

## Afghanistan

### Part 1: Situation update in the country

As the world ushers in the year 2019 and marks 30 years of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Afghanistan will be entering 40 years of unrest and conflict. These four decades have left an indelible impact on the country's children. The year 2018 was especially challenging, with a spike in violence, unprecedented levels of drought and food insecurity, increased poverty and fledging social systems. It was marked by a higher number of security incidents compared to past years, with suicide bombings, aerial strikes and increased insecurity on the roads. Significant conflict-related death tolls, estimated at 50 per day, became commonplace in Afghanistan, with devastating impact on civilians, including children. The first three-quarters of 2018 saw a 26 per cent increase in verified incidences of grave violations against children compared to the whole of 2017 (2,477 in 2017, 3,110 in Jan-Oct 2018). Overall, from January to September 2018, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) documented 8,050 civilian casualties (2,798 deaths and 5,052 injured) reflecting a five per cent increase for civilian deaths and a 3 per cent decrease in civilians injured. An average of 9,500 trauma consultations were reported each month for the period January to September 2018, which represents a 24 per cent increase over the same period in 2017. Children formed 90 per cent of civilian casualties due to explosive remnants of war, being exposed to death or disability, with a substantial number becoming orphaned. The situation of children orphaned because of conflict and violence still needs to be better understood.

Over the first three-quarters of the year, most civilian casualties resulted from suicide attacks and complex attacks, which increased both in frequency and in lethality to civilians, followed by ground engagements. Strategic roads that link the different regions and provinces of the country became highly insecure, reducing access not only for programme implementation and monitoring, but also hindering and delaying arrival and dispatch of programme goods and supplies. This situation not only adds complexity to the programme environment, but also further hampers children's access to basic social services.

Politically, parliamentary elections took place as scheduled in October 2018, despite some organizational, technical and security difficulties. However, elections were not held in one province because of active fighting. Of the approximately 5,000 polling centres which served also as voter registration sites, over 50 per cent were in schools. UNAMA reports indicated that on the three days on which voting in the parliamentary elections took place, violence targeting voting and polling centres caused 435 civilian casualties (56 deaths and 379 injured) in 108 verified incidents of election-related violence. This was the highest level of civilian harm compared to the four previous elections held in Afghanistan. Moreover, throughout the voter registration period, schools were targeted with improvised explosive devices and suicide attacks, and teachers were threatened. This resulted in school closures in some areas, and reluctance of parents to send their children to school, impacting temporarily about 500,000 children during the year, with girls' schools disproportionately affected.

The Geneva Ministerial Conference on Afghanistan held in November 2018 came at a time when opportunities for peace were severely tested by the daily widespread violence across the

country. The conference aimed at renewing the partnership and cooperation between the Afghan Government and the international community for the country's peace, prosperity and self-reliance. A strong call for concrete and sustainable peace in Afghanistan was a common point emphasized by all members of the international community. The Government expressed its readiness for peace without preconditions. At the Conference, the President announced the formation of a 12-person team to negotiate peace with the Taliban. This was in addition to several regional and international efforts towards peace in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan's economic growth for 2018 is projected by the World Bank at 2.4 per cent. At the same time, new data through the 2016/17 Afghanistan Living Condition Survey released in early 2018 showed that 54.5 per cent of people in the country lived below the national basic needs' poverty line. Poverty reduction has therefore become a priority at the highest level of Government, including job creation and strengthening national capacities for generating and analysing data on poverty. Ongoing analysis by the National Statistics and Information Authority indicated that more than half of Afghans are affected by multidimensional poverty, with manifestations of poverty varying across the country. Afghanistan, however, faces serious challenges in reducing poverty, given prospects of political instability around ongoing and upcoming elections, as well as continued conflict and violence. Even if growth is expected to accelerate to around 3.7 per cent in 2021, the high population growth in Afghanistan (estimated at around 2.7 per cent) means that a much faster growth rate is required to significantly improve incomes and livelihoods for the majority of the population, or provide jobs for approximately 400,000 young Afghans entering the labour market every year.

The sanctions imposed on Iran had a direct impact on the situation, especially in the western region. A record number of 708,000 undocumented returnees from Iran were registered from January until end November 2018, compared to 22,000 undocumented returnees from Pakistan over the same period. The reduction in monthly remittances could have significant economic impact on families. Many returnees come back to few jobs, an ongoing drought and weak basic social services. Unaccompanied minors are among those coming back, with 60,186 so far in 2018.

Drought afflicted more than two-thirds of Afghanistan with negative impacts on the agricultural sector. It has left around 3.6 million people across the worst-affected provinces in need of life-saving assistance, including emergency food and livelihoods support. About 280,000 persons were displaced because of the drought. As of November 2018, some 3.3 million people were experiencing emergency levels of food insecurity, according to the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC), representing a 74 per cent increase since November in the previous year. Already impoverished households, especially in the western province of Badghis came under increasing pressure of reduced incomes and already indebted families had to resort to negative coping mechanisms to deal with their poverty, with children paying the price. There were 162 child marriage/betrothal cases among the internally displaced population registered between July and October 2018, with the key triggers being loss of property, assets, livestock and livelihood. A rapid SMART survey conducted in Badghis province in July 2018 found that among children aged under five years, global acute malnutrition was 19.7 per cent and severe acute malnutrition at 5.7 per cent, rates which exceed emergency thresholds.

Diarrhoea, acute respiratory infections, pneumonia and skin infections were all major illnesses affecting children in drought-driven internally displaced persons' settlements, increasing their risk of malnutrition and communicable diseases. Reports also indicated that due to the low temperatures, as many as 25 per cent of children often discontinued their education, even in

areas where temporary classrooms were available, as these cannot be heated due to the risk of fires.

All these adverse political, economic, security and climatic conditions rendered children in Afghanistan more vulnerable than ever and threaten the future of a whole generation.

Despite the dire situation, some positive changes for children have occurred. Remarkable gains have been made by Afghanistan over the past decade in reducing child mortality by half. Yet, there are several challenges that still need to be overcome. Routine immunization remains low, with one in two children still un-immunized, putting not only the lives of under-vaccinated children at risk, but also everyone around them. A major contributing factor is the insecurity in parts of the country that reduces access for health workers to reach children and their families. Most vaccinations (65 per cent) take place at health facilities, and with the rural scattered across valleys and mountains it is difficult to reach them with health services, except through outreach and mobile services. Other factors include an inadequate proportion of female vaccinators (32 per cent), sub-optimal monitoring with limited resources allocated to supervision, weak communication and social mobilization around immunization, and a general lack of accountability. More attention needs to be given to vaccination in urban areas to increase coverage from the current 53 per cent to 100 per cent.

