challenges. Organisations can alleviate these constraints by relying on volunteers or by partnering with other organisations to share resources.
- 6 Most importantly, the ability to establish and maintain external collaborations increases an organisation's available resources and provides access to useful information and capacities. Partnerships across borders prove to be mutually beneficial, with the international partner being able to receive funding and channel it to the local organisation. Existing personal relationships and contacts facilitate the establishment of new partnerships. Additionally, existing networks of organisations can be joined, which may provide a viable opportunity to access a supportive ecosystem

for smaller or newly founded organisations in particular. The establishment of more platforms is pertinent so that NGOs can share resources, coordinate their efforts, and advocate for their cause with a unified voice.

- 7 Local grassroots efforts should be strengthened through equitable partnerships with international actors. While grassroots organisations have access to local communities and contextual understanding that enables them to implement resilient programmes, international organisations can support them with financial resources and institutional assistance. Importantly, grassroots organisations should not be subject to excessive external influence, allowing them to retain their operational autonomy. Monitoring and reporting requirements should be proportionate to local partners' available resources and capacity.
- 8 The interviews also revealed the urgency of more sustained and active involvement by the international community. Rather than disengagement, the plight of girls and women in Afghanistan demands close attention to new developments and commitment to education and protection initiatives. Governments and multilateral actors should explore diverse ways to provide support, encompassing not only financial assistance but also technical support and learning infrastructure. They may also consider recognising certificates obtained by students of NGO-provided education, paving the way for them to participate in international educational opportunities. Additionally, international universities should consider offering in-person and online education specifically designed for Afghan girls and women to ensure they are not excluded from global higher education institutions. Increased engagement of the private sector to support NGOs in various ways is recommended. Further, women from Afghanistan should be included in aid and global education strategies for Afghanistan. Lastly, public awareness should be promoted and diplomatic pressure exerted to keep women's education on international agendas.

10. Limitations and Future Research

- 1 This research is subject to several limitations that affect the scope and interpretability of its findings. For one, the limited sample size of the organisations interviewed restricts the findings' transferability. Additionally, most organisations in the sample are only recently established and small to medium-sized, further limiting the broader applicability of the results. Future research could rely on a larger and more diverse sample of organisations to explore how different types of organisations, including larger and more institutionalised ones, build resilience in constrained and fragile environments. A broader sample may also include NGOs that operate across various countries and are not exclusively focused on education in Afghanistan.
- 2 Second, the study may be affected by selection bias. Organisations with limited capacities or struggling to remain operational may have been more likely to decline interview requests. Also, only two of the interviewed organisations are based in Afghanistan, while the rest operate from abroad. This geographic distribution limits insights into the experiences of organisations on the ground. Future studies may involve on-site observations and prioritise the inclusion of organisations based in the country to obtain a fuller picture.
- 3 Third, due to security risks, interviewees may have been unable to share relevant information, leading to gaps in the data collected. Additionally, the majority of interviewees were founders or leaders of the organisations they represented. Their close identification with and loyalty to their organisation may have led to positive biases in their responses. Furthermore, all interviews were conducted remotely, which may have constrained rapport, trust, and the spontaneous answers, reducing the depth of understanding. Future studies may involve a more diverse sample of respondents occupying more varied positions within organisations, including programme officers and field workers to allow for richer insights. At the same time interviews may be conducted in person wherever possible.
- 4 Future research could also benefit from a longitudinal design, where organisations' resilience-building process is followed over time. Especially in Afghanistan's fast-paced and volatile environment, studies that present only a momentary snapshot of the situation may limit a comprehensive understanding of adaptive capacities and resilience, which are dynamic concepts.
- 5 Additionally, the use of pre-existing theoretical frameworks to analyze resilience-building may have influenced which aspects of resilience were analyzed and which

ones may have been neglected. As a result, certain context-specific dynamics may not have been fully explored in this study.

- 6 Future research may explore more deeply how the resilience of individual NGO team members is related to organisational resilience in the Afghan environment. Beyond focusing on organisational resilience, further research may also examine in more detail the effectiveness and inclusivity of various educational delivery methods in Afghanistan and other crisis contexts, contributing to the technical aspects of education in emergencies.
- 7 Lastly, as an external researcher, my outsider status and distance from the Afghan context may have influenced the framing of questions and interpretation of responses. Understanding this is important in comprehending the scope and potential limitations of this study's conclusions.

