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PRESERVING HOPE IN AFGHANISTAN

Protecting children in the world's
most lethal conflict

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Cover photo:
Boys at the Abdul Ahad Karzai orphanage in Kandahar city.

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PRESERVING HOPE IN AFGHANISTAN

PROTECTING CHILDREN IN THE
WORLD’S MOST LETHAL CONFLICT

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Map source: www.geology.com



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CAUGHT AMID A PITILESS CONFLICT

Every day, an average of nine children are killed or injured in Afghanistan, a country that has become the world’s most lethal war zone after forty years of conflict and turmoil ¹.

Between 2009 and 2018, armed conflict killed nearly 6,500 children and injured close to 15,000 others².

Many children who escape the direct effects of violence still feel the impact on their daily lives. In 2018, the United Nations verified 162 attacks against schools, hospitals and their staffs. It also recorded 44 incidents in which humanitarian aid could not be delivered to needy communities, mainly due to the

¹ Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) 2018
² Casualty figures and incidents cited in this report are based on reports by United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA)

activities of armed groups.

The casualties mount despite international laws that oblige all parties to the conflict to protect civilians.

“Afghan children, their families and communities suffer the horrific consequences of conflict each and every day,” said UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta Fore. “Those same children are desperate to grow up, go to school, learn skills, and build a future for themselves.

“We can, and must, do so much more to reinforce their extraordinary courage and resilience.”

Nabih (right), his wife Hanifa and their six children live in a camp for displaced people outside Herat city. They fled their home in Badghis province due to conflict and drought.

Nahal, Firouzeh and Asman are among the adolescents whose lives have been shaped by violence, turmoil and poverty in Afghanistan³.

- Nahal, 13, still shudders when she remembers the air strike that burned her face, leaving her disfigured.
- Firouzeh, 15, cannot shake the memory of hiding in a ruined building through war and a harsh winter.
- Asman weeps as she describes being forced to marry a stranger at age 15 to keep her younger sister from being sold to pay family debts.

Despite these traumas, Nahal, Firouzeh and Asman are desperate to make the most of

³ Children’s names have been changed for their protection

their lives by continuing their education. “The only way to change my future is to study,” says Firouzeh. “With commitment, one day I can be a teacher or a doctor.”

The three adolescents belong to a generation eager to repair the damage of decades of violence, and to fulfil their – and Afghanistan’s – potential.

“Peace is, of course, what Afghanistan needs above all else,” Executive Director Fore said. “But right now, civilians – especially children – must be shielded from the impact of conflict. The parties involved must fulfil their obligations under international humanitarian and human rights law to prevent civilian casualties, end the targeting of schools and health centres, and allow access to humanitarian aid.”

A boy plays near abandoned military vehicles in southern Afghanistan.



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A DEADLY PLACE FOR CHILDREN

Even by Afghanistan's grim standards, 2019 has been particularly deadly. The months of July to September registered the highest number of civilian casualties in a single quarter since 2009, when the United Nations began systematic documentation.

For children, 2018 was even more lethal: 927 children were killed in armed conflict and 2,135 were injured. In 8 of the country's 34 provinces, the number of civilian casualties rose more than 50 per cent compared with the previous year.

As civilian casualties surged during the

past decade, most of the country suffered. However, the severity of the attacks and their consequences varied considerably from province to province.

According to 2018 data from the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), the highest number of casualties were in Kabul, where 596 civilians were killed and 1,270 injured. The eastern provinces close to the Pakistan border, including Nangarhar, Paktya and Ghazni, and the southern part of the country, including Helmand, Kandahar, and Farah provinces, were also hard hit.

Inside a dormitory for boys living at a state-run orphanage in the southern city of Kandahar. The orphanage provides shelter for around 170 boys in total.

Suicide attacks and aerial strikes

Suicide bombs and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) have been an important factor behind the high casualty figures. In the first nine months of 2019, these methods, employed by armed groups, were responsible for 42 per cent of civilian deaths and injuries.

One such incident occurred in August, when a suicide bomber attacked a crowded wedding hall in Kabul, killing 15 children and 76 adults.

Though ground engagements were the leading cause of child casualties in 2018, aerial operations by government and pro-government forces also registered a sharp increase, causing 236 deaths and a similar number of injuries.

In one attack, in Helmand province on 27 November 2018, a family home was targeted, killing 23 civilians, including 10 children.



©UNICEF Afghanistan/2018/Aizada

Lethal remnants of war

Unexploded shells and other debris (known as explosive remnants of war- ERW) represent a special risk for children, boys in particular.

One incident in Laghman province in April 2019 killed seven boys and maimed eight others. Between January and September 2019, children accounted for 77 per cent of the civilian casualties caused by ERWs.

Multiple parties to the conflict have been cited for recruiting children in breach of international law. In 2018, 46 instances (including one involving a girl) were verified, although many more were reported. Armed

groups have been known to recruit children to plant IEDs, gather intelligence and for other war-related tasks. Cases of conflict-related sexual violence against children have also been recorded.

