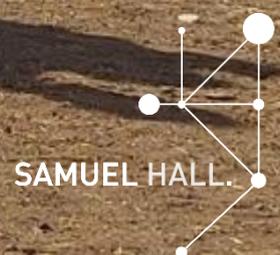# CHILDREN IN DISTRESS:
AN AFGHAN CHILD-FOCUSED NEEDS ASSESSMENTS

Research Brief for War Child UK

SAMUEL HALL.

June 2023

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

BOXES, FIGURES AND PICTURES

ACRONYMS

CBE	Community Based Education	MEAL	Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability & Learning
CPAN	Child Protection Action Network	NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
CS	Case Study	PSS	Psychosocial Support
CRS	Catholic Relief Services	PV	Photovoice
CSO	Civil Society Organisation	UASC	Unaccompanied and Separated Children
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019	UK	United Kingdom
DfA	De Facto Authorities	UN	United Nations
FGD	Focus Group Discussion	UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross	UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
IDPs	Internally Displaced Persons	WASH	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene
IO	International Organisation	WCUK	War Child United Kingdom
IOM	International Organization for Migration	WFP	World Food Program
IRC	International Rescue Committee	YHDO	Youth Health and Development Organization
KII	Key Informant Interview		

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

OBJECTIVES

In the wake of Afghanistan's political changes and the withdrawal of humanitarian and development actors, a unique opportunity has emerged to reflect and act on the urgent needs of Afghan children whose voices have relatively remained unheard. Decades of conflict, natural disasters, and systemic challenges including the recent ban on women working for NGOs has compounded their suffering. Now, with previously inaccessible areas opening up, we can explore uncharted territories to gather evidence to inform child-focused programming.

This child-focused needs assessment ventures into the heart of children's experiences, aiming to break new ground in understanding children's perspectives and aspirations. By delving into their stories, we aim to transform their distress into actionable steps suggested by children themselves.

CONTEXT

Afghanistan faces 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 have deepened this crisis, with children particularly impacted. Service disruptions across sectors have had a profoundly negative impact on the health and overall well-being of children and have severely threatened their rights. The impact of the ban on women working for NGOs is expected to worsen this, reducing access to vulnerable populations.[1] At the same time, actors are now able to develop programming in previously inaccessible areas. There, little data exists on specific needs – and information on children's perspectives and experiences is notably missing.

Severe poverty and extreme hunger combined with unemployment and inflation pose a serious threat to survival and have exacerbated child protection risks. 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.[2] The child protection risks raised by children and adults are fairly consistent across all districts visited and can be broadly categorised as structural, physical, and individual, forming an increasingly dangerous environment for children in these districts. This information is critical to justifying and designing programming and advocacy efforts to support these children.

METHODOLOGY

This needs assessment, conducted in Herat, Ghor and Badghis, used a qualitative child-centred and participatory methodological approach, to contribute to closing the knowledge gaps on the situation of children's rights and well-being in western Afghanistan, bringing to light evidence – including from children – on the challenges they face in previously inaccessible districts. To do so, it drew on 12 case studies with children, 12 parent/caregiver focus group discussions (FGDs), 6 stakeholder FGDs and 15 KIIs with local community actors to:

- Analyse key child protection risks faced by children in the locations of interest,
- Identify priorities for action from the perspective of children themselves; and, to
- Provide recommendations for action to War Child United Kingdom (UK) and other stakeholders on how and where to focus efforts in target areas in Western Afghanistan.

Three main research questions were posed:

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

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[1] 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/.

[2] World Vision Afghanistan, "Multi-Sector Rapid Needs Assessment," March 2022.

KEY FINDINGS: The following key findings and subsequent recommendations evidence the key needs of Afghan children in these newly accessible districts, detailing challenges faced, adaptation strategies employed, and proposing recommendations building on participant feedback.

1. **CHILDREN'S NEED FOR INFORMED AND TRAINED ADVOCATES TO ACCESS SUPPORT AND OVERCOME NEGATIVE COPING MECHANISMS**

Children underlined their dependence on a range of advocates to access any support. These include parents but also other relatives and teachers, who themselves can liaise with those managing or even gatekeeping support initiatives at the local level. Children interviewed called for advocates to address harassment, help them access NGO-provided opportunities, and provide economic support.