11. Conclusion

- 1 This study contributes to the understanding of how education-focused NGOs operating in fragile, dynamic, and high-risk contexts such as Afghanistan build resilience under constraints. Drawing on and expanding existing frameworks by Singh et al. (2022) and Szemző et al. (2022), the findings highlight how interrelated adaptive capacities, including culture, leadership, and people, , tactical administration as well as tactical planning and restructuring, interact with the resilience-building strategies of adaptability, diversification, and ecosystem building in dynamic ways.
- 2 A key insight is that resilience-building operates through iterative feedback loops whereby organisations mobilise limited resources through adaptive capacities. This manifests as resilience-building strategies that may, in turn, generate new resources, reinforcing organisations' operational sustainability and adaptive potential. Notably, in the absence of sufficient financial means, organisations creatively mobilise alternative resources, such as volunteers and digital tools. As suggested, restricted financial resources may have contributed to NGOs working more closely with local communities and remaining closely aligned with their mission (Heinrich Böll Foundation, 2024).
- 3 Context-specific security threats affect resilience-building transversally. They require the ability to adjust daily operations strategically, recruit trustworthy and context-sensitive staff, build confidential partnerships, and covertly implement community-based in-person classes. Importantly, they limit the potential for external collaborations and ecosystem building – strategies that are considered ideal in most other environments. This underscores how certain strategies must be reconfigured or are constrained in high-risk contexts, nuancing prior theoretical findings.
- 4 In practical terms, the findings highlight the importance of intrinsic motivation and psychological support among NGO members in fragile settings. The strategic value of recruiting volunteers and of blended and digital education tools has been emphasised. Furthermore, complementary programmes such as mental health services, men's engagement initiatives, and ongoing learning and professional opportunities are crucial to supporting educational initiatives in Afghanistan. The involvement and leadership of individuals on the ground, especially women, in designing and implementing educational opportunities are pertinent to ensuring context-sensitivity, relevance, and security. Lastly, collaborative structures among NGOs, including partnerships, joint ventures, and networks, remain vital and may be scaled up for sharing resources, capacity-building, and accessing funding opportunities. Importantly,

the smooth reintegration of girls into formal education should be prepared and ensured as soon as it becomes possible.

- 5 Future research will be essential to deepen the understanding of NGO resilience in varied fragile and dynamic contexts.
- 6 Ultimately, this study reaffirms the importance of keeping the precarious and inhumane situation for girls and women in Afghanistan on the international agenda, ensuring both financial and non-financial support, and exerting diplomatic pressure to achieve change. Governments and international actors must speak with one voice to advocate for women's guaranteed access to safe, quality education, re-establishing individual dignity and freedom for women, and contributing to the future of Afghan society as a whole.

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Appendices

Appendix A. Development of Women's Modern Education in Afghanistan Over Time

- 1 The Afghan education system has been impacted heavily by more than 40 years of conflict (Arooje & Burrige, 2021). Additionally, Afghanistan's low level of development evidenced by its low gross domestic product per capita and ensuing economic constraints contributed to challenges for the expansion of the education sector (Samady, 2001).
- 2 The Afghan education system can be divided into formal and informal education, where formal education involves the modern state-run education system (Easer et al., 2023). Informal education, on the other hand, refers to non-state education often provided by madrasas and mosques. Informal education also involves Islamic education which plays a crucial role, with mosque schools being the most common institution for basic Islamic learning (Karlsson & Mansory, 2017). Islamic education can be divided into Madrassa (preschool and primary level), Darul Huffaz (mid-level or lower secondary level), and Darul Uloom (upper secondary level) schools. Additionally, madrassas provide more comprehensive and advanced Islamic education to primarily men.
- 3 The history of Afghanistan's modern education system only dates back to the 19th century (Easer et al., 2023). While in the beginning only boys were allowed to attend school, the first school for girls was opened during Amanullah Khan's government (1919 – 1929), followed by the first secondary school for girls in 1932 in Kabul (Samady, 2001). The first secondary school for boys was established in Kabul in 1903. Since 1931, primary education has been compulsory. Especially after the Second World War, international assistance was important for the development of the education system and helped to accelerate the slow expansion of public education (Karlsson & Mansory, 2017).
- 4 The first provincial girls' school was established in 1941 in Kandahar, and in 1947, the University of Kabul opened a Women's Faculty (Samady, 2001). The Daoud government fostered female participation in social, economic and cultural aspects in 1958. This resulted in more female teachers, as well as more women in government. The

