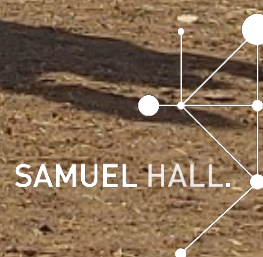


CHILD-FOCUSED RAPID ASSESSMENT OF HUMANITARIAN NEEDS

Final report for War Child UK



December 2022



SAMUEL HALL.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

METHODOLOGY & OBJECTIVES

While Afghanistan has long faced humanitarian challenges stemming from decades of conflict and natural disasters, the political changes in August 2021, and subsequent withdrawal of humanitarian and development actors and freezing of government funds precipitated a deepening crisis.¹ Children, who comprise more than half of Afghanistan’s population, have been the most affected by these events, and are the most vulnerable to future shocks. The service disruptions in all sectors, but particularly education, health, and psychosocial support (PSS) have had a profoundly negative impact on the health and overall well-being of children and other vulnerable populations and have severely threatened the rights of children. At the time of writing, girls’ secondary schools have yet to reopen in the majority of the country, hundreds of thousands of children have returned from Iran or Pakistan or been internally displaced, and over 20 million people - 46% of the population - are food insecure, with 875,000 children expected to suffer from acute malnutrition in 2023.² Furthermore, the de facto authorities have just announced a ban on women working for NGOs, not only a significant violation of women’s rights but massively limiting the delivery of aid, and causing a number of major NGOs to pause activities in country.³

In this context, the perspectives and experiences of children remain underrepresented in research. This needs assessment, conducted in Herat, Ghor and Badghis, used a qualitative child-centred and participatory methodological approach, and aimed to contribute to closing the knowledge gaps and to generate high-quality in-depth evidence of the situation of children’s rights and well-being in western Afghanistan. 30 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) explored the topic of child protection needs and power dynamics within the locations of interest. 12 case studies captured a range of experiences among children in the research areas, and one child in each location was invited to photograph their daily life and activities in the community. Parent/ caregiver focus group discussions (FGDs) (12) focused on child protection needs, risks and trends. In each location (for a total of six) an additional stakeholder FGD provided locally contextualised information regarding barriers faced in implementing child protection programmes.

These qualitative methods were combined with a desk review to answer three main research questions:

<p>What are the key child protection needs at the site level, and how are stakeholders across levels positioned to address these?</p>	<p>How do youth and children themselves present their perspectives?</p>	<p>How can War Child UK and other actors best focus their efforts in the identified districts to support high-risk child protection concerns, and avoid support gaps?</p>
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KEY FINDINGS

Severe poverty and extreme hunger combined with unemployment and inflation poses a serious threat to survival and have exacerbated existing child protection risks. Economic sanctions placed on Afghanistan following the Taliban takeover have resulted in extreme poverty and food insecurity at the household level. An estimated 80-95 percent of households in the Western provinces face food insecurity; at the same time, 99 percent do not have any access to sustainable solutions.⁴ As a result, households resort to dangerous practices, including child labour, child marriage, selling children, and migration. The challenges and needs raised by children and adults in this study are fairly consistent across all provinces. The following key findings and subsequent recommendations detail key needs as well as strategies identified by participants themselves to overcome some of these challenges in the long term, including activities such as skills and vocational training for adults and children, agricultural innovations to increase food production, improved water wells, and livestock/monetary capital.

1. Climate change drives food insecurity and forced migration

A major drought over the March and May 2022 lean season deprived nearly 20 million Afghans of food.

¹ Save the Children, “Afghanistan Multi-sectoral Needs Assessment,” January 2022.

² UN OCHA, “Afghanistan Humanitarian Needs and Planned Response 2023,” 2022.

³ George, Susannah, Claire Parker, and Miriam Berger. “Taliban Bars Women from Working at NGOs; Key Aid Groups Halt Operations.” *The Washington Post*, December, 2022. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/12/24/taliban-women-ngo/>.

⁴ World Vision Afghanistan, “Multi-Sector Rapid Needs Assessment,” March 2022.