Climate change, poverty, and the lack of educational opportunities together lead to an environment where households are more likely to resort to economic coping mechanisms violating children's rights. With over 80% of girls out of school, nationally,[3] and limited perceived opportunities from more advanced education for boys, negative coping mechanisms such as child labour and child marriage become increasingly common as households see their options disappearing, in the districts visited as in, as shown in previous studies, the country overall.

Key informants described a nexus between limited parental knowledge on health, poor children's health, and increased household financial strain. Child protection stakeholders noted that 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.[4] Participants identified the urgent need for local health centres. In addition, lack of health education exacerbates child protection risks, as families overlooked basic healthcare needs in favour of more immediate priorities, including cash assistance: integrated programming is key to avoid this.

2. **WHEN INFORMATION IS NOT ENOUGH: HOUSEHOLD LEVEL SOLUTIONS**

Decisions to engage in practices with negative child protection repercussions were often framed by respondents as a lack of choice rather than an active decision, or the best of a range of negative choices. Understanding this is key to formulating adapted responses relevant in these new districts. As previous research has shown in other parts of Afghanistan, parents / caregivers are generally aware that such practices are not good for their children. Rather, issues such as child labour in dangerous sectors or child marriage represent a last resort, or calculated 'best of bad options' to help a household survive. This underlines that such issues are not seen as inherent rights which cannot be violated (for which advocacy is needed), but also that advocacy is unlikely to suffice, given that families are aware of the risks these may cause for their children. Addressing the root causes of the problems to which these practices respond calls for cross-sectoral approaches to addressing child protection risks.

When it comes to designing child protection programming, actors face an increasingly complex situation today, as access to girls in particular is limited, given increasing movement restrictions. The research underlined the potential for informal forms of support *within* the household. For example, when it comes to girls' education, a particularly sensitive topic, some girls reported learning from siblings within the home. Home-centred models of support hold a potential for broader reach benefiting at risk children. It further suggests the need for safer home environments to facilitate these.[5]

3. **PATTERNS OF VIOLENCE EXISTING: BUILDING CHILD-FRIENDLY, SAFE SPACES FOR CHILDREN**

<u>Outside the home</u>: Children interviewed highlighted a range of physical risks outside the home ranging from poorly constructed wells and missing bridges on paths at risk of flooding to highways as frequently used paths. The data highlights the need to integrate child protection considerations in infrastructural development and in local safety assessments which often focus on security risks. Infrastructure can also address child protection risks

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[3] UNESCO, "Let girls and women in Afghanistan learn!", January 2023.
[4] KII14, international NGO, male, Badghis.
[5] See for example the <u>INSPIRE handbook</u> on the promotion of positive or nurturing parenting.

driven by social norms – for example, building walls around girls' schools increases the social acceptability of attendance.

<u>Inside the home:</u> Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, 74% of children are estimated to have experienced violent discipline in their homes (2013 AMICS). Both COVID-19 and economic pressures have been linked with heightened patterns of violence. This research confirms that while many parents and guardians recognised the dangers in abuse, they lacked requisite skills to cope with stress, and awareness of alternatives to abuse and maltreatment. The majority of parents interviewed reported using physical violence as a form of discipline.

Prolonged conflict, displacement, and trauma have severely impacted the mental health and psychosocial wellbeing of children and families in Afghanistan. Child protection support services are virtually non-existent,[6] as lack of employment, financial stress, food insecurity, and restrictive environments have contributed to worsening mental health. Those constrained to the home suffer from decreased social interactions, contributing to feelings of sadness and depression. Recent studies have called for the integration of PSS into broader programming.[7] This should include child-specific PSS programming, through other programming (education, nutrition, WASH) specifically targeting this group. Supporting children explicitly is critical to both the short-term and their long-term future; as psychosocial wellbeing is critical to learning and growth, lack of support limits children's potential.

4. SUPPORTING LOCAL ACTORS/ TRANSLATING DESIGN TO PRACTISE AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

Non-Governmental Organisation / Civil Society Organisations (NGOs / CSOs) are consistently identified as the providers of child protection support, with the De facto Authorities (DfAs) deciding whether or not activities will be allowed to happen. Community leaders interviewed for this research underlined that they often play a key role in implementation, leading local-level beneficiary identification for NGO / CSO support. Respondents suggested that services do not always reach those most in need, who may not find out about support offered until too late. Additional guidance and monitoring is needed to ensure that such community-level actors can and do identify children most in need of support.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations from children

- **Let us play, safely:** Create safer paths and places for children to travel, play and live, including playgrounds and safe and warm accommodations. Bridges so that children can cross rivers safely to travel to school, work, and for play.