Furthermore, there has been much progress within the Afghanistan health system in the last fifteen years. However, Afghanistan continues to have a fragile and challenging health care environment for women and children and still has among the highest maternal and newborn mortality rates globally. In 2018, the United Nations Interagency Group for Child Mortality Estimation (UN IGME) reported rates of newborn mortality of 39 per 1000 live births, with maternal mortality estimated at 396 maternal deaths per 100,000 completed pregnancies as of 2015. Afghanistan also still has among the worst coverage of maternal and child health services in the world. Key indicators remained low, such as receipt of at least four visits of antenatal care (18 per cent); women who delivered in a health facility (51 per cent) and those who received care from a skilled birth attendant (54 per cent). Only 17 per cent of women received any postnatal care, and that for newborns was just 9 per cent, with major disparities and much poorer service provision in conflict-affected and remote areas. Other important barriers are poverty, and lack of decision-making power of women within the family.

Although there was an upsurge of polio cases in 2018 - 21 cases - most of which were in the southern regions of the country, it is important to note that 96 per cent of the country is polio-free. The increase in polio cases was driven by evolving challenges, including persistent bans on the house-to-house strategy and an increasing mistrust and fatigue towards vaccinations, particularly in areas where communities remain broadly underserved with other essential services.

Afghanistan has one of the world's highest rates of stunting in children under five years of age (41 per cent). The rate of wasting is also high at 9.5 per cent. With the drought this year, 22 of 34 provinces were classified as an emergency with global acute malnutrition rates over 10 per cent with some provinces being over 15 per cent. Inadequate dietary diversity and insufficient amounts of food, coupled with poor hygiene also contributed to health risks and the deaths of older children. Only 16 per cent of Afghanistan children aged 6–24 months received the right variety of food and feeding frequency appropriate for their age (minimum acceptable diet), which has been a key driver for chronic nutrition deprivations amongst children. Only half of Afghan babies were exclusively breastfed up to six months of age, and their potential exposure

to contaminated liquids or foods places them at greater risk of contracting threatening illnesses like pneumonia and diarrhoea. In order to break the lifecycle of undernutrition – an undernourished adolescent will become an undernourished mother, who will give birth to a low weight infant, who is more likely to become a stunted child– it is vital to prioritize services on maternal and adolescent nutrition. Rates of anaemia are at or above 30 per cent for both adolescent girls (29.9) and women of reproductive age (40.4) and must be reduced if improvement in the overall nutritional status of children in Afghanistan is to be achieved.

An estimated 66 per cent of the Afghan population has access to clean drinking water through improved drinking water sources that are protected from outside contamination. This is a marked progress from a decade ago when drinking water reached only 20 per cent of people. Only 26 per cent of the population used improved and safe sanitation. Data from the Education Management Information System 2015-2016 revealed that 50 per cent of schools lacked access to improved drinking water and 33 per cent lacked functional sanitation facilities.

Gains were made this year in positioning UNICEF as a knowledge broker and lead advocate for children. The key findings of the first-ever out of school children's report in Afghanistan published by UNICEF highlighted that just under half (44 - 45 per cent) of children aged 7-17 years old (3.7 million) were missing out on school. The situation is even worse for girls. Some 60 per cent of the out-of-school population are girls (2.2 million girls), and in the most vulnerable areas in the country, they account for up to 85 per cent of the total out-of-school population. Other children who were either out of school or are at risk of dropping out include those living in rural or insecure areas, nomadic displaced and working children, children living in poor families, and children whose household head has no education. For those at risk of dropping out, there were no differences between girls and boys among primary school aged children, while at lower secondary level, girls were twice as likely to drop out. Estimates showed that only 1 to 2 per cent of children attend early childhood education programmes.

The first-ever comprehensive study on child marriage, *Changing the Narrative*, released in 2018 indicated that the practice remains high, even though it dropped by 10 per cent over a span of five years. The security situation, poverty, deeply embedded beliefs and social norms put girls at a disadvantage. In general, there is a narrow understanding of the negative impact of child marriage on girls. Often, attention is focused on the health-related impact of child marriage, with a limited understanding of the impact on education, nutrition, and girls'/women's participation in economic development. The same study showed that in 42 per cent of households at least one member of their family got married before the age of 18. Significant regional disparities exist, varying from 21 per cent of households in Ghor to 66 per cent in Paktia. The study also highlighted that in 78 per cent of households, fathers were the main decision-makers on issues related to marriage, while 56 per cent of respondents agreed that those to be married must be consulted.

Progress was also seen in the protection of children against violence, with the number of government-funded social workers (22 per cent female) doubling in 2018. The Government aims to achieve a 50:50 ratio in 2019. However, the comprehensive Child Rights Protection Law (also known as Child Act) has still not been passed by Parliament, though it has been endorsed by the majority. In 2018, some 130 children were arrested as enemy combatants with anti-government elements, while 1,100 children were detained in Juvenile Rehabilitation Centres.

2019 will be an important year, with the Presidential elections scheduled for July in a context of

increased regional commitment to the stability of Afghanistan, cautious optimism around the peace talks with non-government elements, slow but steady economic growth, and reaffirmed support by the international community to the national transformation agenda of Afghanistan. These are all necessary measures to ensure maximum transparency, credibility, participation and security that are crucial to the peace and stability of Afghanistan, and the well-being of its children.

## Part 2: Major Results including in humanitarian action and gender, against the results in the Country Programme Documents

The Mid-Term Review of the 2015-2019 country programme for Afghanistan included an analysis of the alignment of its components with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the national priorities for children in Afghanistan. The following describes what was achieved during 2018 in line with the UNICEF 2018-2021 Strategic Plan and the national priorities for children in Afghanistan.

### Goal area 1: Every child survives and thrives

In 2018, over 1.5 million women who were pregnant and children under five years of age in conflict-affected areas across Afghanistan were provided with critical medicines, drugs, antenatal care and treatment of severe illnesses, including antibiotics and oral rehydration solution, through 84 mobile teams, exceeding the target of 1.35 million. In addition, 209 health facilities were provided with equipment and ambulances for referral of women and children to health facilities to manage serious illnesses. Following a 2017 supply assessment, newborn equipment was procured and distributed to 229 health facilities. The quality of health care provided by community health workers (CHWs) and midwives was improved through: 1) training on integrated management of childhood illnesses to 32,054 community health workers; 2) a community midwifery education programme implemented in two provinces; and 3) a business administration capacity development training programme for 20 provincial health managers across Afghanistan.

