

UNICEF HUMANITARIAN ACTION UPDATE

AFGHANISTAN

17 JANUARY 2008

UNICEF RESPONDS TO THE NEEDS OF CHILDREN AND WOMEN AFFECTED BY FOOD SHORTAGES AND HIGH PRICES OF BASIC COMMODITIES, AS ACCESS IS BEING COMPOUNDED BY HEAVY SNOWFALL AND BLOCKED ROADS

- In many areas of Afghanistan people suffer from increasing prices of basic commodities and food shortages.
- Bad weather and heavy snowfall have blocked roads and hindered access to vulnerable communities. Officials in some affected provinces have warned that if food and non-food aid does not reach vulnerable communities in the near future, the current shortages could lead to a humanitarian crisis.
- The security situation continues to deteriorate. During 2007, approximately 40-50 percent of the districts in the country were not accessible to UN missions for extended periods due to insecurity and movement restrictions.



1. ISSUES FOR CHILDREN

BACKGROUND

Afghanistan had been in a state of complex emergency for over the past twenty years. The country's infrastructure and systems were largely destroyed. An estimated 22 million Afghans or 70% of the population live in poverty and substandard conditions¹. 40% children less than three years old are underweight and 54% of under five are stunted. Over 100,000 people -most of them children and women- remain displaced by conflict and drought.

Afghanistan has a maternal mortality ratio of 1,600 deaths per 100,000 live births which accounts as one of the highest in the world. The infant mortality rate is 165 per 1,000 live births, whereby one child out of every four does not survive his/her fifth birthday. Recurrent drought, chronic household food shortage and widespread inappropriate infant and young child feeding and caring practices have led to increased admissions of under-five children to therapeutic care centres over the last two years. Among under-five children, 7 per cent suffer from acute malnutrition and 54 per cent of them are chronically malnourished. The nutrition figures could be higher in the areas affected by conflict and drought, where access is denied and humanitarian services are difficult to deliver. Immunization coverage for DPT1, DPT3 and measles is estimated at 90, 77 and 68 per cent respectively. Whereas health services are available in 82 per cent of districts, there is a significant population without access to such services.

Two million primary school-aged children (60 per cent) are out of school, with an estimated 1.3 million of them being girls. Education in insecure areas is facing qualitative and quantitative challenges. Only 23 per cent of the entire population has access to safe drinking water. Access to sanitation facilities is as low as 12 per cent.

The security situation in the country is deteriorating; more areas have fallen into active military operation zones between the Government/Coalition forces and Anti-Government Elements (AGE), which hampers humanitarian operations and access to affected populations. During the course of the year 2007, approximately 40-50 percent of the districts in the country were not accessible to UN missions for extended periods due to insecurity and movement restrictions. Southern provinces and some provinces in the west, east and southeast are the most affected ones.

There are more than 2 million illegal Afghan migrants living in Iran and Pakistan. The Government of Iran has already started the deportation of Afghan migrants and this process will continue. The Government of Pakistan is planning to close four Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan, which is likely to result in an estimated 150,000 Afghans returning to Afghanistan. The anticipated influx of returnees and deportees certainly has grave implications for UNICEF's action in the affected areas, mainly the provision of basic services for children and their families as well as special protection measures for vulnerable groups, such as unaccompanied minors and female-headed households.

CURRENT PRESSING ISSUES FOR CHILDREN AND WOMEN

Owing to the shortage of wheat flour in Pakistan, residents of many areas in Afghanistan, including the central capital Kabul, are suffering from increasing prices of basic commodities and food shortages. Afghanistan's southern, eastern, and south-eastern provinces as well as the central capital Kabul are mainly dependent on food import from Pakistan via its border towns of Peshawar and Quetta. However, the prices of daily commodities, especially wheat flour and

¹ Securing Afghanistan's Future Report (2004), P.3

cooking oil have suddenly jumped in the war-battered country as the authorities in Pakistan have stopped flour smuggling to Afghanistan via many illegal border crossings. Government officials have urged the international community and local traders to react and cover the 400,000 - 500,000 MT food requirements until the next wheat crops season.

The situation is further compounded by heavy snowfall, which resulted in more than 123 deaths, serious damage to house, significant loss of livestock and has blocked many roads and rendered several areas inaccessible. The Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) declared a "state of alert" on the 8th of January. The western provinces of Herat and Ghore are the most affected regions. All airports and roads to the region are closed.

The delivery of food and non-food items to a number of already vulnerable locations has been delayed due to the bad weather. As a result, the price of food and fuel has risen even further, making it more difficult for low-income families to meet their food and heating requirements.