An additional concern are the children detained by Afghan authorities on suspicion of belonging to armed groups. As of December 2018, at least 205 boys were detained in juvenile rehabilitation centres on such charges.

Several children were among some 30 people killed and over one hundred injured by a suicide attack and car bomb which struck this sports club in Kabul on 5 September 2018.

TEENAGE SURVIVOR OF A LANDMINE EXPLOSION

15 year old Rahimullah was fleeing a battle in his village in Helmand province when there was a large explosion.

"I was walking ahead of my brother," recalled Rahimullah. "Suddenly I stepped on a landmine and was thrown into a nearby stream. When I opened my eyes, I saw that both of my legs had been severed."

The boy was saved by a stranger who carried him to safety.

Having survived this horrific experience, the two boys later suffered the deaths of their parents and were placed in care.

Today, Rahimullah and his brother, Hafeezullah, live at an orphanage near the city of Kandahar, where they attend school, and where Rahimullah can indulge his passion for basketball.

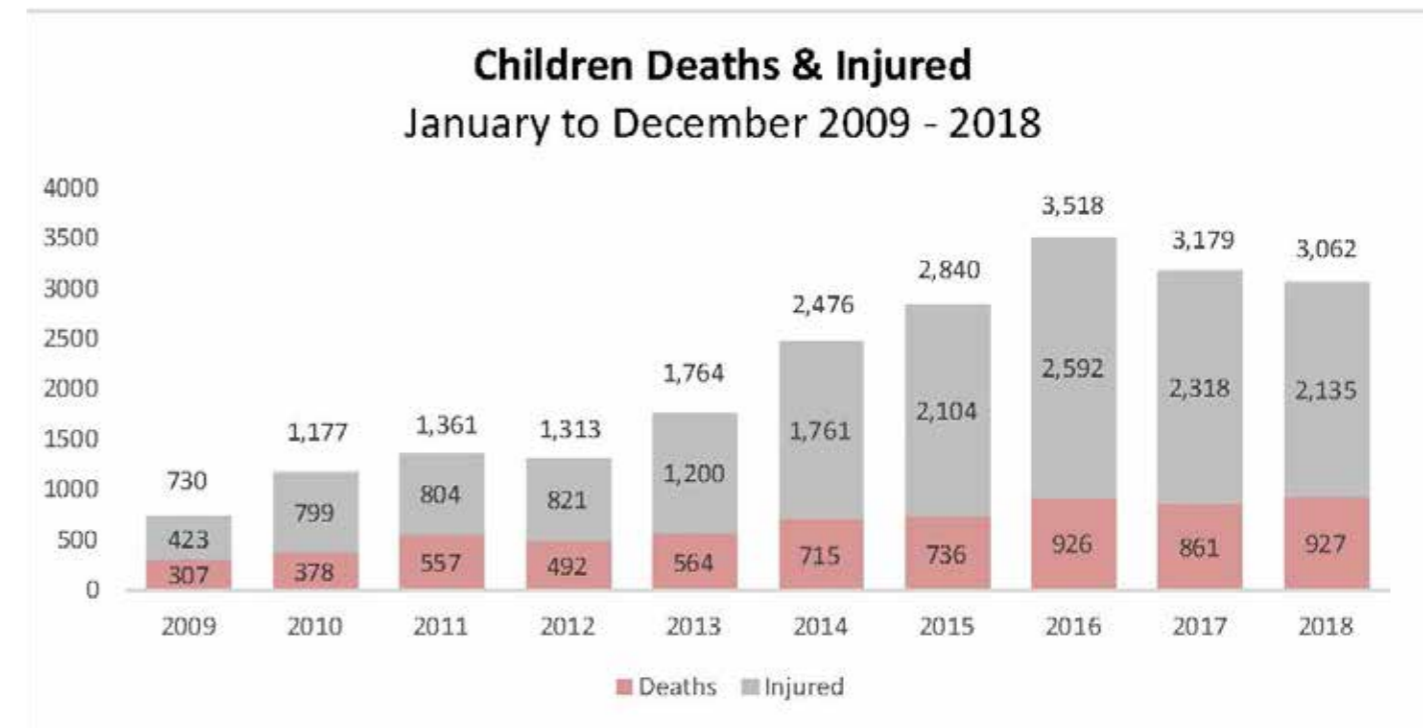
"I love to study," said Rahimullah. "When I grow up I want to help others with disabilities. I feel I understand them having gone through it myself."



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A WORSENING TOLL: THE DEADLY IMPACT ON CHILDREN OF TEN YEARS OF CONFLICT IN AFGHANISTAN

Between 2009 and 2018, armed conflict killed 6,463 children and injured 14,957 others



Source: UNAMA Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict report 2018



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Nations, 217,000 people were newly-displaced in the first nine months of 2019. During the same period, Afghanistan had to cope with the return of 287,000 returnees from neighbouring Iran and Pakistan. Over 40 per cent of those returning were children.

Conflict drove Yasmina, 15, from her home in Badghis province to an IDP camp near the city of Herat. Conditions in the camp are harsh, and she yearns for more than just survival. “I wish I was educated,” Yasmina said. “I would have found a way out then.”