- **Let our women and girls study:** Improve education buildings to make them more appropriate for girls and learning during the colder months, and more generally offer literacy classes for young women and girls.

- **Bring us water:** Help communities have clean and consistent water supplies, so children do not have to travel long distances to get water.

- **Allow access to health care:** Build local health facilities, especially in rural areas.

- **Support those of us who have to work:** Offer training and income-generating alternatives for children working on the street and girls and young women more generally.

High-level & sectoral recommendations

The following recommendations focus on creating a more integrated and coordinated approach to addressing child protection needs, building on existing mechanisms and interventions in Western Afghanistan.

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[6] Reports indicate that following the change in government, child support services more broadly have declined, with more than 86% of adults in a recent survey reporting no such services were accessible.
Save the Children, "Afghanistan Multi-sectoral Needs Assessment", January 2022. https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/Afghanistan-MSNA-Full-Report-March2022.pdf/.
[7] IOM and Samuel Hall, "Synthesis of four briefs on displacement trends and challenges in Afghanistan since August 2021", IOM Afghanistan, 2022,
https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5cfe2c8927234e0001688343/t/6384b9a021635d43d06e93b0/1669642673191/IOM+RADA+_Synthesis+Brief.pdf.

- **Integrate child protection services into existing health and other programming,** with a focus on child-friendly PSS work, into all aspects of humanitarian assistance. For example, health service providers could provide basic mental health assessments for children coming into their care, offering referrals. WASH services should identify child protection violations due to water scarcity, allowing organisations to develop adapted programming.

- **Influence local decision makers and build their understanding of children's rights.** Beyond awareness raising, activities should identify community-based and localised approaches to action on child needs. For example, this could include identifying local advocates, who have been through some of the challenges faced by children interviewed, and can talk to families about alternatives, or identifying where an existing Child-Friendly Space could be used to propose social activities to local children and provide more opportunities to play, or alternative educative approaches.

- **Revive the Child Protection Action Network (CPAN).** The national CPAN has been less active since 2021; it is critical to reinforce it, building on the linkages which exist at the provincial level with the shelters, and the coordination opportunities it offers.

- **Reinforce child-focused guidance on programme design and implementation** at the local level. Additional guidance is needed to include children across the programme cycle. As priorities, guidance should cover participatory programme design approaches, inclusive of child-focused needs assessments such as this one to confirm content *relevance*, and how to work with local stakeholders to target programming as per the design, ensuring *effectiveness*. For example – this could include gathering children's points of view on the development of new infrastructure.

- **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 within all programming are needed to allow women and girls to access aid for themselves or their children; similarly, home-based initiatives can broaden access to support activities. For example, radio programming to provide educational or PSS content could reach girls across many rural areas; under COVID-19, applications have also been developed to provide educational and PSS content to a range of ages, including for example meditation guidelines designed for a therapeutic impact. The specific parameters of what can be done will vary by location - women and girls should be consulted on how best to deliver services to them within their communities.

- **Adopt child-focused sectoral interventions:**
    a. **Child protection.** Key influencers at the community level (educators, religious leaders, parents / guardians who have dealt with specific challenges targeted) can be valuable partners in adopting a holistic approach to integrate a rights-based child protection agenda across all sectors of implementation. It is key to bring locally trusted voices to discussions of sensitive topics, such as working with parents to develop non-violent reactions to stress at home.
    b. **Health, PSS and WASH.** Integrate child-friendly PSS services into all sectors' programming, in particular health and WASH. 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. PSS support for children can be conceptualised at three levels for integration into programming, as proposed by UNICEF's *Global Multisectoral Operational Framework for Mental Health and PSS Support of Children, Adolescents and Caregivers Across Settings*, the child and adolescent, the caretaker, and the community levels. More generally, the support of localised health facilities is a key priority identified by children.
    c. **Education: focus on short-term alternative pathways.** From community-based education (CBEs) for children who have been out of school or are continuing to engage in work, to home-based solutions these offer an opportunity for more rapid support. Consideration should be given to support and strengthen local initiatives such as educational programmes within mosques currently engaging with girls, as well as remote (radio and internet) programmes, including increasing access to the latter.
    d. **Food Security and Livelihoods: child-sensitive aid criteria.** Clarity around beneficiary selection can help focus aid for households with children with additional needs.

1. INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

1.1 Introduction and approach

*"I feel scared everywhere I go, especially in the bazaar, near
the river, and on the road that leads to the bazaar. In these places, I am afraid that I will be abused by
others or that I will be harmed."*[8]

Humanitarian organisations supporting Afghan children are now able to work in previously inaccessible districts. While this access is limited to engagement in specific sectors, it poses a clear opportunity to address and support underserved populations. In a context steadily worsening over the past few years, such support is critical. Nationally, evidence exists about the most significant humanitarian needs faced, but in these previously inaccessible districts, actors face information gaps, in particular when it comes to the perspectives of children themselves.

Centring on the voices of children, this needs assessment seeks to address this gap, specifically aiming to:

- Analyse key child protection risks faced by children in the locations of interest,
- Identify priorities from the perspective of children themselves; and,
- Provide recommendations for action to War Child United Kingdom (UK) and other stakeholders on how and where to focus efforts in target areas in Western Afghanistan.

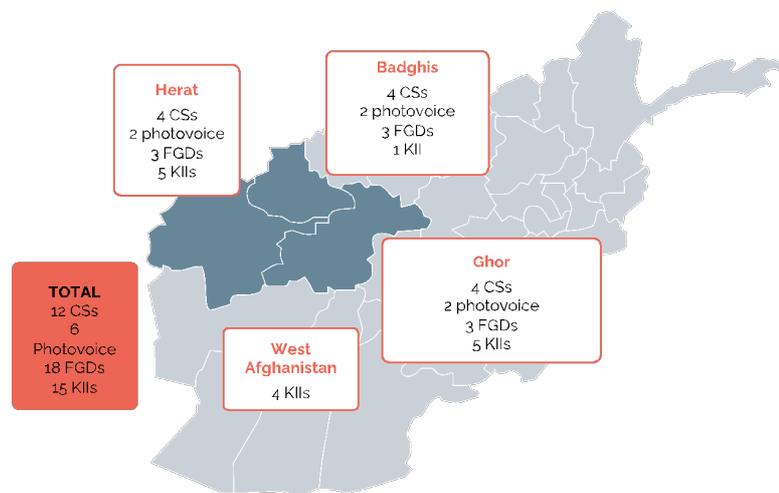[8] CS5, refugee, male child, 13, Badghis.

Three main research questions were thus posed:

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

1.2 Methodology and limitations

Data was collected in October and November 2022 in Herat, Ghor and Badghis using a qualitative child-centred, participatory methodological approach. Sampling considered gender, age, and other identity markers that can link to drivers of child rights violations, discrimination, and barriers to service for vulnerable groups.

Figure 1 - Data Collection conducted by Samuel Hall in Afghanistan

Herat
4 CSs
2 photovoice
3 FGDs
5 KIIs

Badghis
4 CSs
2 photovoice
3 FGDs
1 KII

Ghor
4 CSs
2 photovoice
3 FGDs
5 KIIs

West Afghanistan
4 KIIs

TOTAL
12 CSs
6 Photovoice
18 FGDs
15 KIIs

- 15 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), with War Child (5), NGOs / CSOs (8), the UN (1) and the district-level authorities (1) explored the topic of child protection needs and power dynamics within the locations of interest.
- 12 Parent/ caregiver FGDs (separated by gender) focused on child protection needs, risks and trends, and the experiences that the parents/caregivers had faced.
- 6 FGDs (one per location) with local stakeholders working to support children (including Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO)/Civil Society Organisation (CSO) staff, prominent members of the community, teachers, and medical practitioners) zoomed in on barriers faced in implementing child protection programmes in that locality, key needs, and local-level power dynamics.
- 12 case studies, 6 with boys and 6 with girls, aged twelve to seventeen, aimed to capture a range of experiences among children in the research areas. These CSs were designed in a child-friendly and interactive fashion, including a drawing exercise for children to express themselves non-verbally.