communist regime established in 1978 adopted new educational policies in 1980, as it saw education as a tool for economic and social transformation. Even though they aimed at the expansion of education, results were limited since Afghans resisted the communist ideology and foreign intervention. The communist takeover also entailed years of conflict marked by millions of deaths and waves of emigration. Additionally, the public infrastructure, including educational facilities, took a heavy toll and as a result, enrollment numbers decreased from 1 million to 700'000 from 1972 to 1985. The continuous expansion of the modern education system and female participation therein was definitely reversed by the rise of the Mujahideen in the 1990s.

- 5 While prioritising security and government consolidation, the new regime focused on reviving traditional education. The importance of religious education grew, with religious subjects taking up half of the teaching time (Arooje & Burrridge, 2021). At the same time, the divergence in educational opportunities for girls and boys increased. Further, due to fighting among various leaders of the Mujahideen, more educational infrastructure was damaged (Samady, 2001). No national education system was established, and no unified curriculum existed. During the first Taliban rule from 1995 to 2001, girls' schools were closed, and women could not pursue higher education anymore with the exception of medical universities. Yet, in the countryside, new schools for girls opened with support from the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan. While before the 1980s, solely the government had provided modern education, international organizations also emerged as education providers in the wake of the state's collapse (Karlsson & Mansory, 2017).
- 6 In December 2001, the Bonn agreement was concluded after negotiations between Afghan military commanders, representatives of Afghanistan's different ethnic groups, expatriate Afghans, and representatives of the expelled monarch (Human Rights Watch, 2002). It led to the Afghan Interim power sharing arrangement, the establishment of a new constitution, and elections in 2004. The USA alongside other international actors pushed for its establishment. After 2001, great progress was made in rebuilding the education system. Substantial foreign aid flows aimed at rebuilding the Afghan state, including its demolished education system (Easer et al., 2023). International organizations such as UNICEF with its "Back-to-School" Campaign focused on reconstructing schools and increasing girls' access to education (Arooje & Burrridge, 2021). Moreover, the post-Bonn government focused on establishing a peaceful curriculum. The first curriculum approved in 2004 functioned as a basis for the first textbooks for primary school published in 2007. Also, in 2006, the first National Education Strategic Plan was adopted, which was the first national education plan. Textbooks for secondary lower and upper education were published in 2011 and 2012, respectively.
- 7 Arooje and Burrridge (2021) use statistical data to show that from 2001 until 2018, the number of enrolled students from 1 million to 8.9 million, out of which 3.4 million were girls. However, there were also more than 4.5 million children out of school due to economic problems, cultural issues, security concerns, bad health, and remoteness from schooling facilities. However importantly, statistics reflecting on participation in the education system are difficult to verify due to lack of data access and reliability of data collection (Arooje & Burrridge, 2021). Additionally, organizations want to provide positive feedback to donors leading to over optimistic reports.

