

UNICEF, AFGHANISTAN: BRIEF ON CHILD NOTICE AND UPDATE ON THE SITUATION OF CHILDREN IN AFGHANISTAN

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Shahnaz, 7 show her painting to camera. “I want to be an artist in future” says Shahnaz from Internally displaced children at Ferdousi camp in Nahri Shahi district of Balkh province of Afghanistan.

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BACKGROUND

The 2015 edition of the Child Notice Afghanistan was developed as part of better information for durable solutions and protection project which was financially supported by the Return Fund of the European Commission. The Child Notice describes the situation of children in the countries of origin like Afghanistan and provides legal and practical information on education, health care, child protection, armed conflict, juvenile justice and trafficking. The 2018 edition of Child Notice in Afghanistan has been produced by UNICEF Netherlands, in cooperation with UNICEF Afghanistan.

UNICEF Afghanistan considers the Child Notice as a credible tool to provide useful information within the country as it informs its situation analysis within the country and has informed the development of the country programme of UNICEF, it was also used by the Government of Afghanistan /represented by Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare as an evidence to inform the formulation of the Child Protection Policy that is awaiting approval by the 2nd Vice President's Office. It has also informed the comprehensive programme design for children on the move, which currently has been implemented by UNICEF with the support of EU.

The Child Notice also aims to be an instrumental tool for immigration/asylum officials, border staff, law enforcement staff, social workers, case managers, guardians, service providers (educators, health staff), interpreters, lawyers, judges in assessing the situation and position of children in asylum and migration procedures.

The Child Notice helps the practitioners to assess the best interest of the child and the possible durable situations based on the information on the context and circumstances where the child lives or in the country of origin including child identity, child views, preservation of the family environment, maintaining relationships, the assessment of the services/systems available to provide care, protection and safety, the vulnerability of children and children's rights and needs to be healthy including mental health and education and opportunity for development.

UPDATE ON THE SITUATION OF CHILDREN

The Central Statistic Organization (CSO) has updated the total population of Afghanistan (2020 -21) to about 32.9 million persons, of which 23.4 million persons (71.0 %) live in rural areas, 8 million persons (24.4 %) live in urban area and 1.5 million (4.6%) are nomadic population. The proportion of the population aged under 15 years continues to be among the highest in the world and significantly higher than that of the neighboring countries at 47.7 per cent.

Despite the fact that the country has significantly advanced its legislative and policy frameworks in favor of children's rights with the passage of the first ever Child Rights Law, armed conflict and political crises compounded by poverty, natural disasters, endemic corruption and underlying water scarcity severely hamper the implementation of the positive legislative changes. Insecurity is increasing, driven by weak governance, unfair resource distribution and conflict that has caused high population movement, including cross-border refugees and internally displaced persons.

More than half of the population of Afghanistan – nearly 17 million people – live in conflict-affected areas, and 103 districts have been assessed as the hardest to reach. Since January 2020, some 460,000 people have returned to Afghanistan from Iran, Pakistan and other countries, and about 405,000 (58 per cent children) have been displaced by conflict and disasters. The estimated number of people in need is in 2020 are 14 million, 7.1 million are children.

More than 52 per cent of the population and 56 per cent of children live in multidimensional poverty. In addition, 40 per cent of children are identified as poor in both monetary and multidimensional terms.

Furthermore, the dire environment has impacted on the health and wellbeing of children. An estimated 2 million children under the age of 5 and 485,000 pregnant and lactating women are affected by acute malnutrition, and nearly 600,000 children are at risk of severe acute malnutrition (SAM) in 2020.

Although families' access to maternal, newborn and child health services has more than doubled, maternal mortality remains high at 638 deaths per 100,000 live births, as is newborn mortality with 37 deaths per 1,000 live births.

There still concerns in the continued deterioration of the overall protective environment, manifested by:

- More than 58 % of births are not registered at birth, more than 400,000 children are living without family care and most of them live in institutions where they are at risk of economic and sexual exploitation including child recruitment.
- Violence and corporal punishment are high where more than 78 % of children are subjected to violence at the household level and it is accepted by all in the street, family and community.
- Violence in schools is prevalent including sexual and gender-based violence.
- Child labor is accepted where more than a quarter of children in Afghanistan are engaged in child labor, which puts them at risk of economic and sexual exploitation.
- Social norms and gender inequity exacerbated the probability of child marriage, sexual base violence against girls and boys.

Afghanistan continues to be the deadliest country in the world for children in conflict for the fifth consecutive year as it is outlined in the Special Representative of Secretary General of the United Nation on Children in Armed Conflict (SRSG-CACC). Children in Afghanistan are exposed to extreme harm as a result of the ongoing conflict, including killing and maiming from explosive remnants of war, improvised explosive devices and airstrikes. Many child casualties arise from ground engagements. In the last 9 months of 2020, the Country Taskforce for Monitoring and Reporting Grave Violations, reported 1810 child casualties (killed and maimed).

