

Basic Data

- Population: estimated 24 million [more than 50% under 18 years]
- U5MR: 210 per 1,000 live births [600 children under five die every day]
- Adjusted MMR: is at 1,600 per 100,000 [more than 50 women die every day from complications in pregnancy and childbirth]
- 54% of Afghan children are stunted and 40% are underweight
- Average adult illiteracy rate: 71% [female illiteracy as high as 86%]
- More than 1 million primary school age girls not in school [in two provinces, girls' non-enrolment = 99%]
- More than 75% of population does not have access to safe drinking water
- Up to 30% of primary school age children working to support families
- Early marriage affects many young girls [preventing access to education and increasing health risks]
- Per capita GDP is US\$ 200 [40% of which comes from cultivation and traffic of illicit drugs]

General Questions and Answers Sheet – January/February 2007

1. The UN recently voiced concern about worsening security in Afghanistan. How does this affect UNICEF's activities?

Insecurity remains the major obstacle. There are places where UNICEF and development partners cannot access, especially in the Eastern and Southern parts of the country. However we are optimistic since great progress has been made, in the face of huge challenges

We are seeing more children going to school, we are seeing an improvement in the availability of maternal health care services, and there are projects around the country that tackle the huge rates of female illiteracy. Women are beginning to understand that there are roles for them to play in Afghan society. But we have a long way to go, and we should not be so naive as to suggest that making progress will be easy. We have to work with communities to discuss why investing in women and girls is so important – the contribution women can make to their communities, as mothers, as care givers, as income earners, as role models, as leaders, as professionals all this is essential to the future prosperity, stability and growth of Afghanistan as a nation.

This is not an easy country in which to measure progress, given the lack of investment and of course the consequence of conflict, over so many years.

Afghanistan remains a volatile environment in which to work. But UNICEF is fully committed to supporting the Government and our other partners to continue upholding the rights of women and children. Of course, there are times when it is difficult to work here, especially in areas where there is continued insecurity. But we are always looking for ways to continue our work, using alternative partners, working with community and religious leaders as powerful advocates on behalf of women and children, to ensure that every child, every woman is reached.

We also should not focus on insecurity as just being an impediment to UNICEF, or others, being able to deliver services. Insecurity also makes it difficult for ordinary people to access those services. A pregnant woman cannot reach a health clinic if there is a fear for her safety. A child cannot walk to school if there is a fear for her or his

security. Teachers cannot get to their schools, doctors cannot reach their hospitals. Sometimes just the perception of insecurity is enough to restrict movement of people.

We need to be closer to these communities, to work with them directly, to earn their trust and sense of partnership. We need to show communities – who are best placed to negotiate access to and delivery of services – that the work we support for women and children rises above any political differences that may exist in a particular part of the country.

2. What progress has UNICEF made in Afghanistan so far? UNICEF and partners have

- Immunized over 5 million children against polio and delivered millions of vitamin A supplements.
- Half a million Afghans have gained access to safe water and sanitary latrines.]
- 4.89 million children enrolled in schools with 4.25 millions in primary grades of 1-6. (About 402,427 new girls -100.03% gross enrolment of primary school entry)
- About 50,998 returnee children have enrolled in schools close to their home/villages.
- Around 48,009 illiterate women of remote villages have been enrolled in 1,782 literacy centres.
- National Strategy on Children at-Risk (NSCAR) was launched in May leading an increased interest and commitment from the local government to address child protection issues.
- Mine-risk education programmes have reached nearly a million people, reducing landmine-related accidents by 10 per cent.
- UNICEF supported educational and skills training for 3,017 demobilized child soldiers and other war-affected children (1,162 girls) in 8 provinces.

3. Will Afghanistan reach the Millennium Development Goals?

I think it is more a question of whether Afghanistan and those who invest in Afghanistan make the right decisions about where to target resources to move the nation towards the MDGs. The MDGs set out the commitments of Governments – and here I include donor governments – to tackle some of the worst indicators affecting communities; poverty, poor education, inequalities.

If we come close, but not reach the MDG targets ... is that a failure? Not in the broadest sense of the word. But if we don't take the targets seriously, if we don't all make the right investments now, if we don't put the rights of women and children on top of the national agenda, then that will be a failure, and one which Afghanistan and the world cannot afford to make.

4. Are the donors living up to those commitments? There is a lot of discussion about whether agencies like UNICEF should receive their funding, or whether the Government has the capacity to manage those funds directly. What do you believe is the best way forward?

UNICEF has a programme of cooperation with the Government of Afghanistan, and there is significant donor interest in education, in health, in the provision of water and sanitation. But we are hoping that donors will work together as well to ensure the long-term funding of these activities, and to ensure that other areas such as child protection programmes are also adequately funded.

As for how those funds should be channeled, we are working very closely with line Ministries to ensure that the most effective mechanisms are used, to get funds quickly to the programmes that need them, and ultimately to the people of Afghanistan.