More than 1.2 million children under one year were vaccinated and six million women of child-bearing age continuously accessed immunization services through timely provision of vaccines and non-vaccine supplies. Cold chain equipment worth US\$2 million was provided to the Afghanistan Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) along with training for 300 staff (supervisors, cold chain technicians, managers) on vaccine cold chain management. UNICEF together with the World Health Organization (WHO) provided training to MoPH staff to introduce rotavirus vaccine in 2018. This was an important initiative to prevent deaths from diarrhoea, a leading cause of infant mortality in Afghanistan. Approximately 400,000 children received the rotavirus vaccine. Over 100 MoPH staff in all regions were trained to assess their vaccine management procedures (called Effective Vaccine Management training) to improve the quality of vaccine provision. UNICEF provided technical assistance to MoPH and WHO to conduct a nationwide measles campaign in October and November 2018, through which more than 13 million children aged nine months to 10 years were provided with measles vaccine.

To assist with strategic development, data and advocacy, UNICEF provided technical support to MoPH to develop the Reproductive Maternal Newborn Child and Adolescent Health (RMNCAH) Strategy, finalize a costed comprehensive newborn care plan and provided financial support to develop an expanded programme for immunization (EPI) communication

plan. The evaluation of the new integrated Afghanistan personal health record (Maternal and Child Health Handbook) was launched, and its multi-year national scale up plan initiated, funded by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) initiated. A national quality of care assessment for basic and comprehensive emergency obstetric and neonatal care was completed and the data used to identify areas for improved programme design. Institutional delivery rates increased by 5- to 10 per cent in three provinces following the completion of a cash transfer project to reimburse transport costs to improve maternal health service utilisation, carried out in partnership with MoPH. The World Bank and MoPH are scaling up this project to all 34 provinces in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan had 21 polio cases in 2018, localized in southern and eastern regions, where 15 and six cases were reported respectively. Despite this setback, 28 out of 34 provinces did not reported a polio case in 2018, demonstrating that the strategies outlined in the National Emergency Action Plan (NEAP) for Polio were successful in most of the areas.

The key feature of the ongoing transmission is the southern region's ongoing outbreak was mainly due to access-related challenges and refusals in and around Kandahar city. The most significant risk to the programme is the continued ban on house-to-house campaigns, in effect since May 2018, in major parts of the southern region. Out of a target of 1.5 million children in three provinces, the programme was not been able to reach 850,000 children. The eastern region was faced with repeated positive environmental samples along with six polio cases, unlike the southern region which is having internal circulation, with data strongly suggesting significant movement of the virus back-and-forth across the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.

With UNICEF's planning and coordination, financial resources and technical support, three National Immunization Days (NIDs) and six sub-National Immunization Days were implemented in 2018, synchronized with Pakistan, reaching 9.9 million children.

The Afghanistan Polio Programme continued to evolve and adapt to the changing situation and context. In November, UNICEF contributed to the development of a 'framework of change' under the leadership of the MoPH to address the barriers faced in polio eradication. UNICEF's key contribution to this framework will be through support to address the needs of the population living in those polio high-risk districts that have been inaccessible with an integrated package of basic services such as water, sanitation, education and nutrition.

In November, an external review of the communication strategy of the polio programme was undertaken by a team of experts. Recommendations will be rolled out in 2019 and incorporated into the 2019 NEAP. In the meantime, the polio programme continued to address missed children and refusals through cluster-specific approaches, including village and cluster refusal analysis for action, tracking of reasons for refusals, district-specific communication approaches and catch-up activities after campaigns through a large Immunization Communication Network in very high-risk districts. Key influencers were systematically engaged in tracking refusals such as Cluster-level Refusal Resolution Committees (involving local health workers and respected local mullahs), influential mullahs and imams, Swift Rapid Response Teams (including respected doctors and religious leaders) and regional meetings with influential doctors.

UNICEF addressed misinformation or rumours and information gaps that contributed to refusals. Strategies included tailored communication and other materials, an ambitious social media and online strategy to draw out negative misinformation, and engagement of cultural, religious, medical influencers to build a cadre of well-informed vaccine advocates.

In terms of addressing under-nutrition in children, UNICEF provided support to the Public Nutrition Directorate (PND) to finalize six key technical guidelines, including the National Nutrition Strategy, Integrated Management of Acute Malnutrition (IMAM) guidelines, Community-Based Nutrition Package, Micronutrient Guidelines and National Nutrition Surveillance Guidelines, which provide a common basis for partners implementing nutrition programming in Afghanistan. UNICEF also continued to support multi-sectoral programming, outlined under the Afghanistan Food Security and Nutrition Agenda. Its strategic plan was finalised and approved by the Council of Ministers to go to the Cabinet for final approval and adoption.

UNICEF actively participated in and advocated for strengthening information systems aligned with the Afghanistan Health Information Management System, successfully obtaining approval for key nutritional indicators to be integrated.

The Community-Based Nutrition Package was implemented in 15 districts. UNICEF led the implementation in two districts, reaching over 28,000 community members. UNICEF also provided technical support to the implementation of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) project on Integrated Health, Sanitation and Nutrition in the other districts. In 2018, there were increased services available for pregnant women and mothers of children aged 6-23 months in terms of one-on-one counselling on infant and young child nutrition, with over 1,000 women nutrition counsellors were recruited in 18 provinces. These are a new cadre of health workers established in 2017 and trained in 2018. With the positive evidence generated regarding the approach through an assessment supported by UNICEF in mid-2018 and advocacy efforts, the World Bank agreed to extend the initiative to all 31 provinces where health services are being implemented by Basic Package Health Service partners. For micronutrient supplementation, 8,089,525 (83 per cent coverage) of children aged 6-59 months received Vitamin A supplement during polio NIDs. This was less than the 2017 coverage of 98 per cent, largely due to lack of access during polio NIDs.

A total of 1,163,746 (89 per cent) of eligible girls aged 10-19 years were reached with weekly iron folic acid supplementation (WIFS); lower than in 2017, when 98 per cent of girls in 34 provinces were reached. Efforts will be made in 2019 to understand perceptions related to WIFS and strengthen mobilisation and engagement of key stakeholders. The School Health Policy finalized in 2018 includes a WIFS component. UNICEF supported the participation of the Afghanistan Government delegation at the 2018 South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Regional Conference on Stop Stunting: the Power of Maternal Nutrition held in Nepal which provided a strategic opportunity to discuss and identify actions to accelerate the nutritional care of women during pregnancy and postpartum in South Asia. The Afghanistan Government has now prioritized maternal nutrition for 2019 in terms of policy commitment and requested for integration into the infant and young children nutrition guidance under revision.