Thousands of people have been further impacted by massive flooding throughout the country, destroying farmlands and livelihoods, and limiting access to education.⁵ **Climate change is thus a major driver of livelihood and food security concerns.** Severe droughts cause water scarcity, limit agricultural yields, and challenge livestock survival. Meanwhile, floods not only form a direct risk of death and injury to community members and livestock but also exacerbate existing livelihood and poverty challenges. Many households have resorted to selling productive assets. Although there is limited extant data measuring the relationship between climate change and displacement in Afghanistan,⁶ **participants in this study reported migration to other areas in the country as a coping strategy for droughts and food insecurity, often putting children at higher risk of child labour and leaving school.**

2. Poverty contributes to dangerous coping mechanisms

Parents and caregivers interviewed reported resorting – often very reluctantly – to a range of dangerous practices, including sending children to work, marrying off daughters, and selling children – particularly girls – to meet household expenses and provide food. This study revealed both girls and boys engaging in child labour. Boys generally engage in outside work such as collecting garbage, farming, and begging, while girls engage in work inside the house like tailoring, carpet weaving, and embroidery, due to governmental and cultural restrictions around leaving the house. A small number of especially vulnerable girls – orphans and those from extremely poor families – were reported to work outside collecting garbage or begging, placing them at additional risk.

3. Education challenges lead to child protection risks

Boys and girls face significant challenges – worsened in the past year – around school access, attendance, and quality. This study revealed a combination of demand and supply side barriers that continue to exacerbate education gaps. To address these, participants expressed a strong need for a range of actions, ranging from the establishment of more schools for both boys and girls, and ensuring that they are safe schools, free from violence, as a priority. Other needs include the provision of literacy programs, construction of a bridge over the river to enable (safe) school access, kindergarten, quality male and female teachers, as well as sensitisation of parents/caregivers on the right to education for children and girls, in particular.

4. Non-formal approaches to education increase access

Despite limited access to formal education, this study revealed several forms of informal education used by girls and boys to continue learning. These include madrasas, learning at the mosque, brothers tutoring their sisters at home, and enrolling in courses at the centre of the district. These informal learning methods might offer starting points for humanitarian actors to build upon existing initiatives to bridge learning gaps.

5. Infrastructure-linked dangers and injuries outside the home are common

Improved infrastructure was identified as a key need by participants as a preventative measure against some of the primary dangers children face in their day-to-day activities. Participants highlighted risks associated with fetching water, as well as the danger of poorly constructed wells. Bridges, in particular, are needed to facilitate safe passage during periods of flooding. Further, children lack awareness regarding some basic protective measures against threats such as dangerous highways, mines, and abuse.

6. Lack of access to healthcare and health education services drives child protection risks

Lack of access to healthcare and health education were clearly linked to multiple child protection risks. Key informants described the connection between limited parental knowledge related to health and wellbeing and poor children's health outcomes as well as increased household financial strain. Child protection stakeholders interviewed also noted parents of sick children often prioritise food or cash over healthcare services, in some cases reportedly refusing health care offered to attempt to receive broader support from a different organisation.⁷ Participants often identified the urgent need for local health centres. In addition, lack of health education exacerbated child protection risks, as families overlooked basic healthcare needs in favour of more immediate priorities, including cash assistance.

⁵ World Vision Afghanistan, "Multi-Sector Rapid Needs Assessment," March 2022.

⁶ Samuel Hall and IOM Afghanistan, "Synthesis of four briefs on displacement trends and challenges in Afghanistan since August 2021," forthcoming.

⁷ KII14, international NGO, male, Badghis.

7. Physical and emotional maltreatment within the home is a key challenge

In post-conflict and protracted displacement settings, patterns of violence are heightened. Households face constant pressure, with weakened protective structures in place to protect the children. As poverty and insecurity grow, children describe domestic violence as a primary concern, as many parents resort to negative coping mechanisms as a response to their daily stresses. A majority of parents interviewed reported using physical violence as a form of discipline. Many participants recognised the dangers in abuse, but lacked requisite skills to cope with stress, and awareness of alternatives to abuse and maltreatment, particularly positive coping mechanisms.