The discussion about the relationship between donors, the UN and the Government in terms of funding is ongoing, as all parties are committed to effective, transparent and accountable systems. In the meantime, what matters is that the work is done –and together we will find the best systems that allow services to reach women and children quickly and with maximum impact.

5. Why UNICEF attaches so much importance to education right now? How successful has UNICEF been in getting children, especially girls, back into school?

Afghanistan has one the highest proportion of school-age (7-12) children in the world: about 1 in 5 Afghans is a school-age child. Despite success in sending children to school, trends in gender disparity in education remains worrisome. For instance, the literary rate for young women (aged 15-24) is only 18 per cent, compared to 50 per cent for boys. The primary school completion rate for boys is 32 per cent versus 13 per cent for girls. In terms of cohort tracking, only 30 percent of girls (age 12 years) reach Grade 5, compared to 56 per cent for boys. (Source: Best Estimates of Social Indicators for children in Afghanistan, 1990-2005).

In addition, it is not just UNICEF that is working to get children into school, and ensure they remain there. The Government has been leading this effort, and can claim the credit for the millions of children who attend schools across the country. UNICEF has been pleased to support this, through provision of school materials and more importantly helping with the development of new primary grade curriculum and teacher training.

The challenge is how to reach those children – especially girls – who are still not in school, and ensure that children enrolled in classes do not begin to drop out. The efforts we are making to improve the curriculum and quality of teaching, and our work with others on the Healthy Schools Initiative that will hopefully make the physical environment of schools more child-friendly and healthier, will do much to maintain and improve attendance rates.

In addition, we need to address the 1.2 million primary school age girls who remain at home every day. We are working with communities to find options that allow them to educate their girls closer to home. We are developing women's literacy programmes

that will help to create more female teachers. And we are supporting national awareness campaigns to explain the long-term benefits of education for all. Until we see every child in primary school, we cannot claim to be fully successful.

6. What about all these attacks on schools; this must be a major concern? Why are schools being attacked?

UNICEF is concerned that these incidents – and the intimidation in some communities aimed at stopping families sending girls to school – could undo some of the excellent work undertaken so far in the education sector. UNICEF believes that the solution to these challenges has to come from the communities themselves; and UNICEF has been and continues to be in discussion with local leaders, village elders and religious leaders, to identify ways in which education can be continued. We stand ready to support any initiative that will keep children learning in safety.

As for why these attacks are taking place, I don't think anyone has the real answer. Schools of course are a visible sign of reconstruction and progress, and there are those who perhaps fear such progress. What I do know is that communities want to see their children get an education, they recognize the value of learning – and that is underlined by the millions of children who are returning to school, or starting school for the first time, this week.

7. If Afghanistan, after Sierra Leone, has the worst maternal mortality in the world, can you really reduce the rates significantly?

Yes we can. But it will take time. Maternal mortality is a complex issue that goes beyond that of health alone. It is linked to poor education, it is linked to access, it is linked to families' awareness and understanding of a woman's status in society. It is linked to poverty, and it is linked to traditional practices such as early marriage.

We can only reduce maternal mortality if we invest in all those issues. Again, it is about making the right choices about where one targets resources – if we invest in girls' education and women's literacy, if we invest in advocacy with fathers, if we encourage families not to allow their girls to marry early, if we invest in improving the general status of women by encouraging employment opportunities, if we increase opportunities for women to enter the medical and education professions, then yes we can reduce maternal mortality and we can tackle the unacceptable statistic that at least 50 women die every day in this country from preventable problems during their motherhood.

These are all issues that UNICEF and the Government are working on together, and I am confident that we will begin to see positive results from these efforts over the period of the three year programme that we have recently signed with the Government.

8. We have heard a lot about the silent emergency for women and children in Afghanistan. How does the situation compare to other countries in South Asia, and what are the main priorities to tackle this emergency?

When 600 children under the age of 5 die every day in a country, from preventable causes, it is clear that there is an emergency facing the population. Because those children don't die in front of the television cameras, their plight is often unnoticed. It is

also a complex and social emergency, in that there are a number of factors that cause so many children to die. Added to that, Afghanistan has suffered the most prolonged period of civil conflict of any country in this region, and the associated collapse of infrastructure, lack of investment, poverty, and social inequality that such conflicts create. The mass return of former refugees adds to the complexities.

All of this does make Afghanistan unique within the region. However, the responses are not necessarily so unique. If we invest in education, if we invest in integrated child health care – so children receive a range of services in one place, at one time, close to their communities – if we combine hardware interventions such as provision of clean water with software initiatives such as hygiene education, if we work with our Government partners to build their ability to design, implement and manage programmes for women and children, then we can provide an effective response to this silent emergency.

