ACHIEVING RESULTS for Afghanistan’s children

Child Protection
Every child is protected

Country Programme of Cooperation
UNICEF and the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan
2015-2021
Child Protection
Every child is protected

Context
Persistent armed conflict, natural disasters, displacement, a poor economy and harmful social norms expose Afghan children to violence and abuse.

Conflict-related violence has a devastating impact on children, who account for almost a third of all civilian casualties. In 2015–2018, the United Nations counted 12,600 child casualties, an 80 per cent increase from the preceding five years. Of these nearly 3,500 were killed and 9,100 maimed. In 2018, there were 192 attacks against schools—the highest number in over a decade.

Driven by conflict, poverty and climate change, many adolescents, especially boys, leave the country for a better life abroad. Since 2017, over 9,000 unaccompanied boys and girls have been returned from Iran and Pakistan and are vulnerable to human trafficking and other forms of abuse.

Humanitarian situations also worsen existing protection risks. Many girls are married before 18 years of age due to cultural

Key facts
- In 42% of households, at least one person is married before 18 years of age (Changing the Narrative 2018)
- 14,203 grave violations against children identified during 2015–2018. (Country Task Force on Monitoring and Reporting)
- Only 42% of children under five have birth certificates (DHS 2015)
- 74% of children aged 1–14 years have experienced violent discipline in the past month (MICS 2010–2011)

Targets
- Women aged 20–24 years who are married before 18 to be increased from 42% in 2014 to 28% in 2021
- Children under five whose births are registered to be increased from 42% in 2014 to 60% in 2021
- By 2021, 30,000 children who experienced violence to be reached by services
- Comprehensive child protection legislation and normative frameworks to be established for the first time, with the Child Rights Protection Law implemented by 2021
- Children accessing psychosocial support through child-friendly spaces to be increased from 10,000 in 2015 to 115,200 in 2021
- By 2021, 15,000 deported children from Iran and Pakistan to be reunified with their families
Afghanistan submitted its Combined Second, of the Child. In 2018 the Government of obligations, UNICEF supports the government to help Afghanistan fulfil its international legal age of marriage to 18. Rights of the Child. UNICEF is also advocating which incorporates the Convention on the passage of the Child Rights Protection Law, policy milestone, with UNICEF support, is the of the Alternatives to Detention Law. A major protect children’s rights, such as the passage of children and families, are deprived of education, rendered vulnerable to domestic abuse, and of bearing children when they are children themselves. Afghan girls are also vulnerable to honour killing, sexual violence and traditional practices such as badal (exchange) marriage.

Existing protection systems and services are fragmented and weak. There is widespread failure to promote and protect the rights of children, and rates of birth registration are very low. Children in contact with the law lack adequate protection, and are vulnerable to being recruited or targeted by government or opposition armed forces.

Learn more: https://www.unicef.org/afghanistan/child-protection

HOW UNICEF ACHIEVES RESULTS

UNICEF advocates for children’s rights, taking bold positions and seizing opportunities to speak on their behalf.

UNICEF is committed to safeguarding vulnerable children in Afghanistan’s complex environment, working to ensure that those in emergency situations receive the protection and support they need, and to build formal mechanisms that protect children’s rights everywhere. UNICEF also provides direct services to many children in urgent need of assistance.

Frameworks for protection

UNICEF advocates and provides technical support for policy and legal frameworks to protect children’s rights, such as the passage of the Alternatives to Detention Law. A major policy milestone, with UNICEF support, is the passage of the Child Rights Protection Law, which incorporates the Convention on the Rights of the Child. UNICEF is also advocating for amendments to the Family Law to raise the legal age of marriage to 18.


As co-chair of the Country Task Force on Monitoring and Reporting, UNICEF supports the systematic gathering of accurate and timely data on six grave violations committed against children in situations of armed conflict and advocates against the violations of children’s rights in armed conflict.

Better services

UNICEF supports services for the most vulnerable children through sustainable, government-owned protective systems. In 2018, 25 students graduated from Kabul University with Afghanistan’s first-ever bachelor’s degree in social work, established with UNICEF support, and were employed by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. With UNICEF advocacy, the first-ever government allocations for child protection doubled the number of social worker positions to 172.

UNICEF support includes regular psychosocial support through child-friendly spaces (benefiting 85,000 children in 2018), and case management and referrals to services for children in dire situations such as child labour or child marriage (benefiting 20,000 children in 2018).

The treatment of children in the justice system is a persistent concern in Afghanistan, with over a thousand children detained in 2018, including 221 boys detained for alleged association with armed groups and 799 children (13 girls) in juvenile rehabilitation centres, many for petty or moral crimes. UNICEF advocates for their treatment according to international standards on juvenile justice and provide services including psychosocial support, education, counselling, family mediation, leisure activities, vocational training, legal aid, and reintegration support. UNICEF also improves access to justice for children and strengthens law enforcement institutions through training on child-friendly policing and guidelines for judges on child-friendly due process.