During the year, 277,660 children less than five years of age (152,514 girls and 125,146 boys) received services for the treatment of severe acute malnutrition through 1,193 health facilities. This was 94 per cent of the target and 54 per cent of the burden of children affected. Services were scaled up to sub-health centre level as part of a key strategy in the emergency response in Badghis and some districts in the south. Ready-to-use therapeutic food was provided to all services delivered in-country with UNICEF support.

## **Goal area 2: Every child learns**

UNICEF continued in its role as Coordination Agency for the education sector, including lead among United Nations agencies and co-lead of the Education in Emergencies Working Group. In this capacity, UNICEF continued to facilitate the work of the Development Partners' Group and supported the Ministry of Education (MoE) and the Ministry of Higher Education in coordinating the National Education Strategic Plan (NESP) III Steering Committee and Human Resource Development Board. A comprehensive mapping of donor and development partners' involvement in education through 3Ws (Who, What, Where) was conducted, and greater synergies and complementarities were achieved through the development of an Annual Operational Plan for the sector.

An Out-of-School Children Study, launched in the second quarter of 2018 with the MoE, and which included country- and province-specific profiles and recommendations for decision-makers, was a key milestone. The study generated very wide media coverage and was used by senior government officials to highlight the importance of education in Afghanistan, and the reprioritization of intervention areas for 2019. Furthermore, Afghanistan took part in the Conference on Delivering the Learning Generation in South Asia, a partnership between the UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia and the Education Commission. This provided the MoE with tools and techniques that can be used to facilitate implementation of the ongoing Reform Agenda for Afghanistan's Education system.

Special attention was given to the enrolment and retention of most vulnerable children. Hence, the Government's efforts to roll-out community-based education were supported with the maintenance of 5,300 classes against a target of 4,800. A total of 36,369 students (53 per cent girls) transitioned to formal schools, and classes for 38,684 students continued in extended community-based school (CBS) classes beyond grade three. Furthermore, early learning classes for 14,416 children (60 per cent girls) were supported. To reduce supply side barriers, 518,047 textbooks were provided to 34 provinces for formal schools, and in 20 provinces for accelerated learning centres and CBS classes for students from first to sixth grade. Total learning materials for over one million children in community-based education, formal schools and children affected by emergencies were released to Provincial Education Departments for delivery to students. UNICEF also supported the MoE, MoPH and Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MoLSA) in the development of Early Learning Development Standards for the country.

A National Assessment Framework for Afghanistan was developed, validated and endorsed, with a contract signed with the Australian Council for Educational Research for its implementation. UNICEF continued to work with the United Nations Educational, Scientific, Cultural and Educational Organization (UNESCO) on the ongoing Curriculum Reform, particularly the development of subject-specific syllabi for grades 1-6. As part of efforts in increasing the female teachers' workforce, 682 female teachers against 829 targeted for 2018/19 benefitted from the Girls' Education Access to Teacher Education (GATE) scholarship programme.

In terms of getting every girl into school, UNICEF supported the MoE in finalizing the girls' education policy. The policy mandates continuous and consistent efforts to close the gender gap in school enrolment, to bring out-of-school girls into the education system, and to commit the MoE to affirmative action for girl students and female education personnel. Two phases of Gender-Responsive Planning and Budgeting workshops, which included general consultations and analysis of contextualised causes and barriers to girls' education, were conducted at

national and provincial levels, with 579 representatives from 33 provinces participating.

Continuing support for adolescents, especially girls, remained a key priority. Against a target of 15,000 adolescents, 13,355 (49 per cent females) received training on skills for life. This aimed at strengthening capacities to make better-informed decisions and cope with issues that affect their lives. Adolescent and Youth Networks, active in five regions were involved in targeted awareness-raising campaigns at local, provincial and national levels. They are comprised of groups of adolescent girl and boy champions who are seeking positive change through engaging with their marginalized peers. Efforts to accelerate girls' education need to trigger a social movement, drawing on participation of grassroots civil society organizations, influencers and the use of several means of communication.

### **Goal area 3 – Every child is protected from violence and exploitation**

Within the complex context of Afghanistan, protecting children from violence, exploitation and abuse remained a major area of focus for UNICEF.

Under the aegis of the Child Protection Action Networks (CPAN) Sustainability Strategy, UNICEF supported MoLSA in assuming greater financial responsibility and oversight of CPANs. This resulted in approximately half of the 34 provincial CPANs staff salaries being funded by MoLSA by the end of 2018. MoLSA-funded social workers doubled in 2018, increasing to 152 from 71 in 2017. The Ministry of Finance allocated for the first time a total of US\$500,000 from the national budget for the Child Protection Secretariat, following advocacy from MoLSA. During the year, MoLSA also regulated case management and standardized social workers' jobs.

Following the dissemination of the study into Child Marriage in Afghanistan: Changing the Narrative, commissioned by MoLSA and funded by UNICEF, the Government organized several round tables to discuss the data. This resulted in Government's commitment to create more Child Helplines which receive a proportionally high number of calls related to child marriage. MoLSA and partner's engagement also intensified in communities with higher prevalence of child marriage.

With UNICEF support, Kabul University previously became the first ever academic institution in Afghanistan offering a Bachelor of Social Work degree. The first group of 25 graduates were hired by MoLSA immediately after their graduation in February 2018.

UNICEF's advocacy and support led to all tertiary hospitals in Kabul fully implementing the new MoPH regulation requiring registration of children at birth. Over 90 per cent children born in these hospitals were registered. The national roll-out of this regulation to other provinces is planned for 2019. With UNICEF's financial support, the Afghanistan Central Civil Registry Agency developed an offline birth registration database and registered 408,628 children from January to October 2018.

To strengthen justice for children, UNICEF continued advocating with the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) for adoption of alternatives to detention for children. A Child-Friendly Policing course which was developed with support of UNICEF was included in the formal curriculum for police. In December, the MoJ finalized and endorsed the Guidelines for Child-Friendly Due Process, with the roll-out to Judges planned for 2019.

With support from the European Union, UNICEF continued to provide services for family tracing, family reunification and case management to unaccompanied minors returning from abroad. During 2018, there were 3,081 unaccompanied minors who received family reunification and reintegration services through UNICEF direct support. Approximately 60,000 Afghani men, women and children/adolescents were engaged in communication activities related to unsafe migration. The biggest challenge in dealing with children returning from Iran has been their reintegration. Many return to Iran largely because of increasing poverty levels and elevated levels of unemployment and livelihoods.