Equally important is that we reach out to the provinces where the problems are more extreme out there; in the rural communities, in the areas affected by harsh climates, in the areas where services are not being provided. UNICEF is committed to a provincial approach, targeting its support to the areas that need it most, using the indicators on child development as a guide, and working closely with communities and local authorities on the ground to help reduce the inequalities, and remain in touch with those who are most affected by Afghanistan's silent emergency.

9. What is UNICEF doing about child labour and street children, child trafficking or early marriage? (a common question)

UNICEF estimates that up to one-third of primary school age children are involved in some forms of labour. In a country affected so much by poverty, and where traditionally children have had a role to play in supporting the daily life of the family, this comes as no surprise.

Child trafficking is also related to the economic challenges faced by many families, and the fact that there are those willing to exploit those challenges to take children away from their families. Basic criminality is also a factor.

Early marriage is not uncommon in Afghanistan, and we need to find ways to demonstrate the dangers of this practice to families and their daughters, not just in terms of the wasted opportunity for that girl, but the incredible threats to her health should she become a mother before her body is ready.

UNICEF is working with the Government to try and address some of the longer-term causes of child labour, child trafficking and early marriage.

We are supporting a pilot project here in Kabul that aims to identify vulnerable families, and provide professional social work support to those families in an effort to find ways to prevent families being forced to rely upon a child's income, or having to marry their daughter early. We are looking at ways of helping older young people – those in their early teens – who have either never been to school, or who have dropped out of classes – to learn practical skills, alongside literacy tuition, that will enable them to find constructive employment and a basic education and avoid the risk of them being drawn

into illegal activities to earn money. More than 7,000 such young people have been involved in these UNICEF-supported programmes since 2004.

At the heart of all these issues lies education. A child, who has to work, will be denied an education. A child without an education has limited opportunities as an adult, and is more likely to enter adulthood in poverty, or become a child bride. An adult faced by poverty will have more need for his child to work to support the family, or be tempted by the traffickers. UNICEF is trying to break the cycle, by giving families a chance to educate their children, while at the same time helping future parents to reach adulthood with an improved chance of self-sufficiency.

The Government has adopted a number of National Plans of Action on protection issues, including ones on child trafficking and child labour. However, we need to ensure that the Government and its provincial departments now have the funds and technical support needed to put these plans into action. A piece of paper will not save a child – only tangible action can do that, and that is why I am using my visit to highlight the needs that our partners still face in ensuring that all children receive the necessary protection from abuse and exploitation.

10. In lieu of the collapsed infrastructures, the dire need for reconstruction in places like Kabul, and the sufferings brought on by the current drought, why does UNICEF choose to fund Women's Literacy and Maternal Health? Isn't health, shelter, immunization and hunger more important?

UNICEF has a very extensive programme in Afghanistan that includes both emergency response and development programming. As a result, UNICEF is working in all of these areas. So, while we are working to address the urgent humanitarian needs of the children and their families, we are also working with an eye to the long term future of the country – to building an Afghanistan fit for children. These two specific projects have the potential of improving the lives of Afghan women and their children. UNICEF has long made the connection between maternal and child health; having a healthy mother provides a child with the best start in life. Broader efforts to improve the quality of family life include improving the status of women through the promotion of literacy. Women with some formal education are more likely to have their children immunized and be better informed about their own and their children's nutritional requirements. They are also more likely to have their children remain in school for longer periods of time, furthering their children's education and helping to reduce generational cycles of poverty and disease and provide the means for sustainable development. With this project, UNICEF is working with the Afghan people to provide a better future for themselves and their children.

2007- Health and Nutrition

The major efforts will be directed towards polio eradication. Measles and TT campaign will be conducted in 21 provinces that have not been covered yet. Assisting in development of legislation and regulatory framework for universal iodized salt consumption. One additional salt iodization plant will be set up in Kandahar through private public partnership. focus on nation-wide deworming of school aged children and provision First Aid Kits to schools. HIV/AIDS project will facilitate the National HIV/AIDS Control Programme to develop a comprehensive behaviours change communication package and initiate interventions targeting youth and high-risk groups.

2007- Basic Education and Gender Equality

UNICEF aims to enrol an additional 400,000 girls in schools
To improve the quality of education through construction of 200 cost-effective schools, revision of curriculum and development of textbooks for some subjects of grade seven to nine
orientation of 30,000 teachers on child-centred and gender-sensitive new curriculum and textbooks
empowerment of 62,500 women with literacy course.

2007- Child Protection

UNICEF, in close coordination with UNODC supported the AIHRC to undertake a rapid assessment on children in detention covering 11 provinces. The study will be completed in 2007 and will provide baseline information on areas where urgent programmatic interventions are required.

2007- Water and Environmental Sanitation (WES)

over 700,000 school children will benefit from easy access to improved drinking water sources and basic sanitation facilities and key hygiene messages. More than 340,000 caregivers shall practice improved hygiene behaviours. Necessary training shall be provided to partners including 3,000 teachers on water, sanitation and hygiene related issues as part of capacity building.