A mother and her children living in a tent under harsh conditions. In 2018, the family fled their hometown in Badghis because of violence and drought worsened by climate change.



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Deepening poverty and displacement

Beyond the death and injuries caused by the conflict, the violence of recent years has undermined the hopes and prospects of a whole generation of Afghan children in other ways too.

Underlying challenges, including poverty, displacement, negative norms and limited access to essential services have festered or deepened.

According to the Afghanistan Living Conditions Survey 2016–2017, the economic growth and relative stability that prevailed in the period leading up to 2014 gave way to escalating

violence and a worsening economy, hurting rural and urban areas alike. By 2016, an estimated 55 per cent of Afghans lived below the poverty line, compared to 34 per cent in 2007 and 2008.

Young people are especially hard hit. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), in 2017, 42 per cent of youth were not in employment, education or training.

Deteriorating security conditions have contributed to large-scale population displacement. According to the United

12 year-old Yasamin holds her baby sister, Aisha Gul, outside a nutrition centre in a camp for displaced people near the western city of Herat. The two girls came here with their family to escape fighting in their home province of Badghis.

Negative social norms

Afghan children have long been prey to a range of pernicious social norms and traditional practices. Girls face particular risks, including honour killings, domestic abuse and sexual violence. The traditional practice of *baad*, in which a girl is given to a family in repayment of a debt, remains widespread.

Child marriage- often an attempt to reduce the economic burden of a large family- is common. Nationwide, at least one in three girls is married by age 18. According to a 2018 study, 42 per cent of households reported at least one instance of child marriage.

“I was ten when I was given to a man,” said Shabana, as she waited in line outside a nutrition centre in an IDP camp in Herat. “People might think we are savages for selling our children. But try to be in our shoes. What’s the way out? You tell me and I’ll do it.”

Boys are not immune to abuse, being far more likely than girls to be recruited by armed groups and forces. Another form of exploitation is *bacha bazi*, the practice of hiring young boys as dancers or for sexual activities. Though the revised penal code criminalizes *bacha bazi*, enforcing the law remains a challenge.



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ASSISTING CHILDREN AT RISK

Efforts to end such harmful practices and protect children require close inter-action with local communities. A growing role is played by Child Protection Action Networks (CPANs), which operate across the country.

With UNICEF support, CPANs coordinate government, non-governmental organisations and grass-roots agencies on behalf of individual children at risk. Between January and October 2019, these networks dealt with 5,345 individual child protection cases (4,115 boys and 1,230 girls).

One such case was Mohamidullah, 12, who ran away from his home in Kandahar after a family quarrel and ended up in police custody in Kabul. After a night in detention, Mohamidullah was taken to a child support centre, while staff from the local CPAN traced his family and returned him home.

“Afghan children are exposed to a whole range of risks and abuses,” said Tatjana Colin, Chief of Child Protection for UNICEF Afghanistan. “In order to give them the help they need, we use a variety of formal

A girl carries her little brother in a wheelbarrow in the village of Qara Kamar in Badakhshan province, in the north of Afghanistan.

and informal community networks, while also working with case managers and social workers whose job it is to help individual children.”

Efforts to protect children in Afghanistan are often hampered by a lack of official identity.

Only a third of Afghan children under age

5 have a birth certificate. As a result, child protection and social workers face challenges when identifying children and linking them with assistance. UNICEF is working to help communities and families better understand the importance of registering their children’s birth, for example at health facilities, where vaccination is promoted along with birth registration.



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Resilience against all odds

Despite a history of hardship, two recent events offered a glimpse of a more hopeful future for the country’s most vulnerable citizens – the finalization of a Child Rights Protection Law and the start of service for a new corps of social workers with the Ministry of Social Affairs.

At the same time, children have demonstrated great resilience in the face of extreme challenges. Asman is one such child.

“We were living in Badghis province. One day, Taliban fighters came to our house looking for my brother, who was serving in the army. They said that if we didn’t hand him over, they would take me and three of my sisters instead. My father refused.

“We fled our home and ran to the mountains, leaving everything behind. My mother had to sell her only gold earrings to pay the bus fare to get us to the city. When we got there, we had nothing – no

tent, only our scarves to cover us.

“I managed to get work sewing clothes for an aid project. But when the project closed, I was back at square one. We borrowed money and got into debt.

“One day a man came to take my sister as a way of repaying the debt. I couldn’t allow that to happen. I said: “Sell me instead.” That is how I came to be married at age 15.

“My husband died when I was six months’ pregnant. I returned to help look after my family. There are 13 of us now, and my father is paralysed.”

A year after returning home, Asman was enrolled in a girls’ school outside Herat.

“I am getting an education,” Asman said. “That keeps me going. I want to be a model to my son. A capable woman who changed the course of her life and her family’s.”

Adolescents learn tailoring at a Juvenile Rehabilitation Centre in northern Afghanistan. The centre aims to give youngsters who had a difficult start in life the chance of rehabilitation and reintegration into society.