COVID-19-related factors such as school closures, economic pressures and lockdowns have probably increased the vulnerability of children to recruitment and abduction – 142 boys were recruited, 15 children were abducted, mostly boys to work as soldiers. Boys are also at risk of specific form of sexual abuse called Bacha Bazi.¹ Only 5 cases of sexual violence are verified and reported due to the stigma and the taboo around sexual violence.

¹ Bacha bazi, translated as “playing with boys”, here young children are recruited to perform sexual acts and dance for men in positions of power until they become men when some of them are compensated with money

THE IMPACT OF COVID19 ON CHILDREN

The lockdown led to the reduction of availability of services including the services providers. Access to PSS, legal services and referral to other services are reduced to victims of violence and grave violations. There has been an increase in recruitment and abduction of children by armed forces and groups since the beginning of COVID-19.

Limited evidence shows that the lockdown increased domestic violence and gender-based violence, however, reporting is still a huge challenge due to social norms and social implications. As a result of COVID-19, the monitoring of the deployed team has substantially reduced due to fear of the virus and community resentment to allow others in their homes and communities.

Over 364,000 persons returned to the country since the beginning of 2020 mainly due to COVID-19. The virus has affected families' limited access to services and increased the risks of families adopting negative coping strategies.

The government announced the opening of public and private schools on the 22nd of August except for primary schools (grades 1 to 6) which means students in those grades will remain without access to education in physical settings until further notice. If most of the community based education and schools remain closed, with roughly **7.5 million** children not resuming their normal schooling schedules and access to curriculum content for some time, in addition to the **3.7 million** who were already out-of-school, the burden on a seriously stressed education and child protection system will be significant.

UNICEF PROGRAMME IN AFGHANISTAN

- UNICEF is supporting the Government to strengthening child protection systems with more emphasis on sector financing and social service workforce. National bachelor's degrees in social work have been established and more than 65 social workers have graduated in the last three years (2017-2018-2019 and enrolled within the civil services).
- UNICEF support capacity building of relevant sectors for provision of child protection and social welfare services to vulnerable children, those at risk, child victims of grave violations and unaccompanied separated children including children on the move who benefited from the support of child Protection Action Networks (CPANs), child friendly spaces (CFS) and multipurpose adolescent centers. Children in contact with the law are provided with packages of "rehabilitation and reintegration" services.
- UNICEF supports evidence generation, strengthens data systems and establishes framework for innovation on child protection.
- UNICEF works with the Afghan Government to strengthen Birth Registration system to ensure children have legal identity.
- UNICEF with its partners implement a comprehensive social change programme to prevent and respond to violence, abuse and exploitation of children. UNICEF puts specific focus on supporting transformation of social and gender norms to address pervasive gender discrimination and harmful traditional practices.

- Through its advocacy, technical and financial, the Law on Protection of Child Rights has been adopted through Presidential Decree and awaiting ratification by the Parliament. The Family Child Law is amended, and the National Child Protection Policy developed is awaiting approval.
- Through its advocacy, financial and technical support the UN/Government Action Plan to End Recruitment and Use of Children and its road map is reviewed, followed up with and monitored. UNICEF continues advocating for prioritizing release and community-based reintegration for children associated with armed conflict.
- UNICEF supports partnerships, co-ordination mechanisms, accountability and strengthening the humanitarian and development nexus for child protection.

KEY ASKS

In the country of destination:

- We call for all to put the best interest of the child, whatever the reason for children to migrate and by whatever means the children migrate, as a primary consideration during all stages of the migration process.
- Decisions on status, care and on return of children should be informed by a documented best interest of the child assessment and determination.
- We ask that regardless of the reasons for children to migrate and means through which they arrive in Europe, a durable solution should be sought, taking the best interest of the child into account. Careful and thorough procedures must take place to determine the best solution.

In Afghanistan

- Ensure longer-term investment in building the national child protection system that focuses on strengthening social workforce (with qualified/accredited social workers), effective functioning and outreach of Child Protection Networks (CPANs) to prevent and respond to child protection issues across all 34 provinces with efficient referral mechanisms and access to package of services for most-at-risk children.
- Supporting long-term social change programmes that address gender and social norms related to the harmful practices including child marriage, gender and sexual based violence including Bacha Bazi.
- UNICEF and UN to support integration of child protection provisions, including those relating to the release and reintegration of children formerly associated with armed forces in the peace talks and agreements and in the peace building initiatives.
- More commitments from the Government and other parties to the conflict, UN agencies, and donor countries for re-integration of children impacted by the grave violations and migration and to ensure the provision of education and long-term support, including psychosocial and mental health services. This also includes funding for monitoring and reporting on grave violations against children and the capacity building of child protection actors in the country.