In terms of building child protection structures at community level, the CPANs were evaluated by UNICEF and a response plan developed. The capacity of these networks varies across Afghanistan. More efforts need to be made to strengthen CPANs and clarify the role of MoLSA and other ministries contributing to basic services and protection of children.

In 2018, UNICEF and the United Nations Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) continued to regularly report on grave violations and contribute to Global Horizontal Notes and the reports of the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General on Children Affected by Armed Conflict. The first three-quarters of 2018 saw a 26 per cent increase in verified incidences of grave violations compared to the whole of 2017 (2,477 in 2017, 3,110 in January-October 2018). Special efforts were made to monitor the impact of violence-related elections on schools given that more than 50 per cent of the voters' registration and voting centres were in school premises. UNICEF advocated strongly alongside UNAMA and other partners in child protection such as the Norwegian Refugee Council for safeguarding schools from election-related violence and other forms of attacks against education.

During 2018, 130 children were arrested as enemy combatants with anti-government elements. With intensive advocacy by UNICEF and UNAMA, 90 children confirmed to be younger than 18 years were moved from the adult prison to the Juvenile Rehabilitation Centre (JRC) in Kabul. They received the same packet of services, including psychosocial support, counselling, education, vocational training, family mediation and family reintegration) as the other children detained in 34 JRCs across the country. More efforts will be made to ensure access of those children to free legal aid.

To assess the effectiveness of the strategies adopted for reducing child recruitment, UNICEF Afghanistan commissioned a study on the 34 Child Protection Units established in the regional police recruitment centres, with the findings expected in 2019.

In 2018, the Government of Afghanistan completed its Combined Second, Third and Fourth Periodic Reports on the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), following the previous report of 2008. It was submitted to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in June. Additionally, the Government completed Afghanistan's first Report on the two CRC Optional Protocols; to be approved by the high-level Steering Committee and submitted in 2019.

A major achievement in aligning domestic legislation with the Convention took place in July with the passing of Alternatives to Detention Law (addendum to the Criminal Code). However, the comprehensive Child Rights Protection Law (also known as Child Act) that fully domesticates the Convention on the Rights of the Child into the national legal framework, and the amendments to the Family Law that increase the legal marrying age to 18, remained in the Parliament and were not passed.

Key government partners in child protection include MoLSA, MoJ, Ministry of Interior, the Directorate of Human Rights at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Hajj and Religious Affairs, the Ministry of Refugees and Returnees, the Afghanistan Central Civil Registration Agency, and key national and international non-government organizations (NGOs). Close collaboration was also maintained with the Human Rights Division of UNAMA, as well as the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission.

#### **Goal area 4: Every child lives in a safe and clean environment**

The Government of Afghanistan, led by the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD) and in coordination with MoPH and MoE, continued to provide overall leadership and coordination for the water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) sector. The sector technical group, national steering committees, WASH cluster coordination, and water sector donors' group remain key fora for strategic sector dialogue and coordination. UNICEF continued to be a major sector player, actively engaging in strategic dialogue with Government and donor partners to strengthen the WASH enabling environment, and to deliver services. In addition to UNICEF, other key WASH actors include USAID, the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, the European Union, Finland, Korea, JICA and NGOs.

UNICEF made significant contributions to sustaining the status of the national WASH sector coverage in rural areas and supporting improvements in other key areas. A total of 117,115 people (94 per cent of the target) from 88 communities across 17 provinces gained access to an improved drinking water source, due to UNICEF's direct contribution during the year. This represented a significant shift towards more sustainable water supply systems with gravity-fed and solar-powered piped systems. Some 1,115 communities (185 per cent of target) were declared open defecation free (ODF), covering 467,274 people in 11 provinces, with five full districts declared ODF.

With regards to humanitarian response, UNICEF in coordination with other cluster partners provided WASH services to deprived and emergency-affected populations across Afghanistan, responding to 109 events. This accounted for 57 per cent of the overall cluster achievements. A total of 921,921 affected people gained access to safe water, 204,435 people (100,450 female) benefitted from gender-segregated sanitation facilities, 323,615 people (49 per cent female) received hygiene awareness and 223,902 people (32.5 per cent female) benefitted from the provision of family hygiene kits. The 2018 drought, resulting in water sources either completely drying up or the quantity of water significantly depleted, affected about 2.8 million people. This seriously impacted rural communities and resulted in displacement and increased risk of communicable diseases. UNICEF focused on provision of emergency water services as well as the establishment of long-term sustainable solutions such as water facilities in places of origin to address vulnerabilities to disasters and contribute to building resilience, potentially helping reduce rural-urban migration.

The capacity development of key government partners was undertaken to manage the implementation of the WASH programmes in the country. Through National Technical Assistants, placed in MRRD, MoPH and MoE, UNICEF provided more focused capacity building support to Government staff in planning, implementing and monitoring of WASH programmes.

Sustainable and innovative approaches, such as the design of climate-friendly solar-powered and gravity-fed water supply systems and the scaled-up community-led total sanitation

programme, were some of the focus areas of UNICEF's support to strengthen national and sub-national systems. Furthermore, UNICEF finalized a study on national and sub-national capacity assessment of the MRRD. The assessment aims to identify priorities and provide recommendations for targeted capacity building.

UNICEF provided technical and financial support to the Afghan Government delegation to participate in and learn from strategic regional and global forums. These included the Southern Asia Conference on Sanitation (SACOSAN) and the Mahatma Gandhi International Conference on Sanitation. UNICEF supported the MoE to develop a comprehensive School Health Policy, where WASH is one of the six policy directions providing for access to and use of safe drinking water, sanitation and hygiene services, and promotion of healthy behaviours.

In collaboration with Ministries of Women's Affairs, Religious Affairs and Public Health, UNICEF provided technical and financial support for the MoE to develop a comprehensive guide for teachers, a booklet titled *Wisdom of Girls Health and Success*, and a comic book for adolescent girls to address menstrual hygiene, which was launched in October 2018. This will be rolled out in up to 17 initial provinces, with a focus on female teachers and girls. The second Girl's Hygiene Day was celebrated under the patronage of the country's First Lady and the new materials on menstrual hygiene management guidelines were successfully launched. These materials are expected to contribute to the national efforts for overcoming barriers to girls' education.

#### **Goal area 5: Every child has an equitable chance in life**

During 2018 the Government took promising measures to strengthen availability of and capacity to produce data for children and establish a broader policy base for future child sensitive social protection measures. Foremost among them was the national Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI), approved in principle by the High Council for Poverty Reduction chaired by the President of Afghanistan in April.