FINDING NEW HORIZONS FOR AFGHANISTAN'S YOUNG PEOPLE

Aboubacar Kampo, Representative, UNICEF Afghanistan

Forty years of bloodshed and upheaval have left young Afghans cynical and despondent.

It is not hard to see why.

Half of Afghanistan's population lives in areas severely affected by conflict. Ground engagements, suicide bombs, aerial attacks and other atrocious acts of violence bring daily agony. Child and adult casualties mount steadily.

Poverty levels have surged, while the natural disasters that regularly afflict Afghanistan have displaced many families and brought more misery. After a punishing drought in 2018, severe flooding in 28 provinces this year affected more than a quarter of a million people.

By the end of September 2019, 6.3 million people were dependent on humanitarian assistance, well over half of them children. And 22 out of 34 provinces were recorded as being above the emergency threshold of acute malnutrition.

The long-term consequences of such conditions are horrifying. No wonder Afghanistan is ranked 168 out of 189 countries in the UNDP Human Development Index.

Even so, Afghans have taken significant strides towards improving the lives and recognizing the rights of their children. Consider that:

- The mortality rate of young children

declined by nearly one third between 2008 and 2018

- In 2019, Afghanistan adopted its first ever Child Rights Protection law
- In the past 18 years, important gains have been made in some aspects of women's and girls' rights, even if they are still far short of what is needed

These fragile signs of progress must be encouraged and reinforced by tapping into the energies and ambitions of Afghanistan's overwhelmingly youthful population.

Education would be an obvious place to start, tackling illiteracy rates which are among the highest in the world, and providing classrooms and teachers for the 3.7 million school-age children who are currently out of school.

But it is just as important offer adolescents the opportunity to acquire the skills they need to find jobs and livelihoods. About 400,000 young Afghans enter the labour market each year. They need to know that their career prospects extend beyond joining an armed group or escaping the country to try their luck abroad.

Afghan children and young people have paid a terrible price in past, brutal decades. But with the right support, they can begin to break free of the cycle of violence and underdevelopment and create a better future for themselves – and Afghanistan.

A class 10 student at Haleema Sadia High School in Faizabad, northeast Afghanistan.

PROVIDING SUPPORT TO AFGHANISTAN'S MOST VULNERABLE CHILDREN

For more than 65 years, UNICEF and its national and international partners have responded to the needs of Afghan children and women who have been directly affected by conflict and natural disasters, and who

have struggled with the broader effects of poverty and underdevelopment. In 2018, the UNICEF child protection, health and nutrition, education, and water, sanitation and hygiene programmes reached over 12 million children.

Students going to school in Faizabad, the largest city of Badakhshan, a northern province of Afghanistan. Khanichan High School is supported by UNICEF.

EDUCATION: A place to learn even amid violence

Calmly, Sayed Aziz, 11, recounts the events that prompted his family to flee their home in Farah province and move hundreds of kilometres to Loyawala, a gritty suburb of Kandahar.

“The Taliban said: ‘If you want to live, you should leave,’” Sayed recalled. “We are fighting with the government and you will be at risk.”

Though the experience was distressing, moving allowed Sayed to attend school for the first time.

Now, each morning, Sayed joins 30 other children in a cramped, makeshift classroom. He is in Grade 1 and towers above the much younger children in the class. But the age – and height – difference does not bother him. “I enjoy school,” he said. “And its quiet and peaceful here compared to back home.”

The whitewashed room where Sayed attends school is decorated with colourful posters. An invisible line down the centre divides girls from boys. It looks the part of a classroom, but it is located in Shakiba Akbari’s home. Her son, 20-year-old Aziz, is the teacher.

Improvised school settings like this are a common feature of the Community-Based Education (CBE) initiative, a programme promoted by the Government of Afghanistan to provide a chance to learn to some of the country’s most vulnerable children. The programme aims specifically to bring learning closer to communities living in insecure areas, and where schools have often been targeted. In 2019, 244,000 children were studying in such informal settings.

“For children who have felt the terrible impact of conflict, these classes help them adapt to a

normal life and childhood,” said Sonia Sukdeo, UNICEF Afghanistan’s Education Specialist. “Community-based Education is an important part of the response to the enormous number of Afghan children who are currently unable to attend school, especially due to conflict.”

Obstacles to learning

The extent of the challenge Afghanistan faces in getting all children into school was detailed in a study carried out in 2018. It concluded that over 47 per cent of primary school-age children in rural areas were out of school, and nearly a fifth in urban areas. In addition, 257,000 other students are likely to drop out without finishing their primary education. Girls miss out more than boys. In 2018, 2.2 million girls aged 7 – 17 were out of school,

8 year-old Ranjina Farashti reads aloud during a Pashto lesson at a community-based school on the outskirts of Kandahar. Classes like this are designed for children who are unable to attend normal school due to violence or other reasons.



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©UNICEF Afghanistan/2019/Karimi

Grade one students leave class at Turgani High School in Faizabad, northeast Afghanistan

compared with 1.5 million boys. An estimated 30 per cent of children are engaged in child labour.