Study respondents also frequently reported violence in schools, citing overcrowded classrooms and teacher stress as common causes.⁸ Continued efforts to raise awareness to prevent child abuse and maltreatment are identified as urgent needs by participants.

8. Improved psychosocial support (PSS) is needed

Prolonged conflict, displacement, and trauma have severely impacted the mental health and psychosocial wellbeing of children and families in Afghanistan. The need for PSS services has reached a critical point. Child-friendly PSS services are virtually non-existent. Reports indicate that following the change in government, services have declined further, with more than 86% of parents in a recent survey reporting no such services were accessible.⁹

Current challenges, including lack of employment, financial stress, and food insecurity have resulted in increased household strains and higher reported mental health issues. Parents and children described the restrictive environment as a key factor to their worsening mental health, with participants noting that girls, in particular, suffer from decreased social interactions, restrictions on play, and inability to attend school as contributing to feelings of sadness and depression.

9. Marginalised groups require additional support

Marginalised groups, including IDPs, UASCs, female heads of households, girls, and children with disabilities, and children from poor households are most vulnerable to shocks. Key child protection risks include child labour, child marriage, education, healthcare, and selling of children. This study finds that in many cases, children from female headed households are most vulnerable to other child protection risks, including child labour, early marriage, and family separation.

Respondents called for additional efforts to support marginalised populations, including sensitisation on child's rights to increase awareness of the negative consequences of child labour, child marriage and the selling of children, as well as actions to improve household food security and income.

10. Power dynamics

When it comes to accessing support, children are dependent on a range of actors - whose interest, influence, and actual power will vary by location and evolve rapidly - and who can gatekeep their access to the limited support resources available. Generally, NGOs / CSOs are consistently identified as the providers of child protection support, although the authorities have a fundamental role in allowing them access - and to implement - their activities, or not, and seek to impose their own priorities. The current research reinforces the relevance of community-level work in terms of both identifying vulnerable populations as well as helping them become aware of potential aid. Respondents underlined that there may be mutual lack of awareness of services on the part of populations needing them. Community leaders underlined their own role as intermediaries; this comes with its own equity considerations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following high-level recommendations centre around existing response mechanisms and key considerations to take into account in planning and implementing child protection programming based on these findings from Herat, Badghis and Ghor. They further highlight selected sectoral entry points based on respondent feedback.

⁸ FGD16, male parents/caregivers, Ghor

⁹ Samuel Hall and IOM, 'Research brief: Displacement trends and challenges in Afghanistan since August 2021'

1. **A call to action and coordination for War Child and partners.** Recognising the impact of cross-sectoral approaches and following global guidance on the importance of protection mainstreaming within humanitarian assistance, overall, this research calls for the integration of child protection across all sectors. Building on existing networks and programming, War Child should work to incorporate protection mainstreaming, in particular PSS work, into all aspects of humanitarian assistance. This will allow multiple sectors to work together to share data, support identification of the most vulnerable children, more efficiently and effectively target assistance, and facilitate service delivery. **Such coordination and integration are crucial given the new areas now accessible to War Child and other organisations – and the breadth of needs evidenced there.** Any single organisation will not be able to address the range of needs and number of potential support recipients in all of these. To avoid over targeting certain, perhaps easier to access, areas at the expense of others, coordination of activities between humanitarian actors will be key.



2. **Supporting child protection at all levels of the socio-ecological model.** Child protection around issues such as child labour and child marriage appear in many cases as a perceived secondary concern to urgent needs - to allow households to buy sufficient food and supplies to make it through the winter. Yet, the impacts on Afghanistan’s children in the longer-term if this is set aside will be grave. Two streams of work are thus needed on this front. Firstly, systemic support on child protection *understanding and awareness* - working at all levels of the socio-ecological model, including households, the community, district, and national levels with decision-makers and influencers (including community heads, religious leaders, and more) on the need to continue to protect children at risk explicitly. The recommended coordination above can support the access to child protection support and a stronger understanding of children’s rights at the household and community levels, creating a clear entry point for action. Secondly, more specific strengthening of child protection systems – locally and nationally including the Child Protection Action Network (CPAN) is needed.