UNICEF continued to work closely with the National Statistics and Information Authority to strengthen capacities for collection and use of data on children for evidence-based policy making. Technical assistance on multidimensional poverty was provided in collaboration with the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative and with support from the UNICEFROSA, including development of a national MPI and capacity building for Authority staff. Following consultations with line ministries which took place in August 2018, the MPI report is now in final stages and expected to be launched in early 2019.

The President has advised that the 2019 budget consider the Multidimensional Poverty Index, most likely during the mid-term review of the budget. The engagement on the MPI helped deepen the partnership with the Ministry of Economy and created a strategic entry point for engagement on public finance for children, particularly child-centred budgeting and expenditure analysis.

Following the discontinuation of the pilot cash transfer programme in Balkh Province in 2017 and the limited ability of UNICEF to engage on social protection in 2018, a priority for 2019 is to re-strategize the social protection programme with the MoLSA and relevant development partners. This will build on existing evidence and learning, as well as identifying pathways for reaching the most marginalized children with child-sensitive social protection services. Furthermore, UNICEF is mapping out potential entry points for renewed engagement, including

on humanitarian cash transfers, as a means of reducing the impact of the multiple shocks to which vulnerable population groups, especially children, are subject to because of the conflict, drought and other natural disasters in Afghanistan.

Evidence generation on the impact of social protection is in progress, with a contract signed for an impact evaluation of a small cash transfer initiative for the families of out-of-school adolescent girls, to be implemented under the Education programme in 2019. The evaluation will examine the effect of cash transfers on increasing secondary enrolment rates among girls and reducing the incidence of child marriage.

The Afghanistan SDG nationalization process is led by the Ministry of Economy. Initial analyses showed that children's indicators are not well reflected in the Afghanistan SDGs. More efforts will be done in 2019 to ensure this is effectively addressed.

In 2019, UNICEF will increasingly focus on harnessing the power of evidence as a driver of change, as well as leveraging resources and partnerships for children. While UNICEF has largely focused on strengthening the availability of data on children, there is a need for strengthening analysis based on available data to enhance advocacy for children.

## **Humanitarian response**

Several challenges were faced by Afghanistan during 2018 that led to an exacerbated humanitarian situation. The winter period saw a precipitation deficit of 70 per cent prevailing across most of the country, and the country experienced a deteriorating security situation with an increase in the number of civilians killed, making the conflict in Afghanistan the deadliest in the world during 2018.

To face these challenges, UNICEF Afghanistan scaled up its humanitarian response across the country but especially in the western provinces of Herat and Badghis which were most severely affected by drought. UNICEF and partners reached 1.6 million children, women and other emergency-affected people with humanitarian assistance. This included:

- Treating almost 250,000 severely acute malnourished children;
- Providing near 91,000 women and children with mobile health and nutrition services;
- Providing around 922,000 people with safe drinking water;
- Protecting more than 154,000 children from cold by giving them warm clothes and blankets;
- Providing over 85,000 children with psychosocial support, and;
- Assisting more than 93,000 (53 per cent female) children to access quality education in emergency situations.

UNICEF was among the first agencies to start responding to the drought crisis in the west of the country. The support of senior emergency staff on surge capacity from headquarters enabled UNICEF to support the Government in planning and delivering assistance. This was done in coordination with the key humanitarian actors and in close liaison with the government at both central and provincial level. A decision taken earlier by UNICEF Afghanistan to close its outpost in Badghis by the end of October 2018 due to shortage of funds was reversed. Approval was given by the UNICEF Regional Director to keep the Badghis office open until end of March 2019 and thereafter until the end of December 2019. UNICEF was the only UN agency that had an office and a guesthouse in Badghis. The flexibility to reverse this decision meant that other UN agencies were able to access the affected region and use the office and guesthouse as a base for their operations. The presence on the ground enabled UNICEF to

have first-hand information about the situation and enhanced risk-informed programming.

The UNICEF Representative also led an inter-agency visit to Herat at senior level (heads of agencies of International Organization for Migration (IOM), WHO, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and deputies of the World Food Programme (WFP) and the United National High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). This enabled them to see at first-hand the impact of the drought on the population and led to further strengthening of coordination and response to the crisis by the agencies involved. The UNICEF security team advocated and obtained the opening of the humanitarian space, enabling better monitoring of the humanitarian assistance being provided, and higher degrees of assurance as well as engagement with affected populations. In country inter-office surge staffing support to Herat and Badghis offices enhanced cost-effective rapid response on the ground.

UNICEF led the WASH and nutrition clusters and co-led the education cluster and the child protection sub-cluster, while contributing to the health cluster. UNICEF's efforts in leading the WASH and nutrition clusters were appreciated by Government, donors and partners. UNICEF also strengthened the capacities of cluster members and coordinated and advocated for flexible funding for the WASH and nutrition clusters, enabling them to reach two million people (77 per cent of their 2018 targets). The education sector only received 17 per cent of its humanitarian appeal funds. UNICEF Afghanistan therefore reprogrammed funds from its core resources to ensure the delivery of essential services.

During 2018, UNICEF Afghanistan continued to provide support for the returnees from Iran at the border for family tracing, reunification and case management of unaccompanied minors, in collaboration and coordination with the relevant government departments. Two initiatives taken included development of standard operating procedures and a clearer accountability framework between IOM and UNICEF. Both agencies work in this area of support to returnees from Iran. There was also a technical level meeting between the UNICEF Afghanistan and UNICEF Iran country offices to enhance coordination and streamline actions across both sides of the border.

In terms of funding, by the end of 2018, 15.7 per cent of the actual funds utilized by UNICEF Afghanistan had been in direct contribution to the humanitarian outcome of the country programme. This was slightly higher than the initially planned 15.3 per cent at the beginning of the year. This increase was in line with the realization of the country programme Mid-Term Review recommendation to strengthen its humanitarian response. Hence, UNICEF Afghanistan increased its planned humanitarian budget for 2018 to US\$32.8 million.

As UNICEF and partners moved ahead with implementation of the 2018 Humanitarian Action for Children (HAC) and 2018 Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP), the severe drought expanded its impact. This resulted in massive displacement of drought-affected people to Herat and Badghis provinces in the west of the country. Cluster partners demonstrated limited scale-up capacities, leaving considerable gaps in the areas of WASH, nutrition, education and child protection (winter support). This made UNICEF Afghanistan push through with its responsibility as the provider of last resort in these sectors. During the mid-year review of the HAC, UNICEF increased its appeal to US\$38.8 million, a 27 per cent increase compared to 2017. This required more aggressive fundraising and a boost in UNICEF capacity to manage bigger volumes of supplies procurement, logistics, contracts and cash flow, as reflected in the number of disbursements to partners. The final statistics at the end of the year showed that this boost in capacity was successfully managed, and UNICEF delivered on its core commitments to children in humanitarian situations.