“Traditional and cultural barriers due to social or gender expectations, the lack of infrastructure and trained teachers, and national financial and political bottlenecks – all these make the situation in Afghanistan uniquely challenging,” Sukdeo said.

Conflict is an important contributory factor. In 2018, there were 192 attacks that targeted schools, or involved the killing, injury and abduction of education personnel. This was almost three times the number of incidents documented in 2017. Most of the attacks were attributed to the Taliban. Many parents responded by taking their children out of school.

Haji Shah Mohamed elementary school, on the outskirts of Spin Boldak in Kandahar province, still bears the scars of attack. In 2018, the school, like hundreds of others, was designated as a polling station for parliamentary elections. But the night before, an improvised bomb blew off most of the building’s roof.

“Everyone heard the explosion,” said Jafer Hilal, the head teacher. “We all came running. Part of the roof was lying in the street. The doors and windows were damaged.”

Although there were no casualties, student attendance fell sharply in the weeks that followed as fearful parents kept their children at home.

“Thankfully, the numbers are increasing now,” Hilal said.

HEALTH: Addressing challenges on polio's front line

On a dusty street running between high mudbrick walls and iron gates, Abdel Wahab Ferouzi paused in the hot midday sun and reflected on his work on the front line of Afghanistan's war against polio.

"We know how important our task is," he said. "We have to end polio 100 per cent." Ferouzi and his team, clad in blue uniforms, are in a remote village near the Pakistan border to convince families about the dangers of polio. Nearby, a team of vaccinators dispensed polio drops to as many children as possible.

After years of hard effort, 96 per cent of Afghanistan is polio-free. But in 2018, there were 21 cases, a sharp increase concentrated in the impoverished south of the country. There have been 22 further cases in 2019. Ferouzi said the spike was due to lingering mistrust of vaccinations.

"Some people say vaccination is haram (forbidden) because it's coming from

foreigners," he said. "Some say it might make the children sick. So we speak again to [parents] to persuade them."

Other factors have contributed to the rise in polio cases. Large parts of the country are controlled by Taliban fighters, who are involved in regular clashes with pro-government forces. The United Nations recorded 62 attacks on health care facilities and their staff in 2018.

"There are some places we can't get access unless we negotiate first," said Sayed Mohammed, a polio communicator working with UNICEF support. "Whenever we have a vaccination plan, we go and discuss it with them. We also use staff from the area, people the Taliban know and approve of."

As one of three countries where the wild poliovirus is still found, Afghanistan is critical to the global struggle to eradicate the disease. But the polio programme faces a major challenge: In April 2018, Taliban

A UNICEF-supported polio communication team goes house-to-house in the village of Barikzai, close to Afghanistan's border with Pakistan. The health officials encourage families to vaccinate their children against polio following a recent increase in the number of cases of the disease.



leaders banned the activities of the World Health Organization and the International Committee of the Red Cross in Afghanistan, which effectively halted all polio vaccination campaigns. As a result, well over half the 1.5 million children living in three southern provinces targeted for immunization were not reached by vaccinators.

"So long as the polio virus survives anywhere, it is a global problem that can resurface in any country," said Mohammed Mohammedi, polio team leader for UNICEF Afghanistan.

In the past, Taliban leaders were supportive of polio-eradication efforts, Mohammedi said. The ban on campaigns stemmed from the Taliban's concern that a door-to-door campaign could gather sensitive information about the group.

"We are taking a new approach, one that

responds to the needs of the community, especially those in the remotest areas," Mohammedi said.

As well as providing polio vaccinations, the programme will now be combined with other vital services – including programmes for safe water and health.

Mobile clinics go the distance to serve local needs

Haji Jawal, a village of about 80 families, lies about a three-hour ride from Kandahar by car. Every few weeks, a four-person mobile health team comes to organize an improvised clinic in a room provided by the community.

This morning, Maimona, 20, is among a group of women with small children sitting on a blue carpet waiting to be seen by the nurse or other members of the team.

While her sister, Sayema, looks on, four-year-old Freshta receives polio vaccine drops dispensed by Rihana Azimi, a member of a mobile vaccination team. The two little girls live in the outskirts of Kandahar, a poor neighbourhood where one case of polio was confirmed in 2018.



Mothers and their children seek treatment from a visiting mobile health team in Haji Jawal village in the Spin Boldak district of Kandahar province.

“I have a stomach problem and back pain,” Maimona said, as she cradled her six-month-old daughter, Madina, in her arms.

“I also brought the children so they can be vaccinated,” she added, showing their yellow immunization records.

“We have a schedule of monthly visits to more than 40 villages like this,” says Mohamed Islam, a senior nurse.

“We know all the households and our visits are announced in the mosque,” he said as he sorted boxes of antibiotics, paracetamol and oral rehydration salts. “If the family doesn’t show up, we send round for them, to see where they are.”

Throughout Afghanistan, UNICEF supports 77

mobile health outreach teams that provide immunization, as well as maternal and child health services to 1.2 million people. Their role is critical since many beneficiaries live more than two hours away from the nearest fixed health facilities. The teams provide vaccines to protect children against 10 diseases including polio. They also provide nutrition counselling, screening and referral.