- 8 Nowadays, general education consists of preschool, primary education and secondary education which is divided into lower and higher secondary (Nuffic, n.d.). Additionally, there are various types of vocational training institutions. Commonly, children start primary school at the age of 7 and finish upper secondary school at the age of 18. However, due to internal displacement, many children are forced to interrupt their education at a certain point in time and enter the education system later again (Arooje & Burrridge, 2021). As a result, many children attend grades that do not align with their age. Especially from grade 10 onwards, schools were gender segregated. Given the limited number of schools, girls and boys often attended classes in separate shifts.
- 9 After years of large improvements in girls' school attendance, the worsening of the security situation during the years of 2011 to 2014 led to a decrease in primary school attendance rates from 56% to 54%, whereby girls in rural areas were the ones affected the most (Human Rights Watch, 2017). In general, even before the Taliban's return to power in 2021, insecurity and instability due to internal conflict constituted major challenges to the education system (Arooje & Burrridge, 2021). Farhat et al. (2023) refer to cultural, resource, security and corruption barriers which posed barriers to children's and especially girls' access to school. According to cultural norms, a family's financial resources tend to be allocated to sons' rather than daughters' education. Further, many children are required to pursue income generating activities to support their family and thus, are not able to attend school.
- 10 Also, early marriages were and still are a problem reducing girls' chances to access education as they are forced to become the homemakers and care-takers of the family from a young age (Arooje & Burrridge, 2021). In terms of resources, insufficient education facilities as well as teaching material have negatively affected education access. Especially, in the early years after the fall of the Taliban in 2001, the main challenges revolved around a lack of qualified teachers and teacher training colleges, as well as insufficient infrastructure and teaching materials (Easer et al., 2023). Additionally, there has continuously been a lack of technology-assisted learning (Arooje & Burrridge, 2021). Also, distance to schools has been affecting girls' school attendance, since long journeys are unsafe for girls (Easer et al., 2023). Moreover, in terms of security concerns, before 2021, attacks by armed groups resulted in the closure of certain schools. This especially, since the Taliban was attacking schools that implemented post-2001 curricula and with a special emphasis on girls' schools. Also, girls have been facing harassment and abuse (Easer et al., 2023). Lastly, corruption by school principals and bribery for good exam results emerged as challenges.
- 11 In conclusion, after decades of major advancements and setbacks, even before the Taliban's return to power in 2021, insecurity and instability due to internal conflict still constituted major challenges to the Afghan education system disproportionately affecting girls and women (Arooje & Burrridge, 2021).

Appendix B. The Events Leading up to the Taliban's Return to Power

- 12 The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan is a landlocked country in Asia with 34 provinces. It is the fourth largest country in the world in terms of the area. The country hosts

diverse ethnic groups including Pashtun, Tajik and Hazara (Arooje & Burrige, 2021). It has been marked by geopolitical turmoil and conflict for decades.

- 13 In 1979, the Soviets invaded the country and established a communist state. In response, the Mujahideen rose to power and became the fundamentalist Islamist state ruled by the Taliban from 1996 to 2001 (Lahire, 2018).
- 14 On October 7, 2001, in response to the Taliban's provision of protection to Osama bin Laden after the 9/11 attacks by al-Qaeda, the United States invaded Afghanistan and swiftly overthrew the Taliban regime (Akram & Akbar, 2023). Also, starting in 2003, the NATO was engaged in Afghanistan assuming the command of the International Security Assistance Force [ISAF] (Ruiz Palmer, 2023). Alongside the UN and foreign powers, various Afghan factions signed the Bonn Agreement in December, 2001 (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.). The agreement included a roadmap to the establishment of an inclusive government. While the US pushed for the agreement, they declined the crucial opportunity of including the Taliban, which were weak at that point in time, in the political process to establish a stable government (Boni, 2022). Boni (2022) further points to the problem of the US' desire to export Western-style systems of governance to a country which functions fundamentally differently. Despite these issues, in 2004, the new constitution was agreed upon which created a presidential system, democratic institutions, and a framework for national elections. Not long after, the first democratically elected head of Afghanistan, President Karzai assumed power (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.).
- 15 In 2014, the US and NATO ended their combat operation in Afghanistan, and the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces [ANDSF] took on responsibility for security (Akram & Akbar, 2023). Yet, they maintained presence in the country to train Afghan forces and for counterterrorism missions (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.). The ANDSF struggled to fight the Taliban in remote areas and to restrain their suicide bombings in urban centers (Akram & Akbar, 2023). Upon President Donald Trump's election in 2016, there was a slight increase in US troops in Afghanistan in 2017, but the conflict remained at an impasse for years.
- 16 On February 29 2020, the Agreement to Bringing Peace to Afghanistan, also known as the Doha agreement, a peace agreement between the US and the Taliban, was concluded (Jones, 2020). This agreement outlined a timeline for the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan over 14 months. At that time the political situation in Afghanistan was fragile and the Afghan government was excluded from the negotiations. Further, the USA was in a subordinate negotiating position (Boni, 2022). Despite the agreement, the Taliban continued offensive attacks against the Afghan government, which US troops responded to with increased air strikes and operations (Akram & Akbar, 2023). Eventually, after almost 20 years of military involvement, the US and the NATO fully withdrew from Afghanistan on August 30, 2021 leaving the Afghan National Security Forces without external support (Akram & Akbar, 2023). This withdrawal paved the way for the Taliban's rapid regaining of power, culminating in their takeover of Kabul with shocking speed on August 15, 2021. Just three weeks later, the Taliban announced the formation of its caretaker government on 7 September 2021 consisting exclusively of male senior Taliban leaders and officials, of whom many had been involved in the previous Taliban rule or were on international sanctions or wanted lists (Al Jazeera, 2021a).