Officials in some affected provinces have warned that if roads remain blocked and food and non-food items do not reach vulnerable communities in the near future, the current shortages could lead to a humanitarian crisis. Children and women are among the most vulnerable and those most likely to suffer from this situation.

The current national nutrition data shows that 21% of the women of reproductive age are malnourished (body mass index), 54% of under-five children are stunted, 40% are under weight and 7% are wasted. Micronutrient deficiencies are very high: 72% and 75% of school age children and women of reproductive age are urinary iodine deficient, respectively; 72% and of 6-59 month old children and 48% of reproductive age are anaemic from iron deficiency; vitamins A and C deficiencies are common, peaking in winter in most of the provinces. (National Nutrition Survey 2004, Ministry of Public Health).

Drought-affected agricultural production in 17 provinces of which 10 were most affected. This triggered widespread household food shortages and admissions of malnourished children under-five to therapeutic feeding units (TFUs) doubled in 2006 and sustained in 2007. In total, 4,405 children were admitted to therapeutic feeding centres in 2006 as compared to 2030 cases of malnourished under-five children in 2005. The situation remains precarious as 3,484 admissions were registered between January and September 2007. Furthermore, 20% of the households in the country are estimated food insecure by the Famine Early Warning System (FEWS).

2. UNICEF RESPONSE: ACTIVITIES, ACHIEVEMENTS AND CONSTRAINTS

In order to address the possible effects of the food shortage and high commodity prices, UNICEF is preparing to take the following steps to address the situation:

- A rapid assessment of nutrition status of children in the country which needs to be in partnership with Ministry of Public Health and other UN agencies and NGOs. Although it is not possible to access the insecure areas for assessment which possibly have the most disadvantaged and underserved population.
- Initiate community therapeutic feeding centers closer to communities particularly in the high risk areas taking into account insecurity and managing capacity of MOPH and
- Strengthening nutrition support to women and children and emergency preparedness measures (screening, referral, provision of micronutrient supplements, pre-positioning of therapeutic feeding supplies, training and nutrition education) in coordination with MoPH and other agencies involved.

In addition to the above activities in response to food shortage, UNICEF is undertaking the following activities to address the needs of women and children in Afghanistan for the year 2008:

HEALTH AND NUTRITION

Over 600,000 vulnerable children among the displaced, returnees, host communities and impoverished will benefit from distribution of essential drugs, micronutrients, measles and Tetanus toxoid (TT) vaccination and rapid response to diarrhoeal and acute respiratory disease outbreaks

WATER, SANITATION AND HYGIENE

Approximately one million displaced persons, returnee families and drought-affected communities, focusing particularly on children and women, will be reached through provision of water, sanitation and hygiene education activities.

EDUCATION

Over half a million children will benefit from distribution of teaching/learning materials, construction of cost-effective class rooms, psycho-social support to traumatized and war-affected children and adolescent girls education in the IDP/deportees areas.

CHILD PROTECTION

Children affected by armed conflict and natural disasters will be targeted through monitoring of child rights violations and abuse, creation of child-friendly play areas, community based psycho-social corners in the IDP and deportee concentrated areas, mine risk awareness programmes and trace and re-unification of separated children in the event of natural and man-made disasters.

HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE AND COORDINATION

In coordination with the Government/UN emergency preparedness and response mechanism, UNICEF will preposition relevant supplies in its Zonal Offices and other strategic locations. This will cover 30,000 families with a standard package of family kits, tarpaulins, blankets, warm clothing for women and children and jerry cans. UNICEF in collaboration with other partners will support the disaster risk reduction trainings at community level.

3. FUNDING REQUIREMENTS FOR 2008

Summary of UNICEF financial needs for 2008	
Sector	US\$
Health and nutrition	2,210,835
Water, sanitation and hygiene	2,434,298
Education	5,064,541
Child protection	674,314
Humanitarian response and coordination	2,541,776
Total*	12,925,764

* The total includes a maximum recovery rate of 7 per cent. The actual recovery rate on contributions will be calculated in accordance with UNICEF Executive Board Decision 2006/7 dated 9 June 2006.

Details of the Afghanistan emergency programme can be obtained from:

Catherine Mbengue UNICEF Representative Kabul Afghanistan Tel: + 93 798 50 7100 Email: cmbengue@unicef.org	Esther Vigneau UNICEF EMOPS Geneva Tel: + 41 22 909 5612 Fax: + 41 22 909 5902 E-mail: evigneau@unicef.org	Gary Stahl UNICEF PFO New York Tel: + 1-212 326 7009 Fax: + 1-212 326 7165 Email : gstahl@unicef.org
--	--	--