

Protecting children on the move

MULTISECTORAL COORDINATION IN AFGHANISTAN DURING COVID-19

COUNTRY/COUNTRIES:

Afghanistan and Iran

PARTNERS:

Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs of Afghanistan, National Child Protection Action Network [CPAN], Save the Children, IOM, IRC, local NGO consortium, War Child UK, Afghan Humanitarian Fund, UNICEF partner organisations (Case Management Task Force, Child Protection Cluster) and UNICEF

THEMATIC AREAS:

Children on the move

COVERAGE OF SYSTEMS CHANGE:

Afghanistan-Iran border and other border sites in the country

KEY RESULTS:

In collaboration with the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs of Afghanistan and project partners, UNICEF undertook activities to address the increase of children on the move between Afghanistan and Iran during COVID-19. This has resulted in:

- 1) UNICEF scaling up its work from 15 to 19 provinces and two border points on the south and west borders of Afghanistan;
- 2) An increase in the number of children reached by various services supported by UNICEF due to the onset of COVID-19. For example, there has been an increase of 114.8% in the number of children provided with psychosocial support from the first year (17,992) to the second year of the programme (38,649), and an increase in the number of partners implementing interventions to support children on the move from the first year of the programme to the second year.

COVID-19 CONTEXT

COVID-19 is currently impacting countries around the world. Those with existing humanitarian needs driven by armed conflict, natural disasters and poverty, such as Afghanistan, often feel the impact of such crises more severely, given their fragile context. One of the most significant child protection issues in Afghanistan is the number of children on the move as a result of mass displacement, including unaccompanied children. Due to decades of conflict, millions of Afghans have fled their homes to neighbouring Pakistan and Iran. However, in recent years Afghanistan has also become a country of forced returns. In 2017, 150,000 people returned to Afghanistan from Pakistan, and 400,000 from Iran; many were unaccompanied children. COVID-19 has exacerbated this situation with more children returning to Afghanistan due to fear of economic hardships and deportations.

Iran was a COVID-19 hotspot in the early stages of the pandemic. This meant that the western Afghan region that borders Iran became a sensitive area and children who returned faced stigma and logistical challenges in accessing transport to their respective provinces in Afghanistan. Furthermore, due to quarantine restrictions and social distancing guidance, more space had to be allocated in temporary shelters.

Other impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic included a lack of means for families to adopt COVID-19 preventive measures upon the return of their children. This situation was worsened by inflation due to increased food costs for families. Additionally, access to safe transport was substantially reduced, which limited children's opportunities to reunite with their families in Afghanistan or to return to Iran if needed. These challenges put children at higher risk of not being able to attend school or falling into child labour.

Even before the pandemic, UNICEF worked on migration and children on the move issues across the country and particularly on the Iran-Afghanistan border. UNICEF is present in over 60 districts of 17 provinces, with two border points in the south and west borders with Iran, and some in the east where children arrive from Pakistan. This case study focuses on interventions provided to children on the move between Iran and Afghanistan as a result of COVID-19.

DETAILS OF PROMISING PRACTICE/ CRITICAL POINT OF CHANGE

As a response to the increase in child returnees due to the pandemic, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MoLSA) undertook an innovative project, with assistance from UNICEF as well as seven national and international NGOs, in all regions of Afghanistan. This partnership project aimed to respond swiftly to the needs of children on the move during COVID-19. The humanitarian coordination team developed a global plan for coordinating the humanitarian response, and the

Child Protection Cluster organised by UNICEF and Save the Children coordinated the participation and system strengthening activities of MoLSA.

These participation and system strengthening activities include the following: 1) family tracing, 2) coordinated case management with psychosocial support, 3) support at transit centres before family reunification including transport, 4) social protection including cash transfer and livelihood initiatives to address the causes of children on the move, 5) engaging with communities, including adolescents, around these activities, and 6) comprehensive training of social workers and other frontline responders. Each of these activities is detailed below.

Mechanisms were set in place to record the background of children who were identified as being on the move, including their province and family details. These children then receive case management, psychosocial support, and extracurricular activities at transit centres. UNICEF in partnership with IOM, IRC and other members of the Case Management Task Force (CMTF) developed Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for case management. While these procedures respond to the specific needs of children on the move during COVID-19, they also include strategies to respond to pre-existing vulnerabilities of children in the region.