- 17 Since the Taliban takeover, the Afghan economy has collapsed and extreme poverty levels have spiked (Abbasi, 2024). The takeover meant that billions of US dollars of international aid flows to Afghanistan were stopped within days (Boni, 2022). Previously, the Afghan state relied heavily on foreign aid, while on the presence of international soldiers and aid workers boosted the economy through their spendings goods and services (Abbasi, 2024). In 2021, 75% of public expenditure was financed by development and security assistance. However, in 2022, after an initial increase in foreign aid due to the precarious situation, international funding cuts started to affect humanitarian organizations. As a result, Afghans face growing threats to their rights to health and food, making it impossible for many to maintain an adequate standard of living. Access to essential healthcare services has also become increasingly restricted and millions of children are malnourished.
- 18 Abbasi (2024) outlines in a report the catastrophic situation of the Afghan healthcare system. Healthcare facilities were forced to downsize due to insufficient staffing and funding, leaving them overwhelmed by an excessive patient load. Importing pharmaceuticals has become a challenge such that Afghanistan is now facing a shortage of medical supplies, while the ongoing humanitarian crisis has actually increased the need for health services and medicines. Additionally, malnutrition and poverty are increasing given the dire economic situation. Women and girls are often the ones suffering the most, as they are expected to eat less, and families are less inclined to pay for their health care. Further, male doctors are not allowed to see female patients, while women who want to see a doctor need to be accompanied by a mahram (a male relative). Also, female medical staff need to be accompanied by mahram to work. Further, female doctors and patients are required to wear a hijab. In some regions, these rules are not enforced as strictly, while in other regions it has become almost impossible for women to see a doctor.
- 19 In the context of families' economic and humanitarian hardship, the number of forced child marriages has increased drastically. UN Women (2024a) reports that in 2023, almost 30 percent of underage Afghan girls were married, out of which 9.6% less than 15 years old.
- 20 Girls and women especially suffer under the Taliban rule, which has been pursuing the complete erasure of women from public life (Penn, 2024). Under the supreme leader, Haibatullah Akhundzada, the Taliban have issued over 100 written or announced decrees based on a strict interpretation of Sharia law restricting women's rights and freedoms in most aspects of their lives (United States Institute of Peace, n.d.). Human rights groups refer to the situation as one of "gender apartheid" (Amnesty International, 2024) .
- 21 In September 2023, Human Rights Watch released a report detailing the gender persecution undertaken by the Taliban, classifying it as a crime against humanity (Human Rights Watch, 2023b). According to the Rome Statute, crimes against humanity are subject to four requirements including that an attack is "widespread or systematic", that the attack is directed against a "civilian population", that it is committed with knowledge of the attack, and that the acts are "pursuant to or in furtherance of a State or organizational policy to commit such an attack". Afghanistan is party to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court [ICC] (Human Rights Watch, 2023a). The ICC prosecutor, Karim Khan, has been authorised to investigate the

situation in 2022. In January 2025, the prosecutor submitted arrest warrants against the Taliban's leader and its chief justice, Haibatullah Akhundzada and Abdul Hakim Haqqani, respectively to a pretrial chamber of three ICC judges (Human Rights Watch, 2025). They are accused of persecuting women and girls, but also lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, as well as their supporters.