“Reaching such a dispersed population is possible only by collaborating with local NGOs,” said Fazil Ahmad, Immunization Specialist with UNICEF Afghanistan. “Even so, the teams still have to deal with the geography, security issues and the climate – making sure that the vaccines remain cool throughout their journey, so they are still effective when a child receives the injection or drops.”

MALNUTRITION: Searching for long-term solutions

Clutching her baby daughter in her arms, Bibi Gul seems impervious to the dust swirling around the small nutrition centre where she and a dozen other women are waiting impatiently with their children.

Gul, 30, arrived at this IDP camp on the outskirts of Herat while still pregnant with her daughter, Shafiq. The family had fled violence in their home province of Ghor. Shortly after reaching Herat, Gul’s husband died from an illness, leaving her to provide for their six children, all under age 11.

“To survive, I go begging in the city,” Gul said. “I ask for rice, for bread, or for any leftovers from people’s plates. That’s how I bring food for my children.”

“It’s very tough here,” she added. “Sometimes I want to die rather than see my children go hungry.”

The nutrition centre where Gul and Shafiq wait is one of about 45 established in the past two years with support from UNICEF. The centres – some fixed and others mobile – were set up to assist around 200,000 people who had been driven from their homes by conflict or drought.

Most have returned, but about 50,000 people still live at the IDP camp, which is located on bleak open land near the Iranian border.

Inside the nutrition centre, two nurses measure Shafiq’s height and mid-upper arm circumference – a standard diagnostic test for malnutrition. The test shows that Shafiq suffers from severe acute malnutrition (SAM), the most dangerous form of the condition.

In Afghanistan, SAM affects about 600,000 children under age 5. About 2 million children suffer malnourishment severe enough to

Bibi Gul (left) holds her daughter, Shafiq, as a nurse measures her to establish how severely malnourished she is.



©UNICEF Afghanistan/2019/Husseini

potentially hinder their long-term physical and mental health. Worldwide, only Yemen and South Sudan have similar rates of malnutrition.

“The lack of an adequate nutritious food intake, ill health due to poor sanitation and hygiene, and inadequate access to health services – these are the main factors that contribute to high rates of malnutrition here,” said Maureen Gallagher, Chief of Nutrition with UNICEF Afghanistan. “But the situation is worsened by years of humanitarian crisis and conflict, which have caused the displacement of thousands of families.”

At the nutrition centre, Gul received a supply of ready-to-use therapeutic food (RUTF) paste that will nourish Shafiqah for the coming week. But not all malnourished children receive this life-saving support.

In 2018, UNICEF and partners provided treatment with RUTF to over 277,000 children suffering from SAM, 18 per cent more than the previous year. Sustaining even that level of service is a challenge. And the programme must be substantially scaled up if the additional 300,000 children with SAM are to receive the lifesaving treatment with RUTF that they need.

A mother feeds her underweight baby with fortified milk prescribed by staff at a hospital in Kishim district, northern Afghanistan. Malnutrition affects about 2 million Afghan children at a level serious enough to threaten their long-term health.



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6 month-old Zobair is one of 600,000 Afghan children who suffer from severe acute malnutrition – the most serious form of the condition. His mother, Hanhaa, has brought him to Kabul’s Ataturk hospital for treatment.

Investments that can address a complex problem

SAM is not Afghanistan’s only nutrition-related challenge. About 4 in 10 children suffer from stunting, which means they are short for their weight. Stunting can also have long-term negative effects on a child’s physical, mental and social development, and it significantly harms their education and future economic prospects.

Meanwhile, wasting, or low weight for height,

affects 1 in 10 Afghan children, threatening their lives and health. A contributory factor is that breastfeeding rates are low: less than half of mothers exclusively breastfeed, leaving many deprived of the most important first source of nutrition in a child’s life.

“To tackle this complex issue, we need additional investment that would allow UNICEF and its partners to work with caregivers and household heads to improve feeding practices for young children,”

Gallagher said.

WASH: A sustainable answer to growing water needs

Despite progress over the past decade, only 64 per cent of Afghans have access to improved drinking water. A fast-growing population and climate change are putting additional pressure on a resource that is critical for the health and futures of children throughout the country.

“Afghanistan is becoming one of the most water-stressed nations on the planet, and with rapid population growth, the needs are growing daily,” said Paulos Workneh, the WASH Chief for UNICEF Afghanistan. Drought places further strain on limited water supplies and has encouraged the search for innovative and sustainable interventions.

In 2018, when drought affected about 2.8 million Afghans, gravity-fed, solar-powered systems were an important part of the humanitarian response undertaken by UNICEF and partners under the coordination of the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD). The results can be seen in Shahrak Subz, a

stony desert area outside Herat city which is home to tens of thousands of IDPs who arrived here in 2018 to escape violence or severe drought in their home provinces.

Under a scorching sun, 110 large solar panels provide the power that lifts water from 120 metres under the desert floor. The water is then piped to dozens of water tap stands in the surrounding camp.

