

Afghanistan

Background

More than 20 years of conflict in Afghanistan have seriously affected the well-being of women and children throughout the country. Afghanistan ranks amongst the world's poorest nations. Despite recent improvements, the country's level of human development still remains very low.

While progress has been achieved on a number of issues in the past few years, it will take time for major improvements to take effect. Success will depend to a large degree on the ability of the central Government to regain control over national policies and implementation across the entire country.

Child protection

A significant number of Afghan children are in work due to their families' abject poverty. Apart from children taking part in hostilities and armed conflict, many children are also pushed to the street because of abuse and breakdowns in family relationships.

Governmental systems and services to support vulnerable groups and to care for and protect particularly vulnerable children have deteriorated

during the two decades of civil war. The lack of security makes it very hard to reach people in need of social services in inaccessible areas.

However, UNICEF is supporting initiatives to eliminate child trafficking, early marriage and forced and bonded child labour, and to reduce physical, psychological and sexual violence against children – some of the worst abuses of child rights in Afghanistan. The monitoring and reporting of child rights violations is being supported through the establishment of community-level mechanisms.

Health and nutrition

Access to health services is very limited, with around 10 doctors for every 100,000 people. Out of a total population of 24 million people, 68 per cent are under 25 years of age. However, 17 per cent of all children do not survive beyond their first birthday. In 2005, 54 per cent of children were chronically malnourished. Two women die every hour due to complications in pregnancy or childbirth.

Measles is a major cause of death among children, and tetanus – often the result of



A health worker vaccinates a toddler at a maternal and child health clinic near the western city of Herat. The clinic receives vaccines, as well as vitamin A capsules and other medical supplies, from UNICEF. *Credit: UNICEF/HQ00-0863/Roger LeMoyné*

unsanitary conditions at delivery – is a leading killer of mothers and newborn babies. In September 2006, more than 708,600 children under five were vaccinated against measles, whilst over 1 million women of childbearing age received tetanus vaccinations. The focus area of this campaign was the remote province of Bamyan, in central Afghanistan, where the population is displaced after decades of war.

UNICEF has also been providing training for health workers on the treatment of malnourished children in

Moving forward

Afghanistan has some of the worst child development indicators in the world.

UNICEF aims to reverse the trend and help build a stronger nation by supporting actions to meet these goals:

- ▶ Reducing under-5 mortality by 22 per cent.
- ▶ Reducing the maternal mortality ratio by 25 per cent.
- ▶ Improving nutrition, including virtual elimination of iodine deficiency disorders, a 30 per cent decrease in underweight children under three years and a 30 per cent decrease in anaemia among children and women.
- ▶ Increasing the literacy rates among 15 to 49 year old females by 50 per cent and increasing girl's primary school net enrolment by 20 per cent by the end of 2008.
- ▶ Providing 3 million children and young people with the skills, knowledge and confidence to manage life's challenges.
- ▶ Ensuring a greater national awareness on HIV/AIDS. While only 49 cases of HIV infection have been officially recorded, a lack of understanding on causes of transmission presents a great risk that could lead to the onset of an epidemic.
- ▶ Increasing access to sustainable safe drinking water and permanent improved sanitation by 20 per cent.
- ▶ Supporting the Government of Afghanistan in strengthening its capacity to monitor and report violations of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

therapeutic feeding centres. So far, 40 health workers have been trained, and more training sessions are underway.

Education

About 2 million Afghan primary school aged children receive no education, of which 1.3 million are girls. In 2005, female literacy was just 85 per cent, whilst girl's attendance was 40 per cent.

Schools in Afghanistan are the target of increasingly violent attacks. Damage to schools and threats to teachers and students have been reported in a hundred schools since the beginning of this year. Reported incidents have spread from the south and southeastern regions to all of the provinces, including a missile attack, 11 explosions, 50 school burnings and 37 threats against schools and communities.

As of July 2006, UNICEF had recorded 99 cases of violence, more than six times the number of incidents from the same period in 2005. Six children have died as the result of these actions.

Whilst UNICEF and the Government are taking steps to protect children and schools, the latest school security-related incidents remain of great concern. The education structure remains shaky following years of political turmoil, which has included the denial of education for girls.

UNICEF has assisted in the restoration of education departments by supplying equipment – such as tents, floor mats and teaching materials – and, in some instances, repairing school buildings. A total of 461 school tents and 1,800 floor mats have been distributed to date, ensuring that children are able to continue receiving lessons.

Water and sanitation

Afghanistan has a history of natural disasters and regularly experiences small-scale emergencies. Lack of rainfall during early 2006 has led to a drought, which has affected 2.5 million people and impacted on the nation's agriculture and the availability of potable drinking water. In 2005, only 23 per cent of households had access to clean water.

In response to the drought, UNICEF has supported water-tanking operations to provide access to clean water those drought-affected areas. So far, this has benefited 100,000 people. In addition, UNICEF is providing support for the construction of three strategic water points and seven water reservoirs. During summer 2006, a campaign to prevent diarrhoea also reached 2 million people in urban settings.

UNICEF's ongoing response


Despite the challenges, UNICEF and its partners have been able to provide assistance to internally displaced people and to ensure that children continue going to school, that there is access to clean water and that disease outbreaks are kept at bay. However, much work remains to ensure that Afghan children can enjoy a brighter future.

UNICEF's work is funded entirely by voluntary donations.

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