Family tracing and reunification is then carried out. Following case management and family tracing, children are then transported to their home provinces, or anywhere else in the country where they may need to be taken.

UNICEF is collaborating closely with MoLSA to implement these measures and is also conducting location-specific training and follow-up with children for up to six months. As part of this process, UNICEF has been building the capacity of social workers in collaboration with the National Child Protection Action Network (CPAN) in Afghanistan, a government-led network of governmental and non-government organisations. This has had important impacts for children, as CPAN members have followed up with children on the move as well as other children in need.

Efforts are being made to ensure this work is coordinated within other initiatives to address children on the move and COVID-19 specific child protection measures. For example, this project also forms part

of a collaboration with the Government of Iran, with colleagues identifying Afghan and Turkish children to provide protection and case management.

Under UNICEF's lead, the Child Protection Cluster mobilised more than USD 3 million for children during COVID-19 including children on the move. This was done through the Afghan Humanitarian Fund (AHF) allocation under UN OCHA to cover the increased need for temporary shelter and COVID-19 prevention measures. In addition, the child protection section in UNICEF has developed messages on COVID-19 prevention and child protection issues that may be exacerbated during COVID-19 and incorporated these within the Communication for Development (C4D) programmes. UNICEF's work on children on the move is coordinated with the initiatives led by MoLSA.

Finally, social protection measures are recognised as vital in ensuring the welfare of children on the move. UNICEF is currently finalising SOPs for social protection for children on the move in partnership with members of the Children on the Move Working Group under the Child Protection Sub Cluster. As part of the reintegration package, UNICEF, in collaboration with implementing partners provides a cash transfer or livelihood activities/small business start-up support, such as income generation/vocational training for children and families.

LESSONS LEARNED FOR CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEMS

- **Integrating the programming for children on the move project within the existing child protection infrastructure, including CPAN, was critical in Afghanistan**, as this ensured follow-up with children on their return. It also helped ensure that reintegration was done in a timely manner and children were being reunited in communities they already knew.
- **Addressing root causes leading to protection vulnerabilities of children on the move was an essential component of**

this project in promoting prevention as part of the reintegration package. The impacts of the intervention are still being felt and further monitoring and evaluation should continue to be conducted. The cash transfer and livelihood activities, in particular, were aimed at preventing children from being on the move again, thus ensuring that progress made in the pandemic is not reversed immediately due to other causes such as poverty.

- **Community engagement was vital in creating awareness**, not only about COVID-19 but also about the adverse effects of children migrating and prevention of stigma and discrimination. Involving adolescents as active agents of change is also an important factor in building community engagement.
- **Developing the capacity of professionals in contact with children guaranteed the effectiveness of the project.** Training social workers and border police on support strategies, case management, and child-friendly policing to not only support children on the move but also other children in need, including children affected by armed conflict is an important intervention that will support all aspects of systems strengthening.

LESSONS LEARNED FOR PARTNERSHIPS: COOPERATION, COORDINATION AND COLLABORATION

- **Coordination efforts at several levels was crucial to the success of the children on the move project.** There was coordination with national and international NGOs, with different sectors within UNICEF including C4D, WASH, Education and Health. In addition, coordination is in place with other UN agencies including UNHCR, and IOM and at the cross-border level with Iran. Critically, these efforts integrate often disparate elements of protection embedded in different systems, such as humanitarian and development systems, to work together as one system.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS AND QUESTIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION AND FUTURE ADAPTATION

- Since COVID-19 is an evolving situation, the number of children on the move could continue increasing due to increased deportations from neighbouring countries and also voluntary migration. Restricted access to health services due to stigma and

discrimination related to COVID-19 further exacerbates the situation of these children. There is limited data that highlights that COVID-19 is the sole reason for children to leave the country any more than the pre-existing reasons of poverty, lack of opportunities and insecurity. For this reason, **it is necessary to ensure the sustainability of monitoring mechanisms of child returnees.**

- To continue strengthening and improving services for children on the move, **it is necessary to enhance evidence generation and information management systems such as CPIMS+ for real-time learning and sharing information across borders.**

KEY CONTACTS AND FURTHER RESOURCES:

For more information visit:

UNICEF Afghanistan Country Office website at <https://www.unicef.org/afghanistan/>

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