3. **Developing localised approaches to implementing child protection support.** Resources across the board are very limited, with NGOs seen as the primary source of support. Currently, however, there is in many cases a perceived disconnect between specific community needs and individual vulnerabilities, and the ways that beneficiaries are selected and support is allocated. A targeted community approach is needed both to ensure that aid is accessible to the most vulnerable and to allow organisations to triangulate information around recommended beneficiaries from other stakeholders - namely, community leaders and local and district / provincial authorities, whose selection processes may be biased. Such approaches will need to be adapted to the specific communities of implementation – a one-size-fits-all approach will not suffice, as for example in one province the provincial governor may be the key stakeholder, and in another a specific directorate head, or more local actors.



4. **Bring support to vulnerable persons who cannot come to it.** Girls and women in particular have limited mobility in Afghanistan; this can impact children in female-headed households as well. Gendered spaces are needed to allow women and girls to access aid for themselves or their children; this could be a standard part of support provided to ensure that even within more generalised programming, PSS or counselling activities are included. Generally, more inclusive approaches should be considered in the planning and delivery of humanitarian assistance recognising these access limitations, especially if the current ban on women’s work within NGOs continues.



5. **Organisational reflection around engagement with the de facto authorities.** The expected implication of the current authorities in both activity and beneficiary selection and monitoring is clear. The question of how and under which conditions to partner with the authorities is one which must be engaged with internally to ensure that staff have clear guidelines. Beyond the ethical debates, there is also a risk that distribution of support could be seen as biased by the people they are trying to help, particularly in this current context, meaning extreme care needs to be taken in understanding contextual realities and setting up mitigation measures.



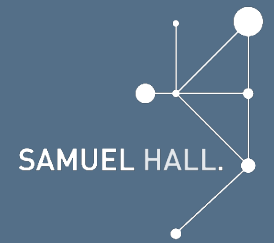
Sectoral Opportunities

The table below proposes sectoral level recommendations with specific entry points to effectively address the gaps in child protection within the current response mechanisms. Sectors highlighted in red have been

highlighted as key areas for War Child given service gaps, War Child experience, child protection needs evidenced, and, pragmatically, the feasibility of actions in these sectors in the short term.

<p>Child Protection</p>	<p>War Child and partners should adopt a holistic approach to child protection programming, integrating a rights-based approach. Ongoing awareness campaigns to promote social norms changes to strengthen child protection should adopt a multisectoral approach, working with key influencers at the community level such as those identified in this research.</p>
<p>Health, PSS & WASH</p>	<p>Support the holistic integration of PSS services into all sectors, including health and WASH. PSS services should be fully integrated into all sectors. This could be facilitated through targeted identification and intervention of PSS needs while beneficiaries are accessing other services such as food distribution. Given the limited amount of PSS services available, a particular focus on training staff to identify high-risk cases and refer them to these services is needed.</p>
<p>Education</p>	<p>Revitalise and strengthen the education sector through alternative pathways to education. Given the de facto authorities' position on girls' education and the limited funding available for larger infrastructure investments – however much needed - there is a need to focus on the implementing and reinforcement of alternative opportunities for education such as community-based education (CBEs) for children who have been out of school or are continuing to engage in work. Consideration should be given to support and strengthen existing educational programmes within mosques currently engaging with girls.</p>
<p>Food Security and Livelihoods</p>	<p>Improve efficiency, transparency, and equity in targeted aid distribution and beneficiary selection. All Afghans need to see donor investments leading to impartial aid delivery and to ensure inclusion in sectoral programming. Additional transparency around aid criteria and beneficiary selection could support in alleviating concerns around nepotism and perceptions that the most in need are not helped, which could potentially lead to implementation challenges for organisations if not considered.</p>





ABOUT SAMUEL HALL

Samuel Hall is a social enterprise that conducts research, evaluates programmes, and designs policies in contexts of migration and displacement. Our approach is ethical, academically rigorous, and based on first-hand experience of complex and fragile settings.

Our research connects the voices of communities to changemakers for more inclusive societies. With offices in Afghanistan, Germany, Kenya, and Tunisia and a presence in Somalia, Ethiopia, and the United Arab Emirates, we are based in the regions we study. For more information, please visit www.samuelhall.org.

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