A visit by the UNICEF Director of Programme Division and Director of Emergency Operations in New York and the Regional Director for South Asia was a significant opportunity to look at the humanitarian development continuum and its operationalization in Afghanistan. There are several areas in which the actions of UNICEF Afghanistan embody this continuum, including in nutrition, education and WASH.

## **Gender**

UNICEF Afghanistan finalized a Gender Programmatic Review in the second half of 2018 with the objective of strengthening gender integration in the country programme and identifying key gender mainstreaming priority areas in Afghanistan. Recommendations included analyzing key national policies with a gender lens, strengthening gender advocacy, addressing norms and stereotypes across sectors, and addressing violence against girls through cross-sectoral interventions. These recommendations will form the basis for development of a new UNICEF Afghanistan gender strategy and action plan in 2019. Following the gender review, gender mainstreaming training was conducted for 30 UNICEF staff in July, with two more workshops planned for 2019.

There are many sectoral gender-specific actions in the Afghanistan country programme. These include: weekly iron folic acid supplementation for adolescent school girls reaching 1,163,746 of the 1,305,087 targeted girls across 34 provinces; the focus on improving maternal health facilities and reducing maternal mortality, and; action against child marriage through the CPANs that exist in all provinces. The most significant component of sectoral gender action plans resides in the adoption of girls' education as one of the four flagship results of the country programme in line with the strategies of the UNICEF Strategic Plan and the Afghanistan national priorities. The most noteworthy are in terms of overcoming barriers to girls' education, and engagement of senior officials within Afghanistan – both women and men – in the call for girls' education. The out-of-school children study launched during 2018 served to identify the huge gap in the education of girls. It found that out of the 3.7 million children not in school, 60 per cent were girls. In some provinces - Uruzgan, Zabul, Helmand, Kandahar, Paktika, Logan and Wardak - up to 80 per cent were girls, and in Uruzgan province nearly all (96 per cent) of out-of-school children were girls. UNICEF followed this study with an analysis that looked at how conflict has affected the education of girls.

High level gender-related advocacy was also carried out by through the participation of the Regional Director for UNICEF in South Asia in a high-level panel on women's empowerment chaired by the First Lady of Afghanistan at the November Inter-Ministerial Geneva Conference on Afghanistan. During the high-level panel, UNICEF drew attention to basic education for girls as the foundation for women's empowerment through professional and vocational education and training.

In addition, the joint work undertaken by the Education and the WASH programmes in UNICEF with the Ministries of Public Health, Education, Women Affairs and Rural Rehabilitation and Development on training manuals on menstrual hygiene management was a major achievement, breaking the taboo about speaking in public about this sensitive topic. The presence of the First Lady at this event, as well as two Ministers who are both men and who talked openly about menstrual hygiene management was one way of engaging men in shifting social norms. The event received high level attention and media coverage.

In terms of gender parity among staff, the overall proportion of female staff is 22 per cent. However, this hides some differences in proportions between the various categories: 46 per cent of international staff, 19 per cent of national professional staff, and 15 per cent of general service staff are female. Longer-term actions to address gender parity include the highly successful intern programme, establishment of female staff for the first time in zone office locations such as Jalalabad and Kandahar, the support of an integrated crèche within the main Kabul office, and consultation with the Staff Association on encouraging a female-friendly environment.

### Part 3: Lessons learned and constraints

The year marked the second year of programme implementation following the Mid-Term Review in 2017. Afghanistan remained a complex and rapidly evolving context. Several lessons were drawn from the implementation of the programme this year, which will guide the work and role of UNICEF for the rest of the country programme cycle.

The first lesson was the need to exercise cautious optimism, as well as realistic and flexible targeting within the highly volatile and fragile situation in Afghanistan and the difficulties of the operating environment. Two examples are programming for polio eradication and roll out of the community-based nutrition package.

Following three years of progressive improvement in the overall polio situation as evidenced by a reduction in the number of polio cases from 23 in 2015, 13 in 2016 and 14 in 2017, the overall geographic restriction of poliovirus, steady improvement in campaign quality indicators, and improvements in population immunity and vaccine acceptance, the 2018 target was to stop transmission by the end of the year. However, during 2018 Afghanistan faced an upsurge in polio cases, accounting for 21 of the 29 cases of polio recorded globally. The majority of the cases were in the south of the country, where there has been a ban on house-to-house campaigns since May, as well as an increase in refusals. Prior to the ban, the number of inaccessible children was the lowest it has been in more than two years. The mobility of populations within Afghanistan and across the border with Pakistan continued to present a risk for the programme, particularly in the eastern region. This phenomenon contributed to new circulation registered in the province of Nuristan which had been polio-free since 2009. The deteriorating security situation, particularly in the south of the country, as well as the difficulties encountered in gaining access to some areas, contributed to increased restrictions, resulting in over one million children missing out on vaccination, with the inevitable upsurge in polio cases. It is important to note though that 96 per cent of the country is polio-free. Significant efforts continue to be made to try and resolve the resistance to house-to-house campaigns and to dialogue for uncompromised access. There is incredible pressure to get to zero cases by all global stakeholders. Setting realistic targets within a highly complex, volatile environment and ensuring thorough estimates of potential residual risks are crucial for the reputation of UNICEF.

In the case of the limited implementation of the community-based nutrition package in the field, this was largely due to the limited number and capacities of partners and the difficulties associated with working at community level in Afghanistan. The small size of communities coupled, with them being widely spread across difficult, hard-to-reach and sometimes impossible terrain, meant that many communities could not be reached with nutrition actions.

Within the One UN framework, UNICEF Afghanistan has tried as much as possible to look and consider Afghanistan as a development programme in a fragile context. During 2018, the key changes made in 2017 at the Mid-Term Review were found to be justifiable, notably the need to make a paradigm shift into “a continuum of development work, resilience-building, and scaled up humanitarian responses to children affected by both acute and protracted emergency situations”. This shift includes realistic and flexible target setting. This is something which UNICEF will continue to be more aware of in the future, if the current trends of the overall situation in Afghanistan continue.