“The (displaced) people arrived in desperate shape, without food or belongings, having lost their cattle, and with no money to pay for trucked water,” said Romal Omari, a UNICEF WASH officer in Herat.

“We needed a sustainable way of meeting their water needs,” he added.

Even in areas unaffected by drought, the growing thirst for clean water is presenting opportunities to access regions that aid agencies have sometimes found hard to reach.

Large solar panels provide the power that lifts water from under the desert floor to meet the needs of thousands of displaced people living near Herat city. Abdul Hussein’s job is to turn the solar panels three times daily to catch the maximum sun.



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A boy fills his water container at one of around 40 tap stands set up with UNICEF support to meet the needs of IDPs living in the area.

“Everyone needs water – including communities controlled by armed groups,” said Workneh. “They beg for our engineers to come and help them.”

In 2018, UNICEF provided access to improved drinking water sources to about 197,000 people in 123 communities nationwide.

Meanwhile, UNICEF’s humanitarian WASH response reached 1.1 million IDPs, returnees and drought survivors.

Changing behaviour around open defecation

The wide prevalence of open defecation contributes to making diarrhoeal disease the second most common cause of death among young Afghan children. While 80 per cent of families have access to toilets, only about half of them are designed to keep waste separate from human contact.

But programmes to change community behaviours and curb open defecation have made some progress. In 2018, over 1,100 communities were declared to be open defecation-free.

In Shahrak Subz, encouraging people to use the bright blue toilets scattered throughout the camp is the task of UNICEF-supported hygiene promoters like Somaya Suroosh and Nahid Faidai.

Suroosh and Faidai engage in discussion with groups of mothers on all manner of hygiene-related topics: boiling water before drinking it; using oral rehydration salts; the best method and times to wash hands.

“We see fewer children suffering from diarrhoea nowadays, but there’s still more to be done,” Faidai said. “That’s why we come here continuously, giving them the information over and over again.”



A CALL TO ACTION FOR THE CHILDREN OF AFGHANISTAN

As long as the conflict in Afghanistan continues, the parties involved must protect children and safeguard their rights to education, health, water, sanitation, hygiene and other services. It is their obligation under international humanitarian law and international human rights law.

To make sure that international law is upheld and that children are protected, UNICEF issues a Call to Action:

To shield children from conflict, UNICEF calls on:

All parties to the conflict to adhere to international humanitarian law and ensure the safe and unrestricted access of humanitarian actors to children, especially during conflict.

All parties to the conflict to cease all attacks and threats against schools, students and teachers, and health care facilities and their staff and ensure that children's access to services is safe.

Government and pro-government armed forces to end strikes on civilian infrastructure of any kind and to strengthen current rules of engagement to prevent civilian casualties, particularly in the context of aerial strikes carried out by or in support of Afghan National Forces.

All parties to the conflict to end the recruitment and use of children and to hold perpetrators accountable. The Government of Afghanistan to implement the existing Action Plan on the recruitment and use of children.

Armed Groups to collaborate with the Country Task Force on Monitoring and Reporting to develop action plans to end grave violations against children, including child recruitment.

The Government of Afghanistan to refrain from detaining children on national security-related charges and to treat

children actually or allegedly associated with armed groups primarily as victims, and to hand them over to child protection actors without delay.

The Government of Afghanistan to strengthen age assessment and vetting procedures to prevent recruitment and use of children; enforce the provisions in the revised Penal Code concerning bacha bazi; and ensure accountability for crimes of sexual violence against children.

The Government of Afghanistan to expand budget allocations for protection services, including for efforts to: reintegrate former child soldiers into society and protect children from being recruited; encourage birth registration; and upgrade community networks' information on incidents and identify local solutions.

The Government of Afghanistan to allocate resources for the effective rollout and implementation of the Child Rights Protection Law.

International partners to commit funds to prevent and respond to grave violations against children in conflict, including efforts to: support child victims of sexual violence; prevent child marriage; reintegrate children associated with armed groups and forces into communities; and provide health and other services to injured children.



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To provide education for children, UNICEF calls on:

All parties to the conflict to respect the civilian character of schools and treat them as zones of peace where children are safe from harm. Schools and all education facilities must be safe and protected in line with international law and with the Safe School Declaration which Afghanistan has endorsed.

The Government of Afghanistan to allocate

more financial resources to education and especially to efforts to enrol more girls into school, with priority given to provinces where the numbers of out-of-school children are highest.

Authorities in areas not under government control to lift restrictions on children attending school, especially girls.

To protect children's health and nutrition, UNICEF calls on:

The Government of Afghanistan to prioritize resources to expand basic primary health services in order to prevent and treat severe acute malnutrition and strengthen routine immunization services.

All parties to the conflict to ensure that children have access to polio immunization and other vital services in areas under their control.

International partners to support: the scale up of the severe acute malnutrition services

necessary to prevent children from dying; and the development of multi-sectoral, nutrition-sensitive programming at scale that incorporates WASH, food security, agriculture, social protection and health interventions.