- 22 For one, women only have limited employment options (Human Rights Watch, 2023a). Since December 2022, they are banned from working with international humanitarian organizations or at UN offices in the country. This has also deepened the public health crisis (Abbasi, 2024). Also, a ban on beauty salons, which have all been run by female owners, were forced to shut down (United States Institute of Peace, n.d.). This not only left an additional 60'000 women unemployed but also put the already distressed economy under further strain (Iltaf, 2024). What is more, many organizations preferably hire men, complicating the situation for women (UN Women, 2024a). For households where a woman is the main breadwinner, this is especially devastating (Iltaf, 2024).
- 23 Further, women face restrictions on their freedom of movement, expression, and association (Human Rights Watch, 2023b). They also face intimidations, arbitrary arrests and violations of their right to liberty. Since December 2021, this includes that they are not allowed to travel more than 72 to 78 kilometers from their homes without being accompanied by a mahram (Al Jazeera, 2021b). Also, they cannot take domestic or international flights without a mahram (Human Rights Watch, 2023a). In some cases, women are also interrogated and punished when traveling much shorter distances by themselves. This hinders them from doing business, from traveling, or also from escaping domestic violence. Especially, women without male relatives suffer from this rule not being able to even buy food without being at danger (UN Women, 2024a). Moreover, women cannot go to public places such as the gym, parks and so forth. In December 2024, the Taliban even stated that new residential houses must be built such that rooms used by women do not have any windows. Windows in already existing buildings must be blocked (KabulNow, 2024). Moreover, several mechanisms to address gender-based violence have been removed under the Taliban rule. Some divorce rulings have been cancelled, and women have been returned to their abusive husbands (UN Women, 2024a). In addition, women may be stoned to death for adultery (Kumar, 2024).
- 24 In August 2024, a new range of vice and virtue laws were passed forcing women to cover their bodies and faces entirely in public to avoid tempting men (Kelly & Joya, 2024). Moreover, they are not allowed to be heard in public, nor singing or reading aloud from inside their houses. They are also punished if they look into the eyes of a man to whom they are not related.

Appendix C. Development of the NGO Landscape in Afghanistan before 2021

- 25 In the 1960s, CARE and USAID were the first international NGOs to operate in Afghanistan, followed by few others during the 1970s (Oliker, et al., 2004). As soon as Kabul was under Soviet control in 1979, Washington stripped all US-government supported NGOs in Afghanistan of their funding forcing them to leave the country. Together with other international and national NGOs, they stepped in to provide food

and shelter to Afghans who sought refuge in Pakistan following the Soviet invasion (Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief, 2014). By the early 1980s, some NGOs expanded their efforts through cross-border operations into Afghanistan to meet the communities' basic health and livelihood needs in regions outside Soviet control. Most of them still operated out of Pakistan and were dependent on the Mujahideen for their safety when entering Afghanistan (Oliker, et al., 2004).

- 26 In the following years, NGOs grew and professionalised, while establishing coordination bodies among them (Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief, 2014). Moreover, after the Soviet withdrawal in 1988, they implemented activities beyond emergency relief including capacity building and development activities such as for instance, education and infrastructure programmes (Mitchell, 2017). The United Nations Regional Office for Central Asia's efforts to expand the NGO base through partnering with often newly founded NGOs, and supporting the establishment of Afghan NGOs with specific expertise, especially in demining, and others with a focus on rural rehabilitation and development work, led to a significant increase in national NGOs (Oliker, et al., 2004).
- 27 When Kabul's pro-Moscow government by President Mohammad Najibullah fell in 1992, the two superpowers lost interest and decreased their aid money substantially. Then, the West supported the Mujahideen, of which the Taliban were part of, financially in an effort to gain political influence (Clark, 2023). Still, the annual international aid flows were limited compared to 2022 when humanitarian assistance reached 3 billion USD (Byrd, 2023; Clark, 2023). Also, programme monitoring was difficult due to security concerns hindering accountability (Oliker, et al., 2004).
- 28 During the first Taliban regime, the political situation for NGOs worsened and many of them were prohibited from operating (Mitchell, 2017). The remaining ones could only operate under substantial restrictions, especially in terms of girls' equal access to education and maternal health care (Oliker, et al., 2004). In line with the Taliban's interpretation of Sharia law, NGOs were not allowed to employ female staff and faced constraints in providing support to women (Fielden & Azerbaijani-Moghadam, 2001). Some NGOs, however, could directly work with rural communities in close collaboration with UN agencies and donors (Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief, 2014). Nevertheless, given the severe constraints on their operations, most NGOs except such that were pro-Taliban retreated to Pakistan again (Oliker, et al., 2004).
- 29 After the 9/11 attacks in 2001, even more NGOs left the country in expectation of military retaliation by the USA and handed their operations to their national staff. Given the ensuing shortage of humanitarian assistance providers, the US military stepped in to provide relief and development operations alongside military operations. As soon as the security allowed it, NGOs started to return to Afghanistan.
- 30 The Bonn Conference led to massive increases in aid flows to Afghanistan (Van den Boogaard, 2011). Given donors' interest to rebuild the country, NGO activity gained traction again in the following years (Mitchell, 2017). The number of NGOs grew every year despite the security situation worsening in light of the Taliban's renewed increase in influence over the years. The scope of their activities expanded again to include peacebuilding, human rights, governance and women's rights (Bowden & Siddiqi, 2020). Mitchell (2017) finds 891 active NGOs in the country between 2000 and 2014. Several