The second lesson learned is the engagement of UNICEF Afghanistan in actions pertaining to the humanitarian-development nexus, as recommended by the Mid-Term Review. There are several examples, including the expansion of the paradigm of nutrition action to focus not only on treatment of children with severe acute malnutrition, but also to focus on prevention. This allows for eventual reduction of expenses related to treatment and focusing on more long-term solutions. This has been fully embraced by the Government, especially the Ministry of Public Health, as well as the national food security and nutrition agenda. Similarly, an important action undertaken this year in response to the drought situation in the west of Afghanistan was the introduction of the treatment of children with severe acute malnutrition to the level of the health sub-centre. This was a measure taken by UNICEF in the province of Badghis in western Afghanistan to enable the treatment of a larger number of children, since there were not enough health centres to deliver the services required. The action has proved to be quite successful so far. Advocacy efforts are underway, including with the World Bank, to take this to scale. Should the government buy-in continue, what started as an emergency action to deal with an increasing number of severely malnourished children in one area of the country could result in treatment of larger numbers across the country, and at lower cost.

Another good practice in the context of the drought response, in which the Child Protection Action Networks and the social workers that had both been nurtured by UNICEF as part of the regular development programme have been engaged in responding to the large-scale displacement that took place in Herat province due to the drought. The CPAN and the social workers became the forefront of identifying and addressing major child protection issues among the displaced children. The CPAN members moved to the internally displaced persons settlements and engaged with the communities to prevent negative coping mechanisms such as early marriage, child labour and child recruitment by armed groups and armed forces. This demonstrated the benefits of the development investment into such structures that were beneficial at the time of the crisis. The country programme has rich examples of humanitarian-development nexus for which support has been requested from UNICEF ROSA to document during 2019.

The third lesson learned in 2018 relates to positioning UNICEF as the lead voice and advocate and seizing relevant opportunities to speak out on behalf of children in Afghanistan. This includes both public advocacy by highlighting the situation of children in Afghanistan through the media – both national and international – and silent diplomacy through quiet advocacy with key influencers in Government and diplomatic circles. There was significant increase in public advocacy efforts with traditional and social media, especially with the compelling evidence provided by the Out-of-School Study, Child Marriage Study, assessment of humanitarian response and the menstrual hygiene management guidelines, most of which were either the first-ever or first in decades. These reports positioned UNICEF as a knowledge leader for children, duly recognized by the Government, donors and other partners. UNICEF was also vocal on the attack on schools and on children, and developed comprehensive question and

answers, quick facts and position papers on sensitive issues impacting on the rights and well-being of children. Silent diplomacy was key in navigating the polio eradication quagmire, engaging around children on the move and advocacy around the Afghanistan Child Protection Act, though the latter has still not been passed by Parliament. Despite the progress made, there is a need to speak out and engage more boldly on the rights and well-being of children. Some key lessons include the need to:

- 1 Invest in research and data management to distil reliable and credible data in a timely and efficient manner. This applies to all areas, but particularly for child protection, due largely to dysfunctional systems for data collection;
- 2 Mitigate a risk averse attitude which has been in place for many years because of the operating environment when it comes to speaking out;
- 3 More strategically invest in identifying, compiling and simplifying the key messages for which advocacy needs to be conducted.

For example, the considerable number of civilians and members of the national security forces killed in Afghanistan in 2018 has orphaned many children who may lose opportunities and be deprived of their basic right to a normal childhood and access to basic social services. There is no data relating to this, nor is there any clarity about what is offered to the children of those who are killed. Having such information would have enabled UNICEF to speak more on their behalf. The Group of Friends of Children Affected by Armed Conflict, which is headed by Sweden, progressively increased its engagement during the year to bring the agenda to the forefront and to foster stronger alliances to speak out on behalf of those children. Afghanistan remains a complex and dynamically evolving context which constantly requires strong political acumen on when and how to speak out as well as proactively responding to competing priorities. These priorities include the unprecedented levels of drought and the impact on vulnerable populations across the country, the significant spike in violence and deterioration in security, addressing polio eradication, as well as balancing of programme continuity and staff safety. While the country programme has focused on programme implementation and support to service delivery, advocacy and speaking out about and on behalf of children – a normative role of UNICEF – requires dedicated investment and capacities both at national and sub national levels.

The fourth lesson is about the importance of partnerships to achieve better results for children. In a country like Afghanistan with competing priorities for children, it is not possible to work without relying on partnerships. While the partnership with Government is steady and UNICEF works hard to strengthen it at central level in Kabul and in provinces, there is a need to explore and expand partnerships outside this domain. Efforts need to be made to work more with civil society at grassroots level. Many of the country programme and humanitarian results require some behavioural change, which must be addressed at the level of the community. Hence, civil society is an important and critical partner. There is also a need to forge a stronger partnership with the media so that the voice for children and their priorities is amplified. A partnership strategy with key influencers such as parliamentarians, religious leaders and the media will be put in place in 2019.

The fifth lesson learnt had been the added value of UN Volunteers and interns. This year the human resource team conducted six field visits to various tertiary institutions across the country sharing the work of UNICEF and the role of young people. This resulted in UNICEF hosting 26 interns this year, 19 of whom were female, and several of them were based in the field.

The sixth and arguably the most important lesson relates to working on the flagship results that

were adopted by UNICEF Afghanistan as a key outcome of the Mid-Term Review carried out in 2017, to ensure greater efficiency and effectiveness in achieving results for children. Strategic reflection was undertaken on the initial implementation of the flagship results approach in 2018, following the mid-year review. It revealed that achievement of those flagship results required **strengthening management**. Geographical convergence and siloed, multisectoral convergence (by listing and doing several activities together) was not enough to make the required change to deliver the flagship results for children. UNICEF Afghanistan therefore engaged the services of a consultant to undertake a review of the working modality on the flagships, supporting clear articulation of the what and how, including required shifts and the investment needed to drive results. Some of the changes proposed and adopted included a shift from multisectoral approaches, which maintains the silos, to intersectoral approaches, where the result is collectively owned across all sections; as well as the establishment of four intersectoral flagship task forces. The purpose of these task forces is coordination across programmes, sections and field office, as well as the identification, implementation, and monitoring of high impact, catalytic, intersectoral approaches and actions that will lead to the achievement of the flagship results.

The task forces will report regularly to the country management team on progress in overcoming barriers and moving towards the identified changes through the intersectoral approaches. They will also undertake joint resource mobilization and work closely with the communication, advocacy and civic engagement section to strengthen advocacy, raise awareness and mobilize Government, influencers and other partners on the prioritization of resources, investments and inter-sectoral collaboration among partners to achieve flagship results for children in Afghanistan. It is expected that these task forces will start meeting in 2019, with their performance closely monitored to obtain the desired results.

END/