International partners to make the necessary investments to prevent undernutrition by ensuring that children have access to: nutritious foods and appropriate feeding; safe drinking water, and sanitation; livelihood and income opportunities, education and other social services.

To provide water, sanitation and hygiene to every child, UNICEF calls on:

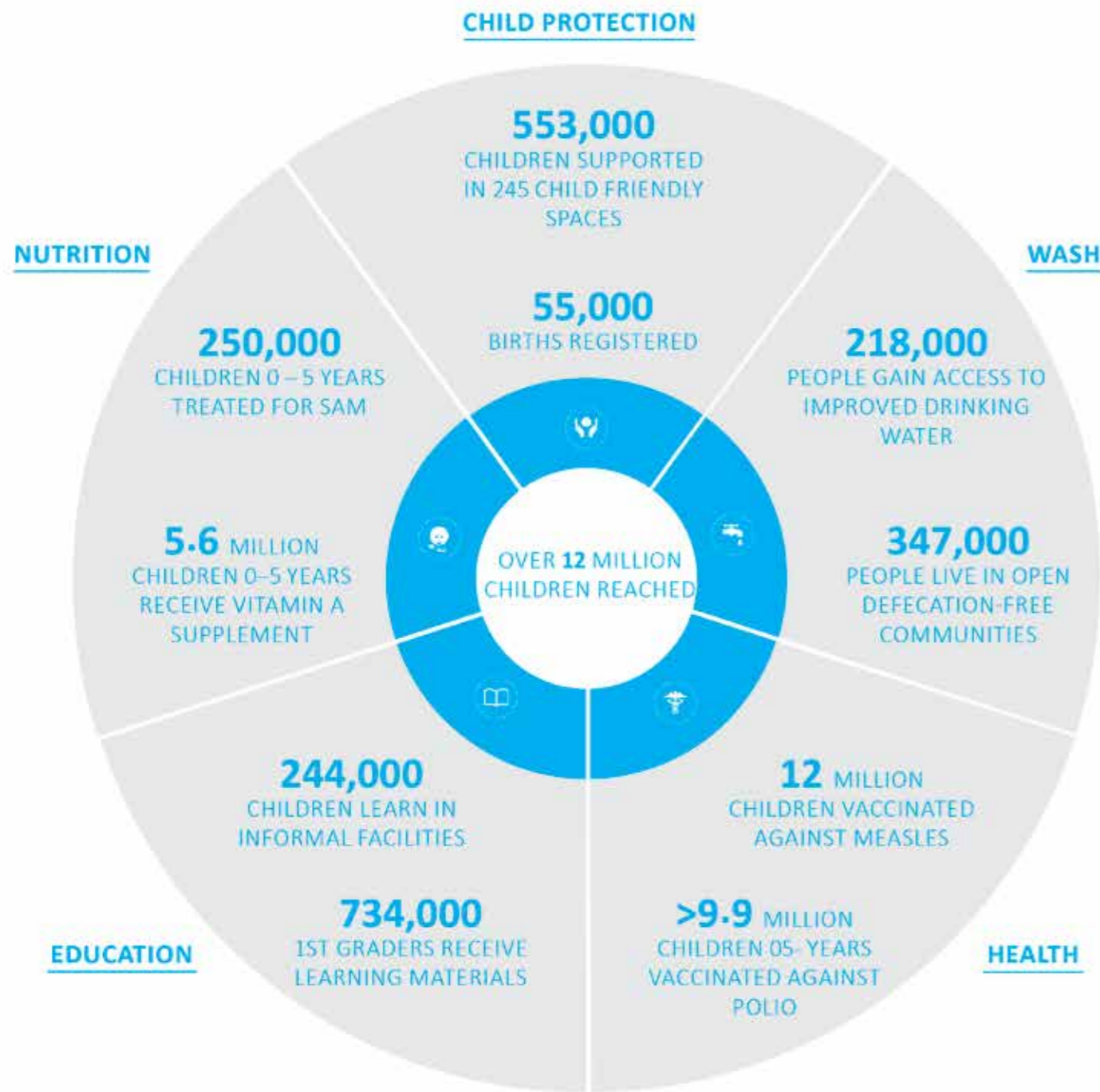
The Government of Afghanistan and all involved partners to step up efforts to end open defecation; intensify strategies to provide safe drinking water to the most impoverished

communities; expand WASH in schools programmes that support menstrual hygiene services for girls and promote the retention of girls in school.



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UNICEF AFGHANISTAN RESPONSE HIGHLIGHTS 2019



UNICEF AFGHANISTAN FUNDING NEEDS 2020

PROGRAMMES	FUNDING REQUIREMENTS (USD)	FUNDING GAP	
HEALTH & POLIO	113,927,490	81,301,393	71%
WASH	23,606,576	7,645,313	32%
NUTRITION	41,356,111	34,744,362	84%
EDUCATION	116,249,736	100,687,420	87%
CHILD PROTECTION	21,891,174	15,532,936	71%
SOCIAL INCLUSION	5,892,913	2,617,072	44%
TOTAL	322,924,000	242,528,496	75%



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Polio vaccinators going door to door in a suburb of Kabul.

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