Birth registration is essential to protect child rights and prevent underage recruitment. UNICEF supports the Afghanistan Central Civil Registration Agency to establish standardized procedures, and the Ministry of Public Health in instituting mandatory birth registration in hospitals. This was achieved in Kabul in 2018, and is being rolled out elsewhere.

Communities prevent harmful practices

UNICEF engages leaders in communities, religious leaders, local governments and civil society, driving social change to end harmful practices. Messages on prevention of child marriage and recruitment, and violence against children have reached more than 2 million people, while over 40,000 fathers and grandfathers have attended town hall meetings where harmful practices were discussed. UNICEF works with the Ministry of Hajj, providing information on child protection to religious leaders whose sermons reached half a million Afghans in 2018. Such messages create vital conversations within communities, spread awareness, and drive shifts in harmful social norms such as child marriage.

UNICEF advocacy is supported by evidence-gathering (such as a 2018 study on child marriage) to support community action and enhance measures such as child helplines which receive a proportionally high number of calls related to child marriage.
Child protection in emergencies

UNICEF leads the Sub-Cluster on Child Protection in Emergencies, providing a wide range of services for children affected by emergencies. In 2018, some 85,000 children received psychosocial support and over 6,400 children in conflict and natural disaster-affected areas were provided case management. Over 150,000 children received other forms of support, including distribution of winterization items.

Community-based Child Protection Action Networks (CPAN) played a significant role in the 2018–2019 drought response; for example, members moved to settlements for displaced families to identify and prevent negative coping mechanisms, demonstrating how development investment can benefit in humanitarian contexts.

UN agencies verified the recruitment of 272 children during 2015–2018, including through 34 child protection units established in Afghan National Police recruitment centres across the nation. With children accounting for 84 per cent of civilian casualties from explosive remnants of war, UNICEF works with the UN Mine Action Service to provide risk education and referral to appropriate services for injured children.

UNICEF advocates for the rights of children arrested on national security charges and provides services to reintegrate them into society.

The reintegration of unaccompanied minors returned to Afghanistan from Iran, Pakistan, Turkey, the Gulf states and Europe is a UNICEF priority. Both displaced children and economic migrants are provided psychosocial support, and family tracing, reunification and reintegration assistance. To date, 9,000 unaccompanied minors have been reunified with their families or relatives, and received support in the places of reunification.

Challenges & opportunities

Emergency response, including to drought, diverts resources and impacts on UNICEF child protection programming. While this can pose a challenge to programme implementation, emergency response also offers an opportunity to mobilize funds and identify best practices and has helped increase local awareness on negative coping mechanisms. Engagement with local organizations has also increased capacity and effectiveness.

The number of vulnerable children in Afghanistan exceeds both response and government capacity. This requires careful regular course corrections by UNICEF to maintain focus on activities with the greatest impacts.

Especially when access is limited, community networks are critical in collecting information on grave violations, and may be empowered to document, follow-up and advocate locally. While reporting may increase personal risk, this is mitigated through engagement and advocacy with local leaders.

At government level, UNICEF support has contributed to the development of policies and operating procedures (such as child friendly due process), creating platforms for future implementation. With Afghanistan’s first-ever government allocations to the child protection secretariat, UNICEF is supporting budget utilization and policy justifications for further allocations.

Budget

UNICEF Afghanistan’s budget for child protection in 2015–2021 is US$ 48 million. This excludes the humanitarian response budget.
Maryam lives in a village outside Bamyan city where most people are farmers or skilled labourers. Fathers here are the main decision-makers when it comes to marriage.

However, the family of the groom wanted to have the marriage quickly, which meant that Maryam had to leave school. She was not ready for this, but had no alternative.

Fortunately, one of her neighbours reached out to a CPAN team. With village elders, CPAN members talked to Maryam’s parents. Maryam’s engagement was cancelled and she was allowed to continue studying.

“When the elders in the village asked me to cancel my daughter’s wedding, I felt relieved,” says Maryam’s father. “I was following a tradition that we had had for years, but now Maryam’s case is putting an end to this tradition in our community.”

Maryam, from Bamyan province

Key alignments
Child Rights Protection Law 2019
National Action Plan on Ending Child Marriage 2017
National Strategy for Children at Risk 2006
National Justice Sector Strategy 2008
National Youth Policy 2013
Juvenile Code 2005
National Strategy for Street Working Children 2011
National Policy on Internally Displaced Persons 2014

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