umbrella organizations facilitated the coordination of their work, such as ACBAR or the Afghan Civil Society Forum (Lakha, 2024).

- 31 However, the international community has been criticised for relying predominantly on foreign, mainly Western, NGOs to implement their programmes, instead of emphasising local legitimacy (Van den Boogaard, 2011). Although civil society consultations held alongside the Bonn Conference paved the way to the establishment of the Afghan Civil Society Forum, international actors determined which parties could join the forum based on a Western-centric definition of civil society. In general, local religious councils and customary authorities, arguably traditional Afghan civil society organizations, were largely disregarded by international actors because they were deemed potentially supportive of the Taliban and opposed to modern values (Lakha, 2024). Yet, these religious actors in fact held diverse values and beliefs (Borchgrevink, 2007), and could have played a pivotal role in shaping social change given their substantial control over rural communities (Lakha, 2024).
- 32 International NGOs, in contrast, acted primarily as service providers, mainly accountable to their donors instead of their beneficiaries (Van den Boogaard, 2011). Since international actors prioritised security and military objectives aligned with US' interests, foreign NGOs focused on short-term aid projects that supported immediate military and security goals, rather than on long-term initiatives aimed at reconciliation and community building essential for sustainable peace and reconstruction. Although some partnerships were formed with modern Afghan NGOs, these local actors often lacked real autonomy and were compelled to adopt the approach of their international partners due to their subordinate position in the aid hierarchy (Lakha, 2024).

Appendix D. Organisations interviewed (Anonymised)

Organisation	Interviewee
US-based nonprofit organization established in 2009 offering underground classes and online learning.	Executive Director
Online educational initiative established in 2022 and relying on local teachers to record educational videos.	Founder
Afghan-French non-governmental organization established in 2020 offering online classes, radio programmes, and learning TV broadcasts.	Educational Project Manager
A UK-based education initiative launched in 2022, offering curriculum-aligned video lesson.	Founder
A nonprofit initiative established in 2023, offering online language courses to Afghan girls taught by international volunteers	Founder and Executive Director
A Kabul-based NGO established in 2021 providing underground classes, online university, and vocational training.	Founder and Director
A Kabul-based nonprofit organization established in 2021, offering online courses taught by international volunteers.	Founder and Executive Director

A collaborative network established in 2023 uniting educational institutions and NGOs with the mission of supporting girls' and women's education in Afghanistan.	Staff Member
A US-based NGO, established in 2022, operating a co-educational school in Kabul and offering online classes for Afghan girls. The organization has also initiated food distribution programmes for students' families, offers grassroots empowerment and capacity-building for local educators and activists.	Founder and Leader
A Swiss-based nonprofit organization established in November 2023 providing online classes with international teachers.	Founder and President
A US-nonprofit organization founded in 2017 dedicated to promoting critical thinking, human rights, and access to information across the Middle East. In Afghanistan, it has implemented several key programmes to support education and empowerment.	Program Director Afghanistan