Finally, in each location, one child was invited to photograph their daily life, the activities they took part in, and spaces they perceived as 'positive' or 'negative' in the community. Creating a narrative element to these photovoice interviews, the enumerator engaged in a conversation to discuss the meaning of each image. Data was collected by War Child's MEAL field teams after a training and pilot led by Samuel Hall in Herat.

Safeguarding and research ethics: The research team employed a trauma-informed, child-adapted research approach that is centred on the voices of girls and boys. This approach is informed by Samuel Hall and War Child's Safeguarding Policy and prioritised the comfort and safety of the child respondents at all times, taking into account their school schedules and preferred times. Further details on the safeguarding approach can be found in Annex.

Limitations. The research team faced two main practical challenges. Firstly, local unrest in one district led to a two-week delay in fieldwork; ultimately, all planned activities were conducted. Secondly, cultural gender norms and restrictions on the participation of girls and women in society meant that girls were not able to participate in the photovoice exercise, although their voices were captured through case studies. Cultural and religious norms may also have restricted participants' willingness to speak on gender-specific child protection norms. To address the latter, enumerators sought to create a safe and culturally sensitive environment for discussion.

2. UNDERSTANDING CHILD PROTECTION RISKS IN PREVIOUSLY INACCESSIBLE DISTRICTS

Photo of a valley in Herat province

2.1 Contextualising findings: exploring the 'known' in the unknown'

The 2023 UNICEF Humanitarian Action for Children appeal highlights "unprecedented and rising humanitarian needs" in Afghanistan, including 7.5 million children and caregivers in need of protection services, 8.6 million children in need of education support, and 7.2 million people in need of nutrition assistance, per capita income having dropped by a third in three years.[9] While the breadth of these challenges is increasing, many of these needs are not new. However, evidencing these continued challenges is critical to justify action. The ways in which these challenges are happening, the nuances of the barriers faced in different locations, and the perceived and real agency of actors involved is evolving.

This brief's findings – laying out the structural, physical and individual child protection risks faced by children in selected newly accessible districts in Western Afghanistan – detail how the most common risks are being experienced. It shows that limited gains in access to services are being reversed, protection risks widespread, and actors' practical challenges in accessing those in most need: even as geographic access has expanded, access to those most in need has not.

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[9] UNICEF, "Humanitarian Action for Children", 2023, https://www.unicef.org/media/131871/file/2023-HAC-Afghanistan.pdf.

2.2 Structural child protection risks

Climate change, poverty, and the lack of educational opportunities for children create a hostile environment for child protection in the districts visited. Increasing floods and droughts have both driven displacement and contributed to broader food insecurity; the broader economic climate means that many households facing these challenges were already stretched to the limit. Without educational opportunities for girls, and less obvious benefits to them for boys, negative coping mechanisms such as child labour and child marriage increase.

Poverty

Sanctions placed on Afghanistan have resulted in a 40 percent drop in GDP, worsening an already poor economic situation.[10] This is not new in rural areas – one study from 2011, for example, already outlined that "a culmination of increasing pressures and narrowing options is undermining the ability of many rural families to make a basic living."[11] In each district visited, respondents were explicit on the financial challenges they face, translating these figures into food and housing insecurity, addressed via unsustainable borrowing.

> *"I am in debt. When the moneylenders come to my house, I cry and swear that I have nothing until they leave me. Every night I feed my children first, when they have eaten food, if there is anything left, I eat it, otherwise, I don't eat anything, because there is not enough food for all of us."[12]*

This impacts children directly - chronic undernutrition and a lack of diversity in meals forming a major threat to children's health – and indirectly. Parents and caregivers reported resorting to a range of dangerous practices, including sending children to work, marrying off daughters, and selling children, particularly girls.

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) reported one quarter of children as engaged in unpaid labour, while 20 percent reported working for pay. [13] While boys are at highest risk of child labour,[14] girls and boys work:

- **Boys** generally engage in outside work such as collecting garbage, cleaning shoes, shepherding, farming, and begging. They face additional risks when sent to cities or abroad to earn money for the family. The latter occurs despite the recognition by caregivers of the high risk of deportation accompanied by violence, and difficult and hazardous work for those who make it abroad.
- **Girls'** work is generally in the home, governmental restrictions adding to existing cultural norms around this. Tailoring, carpet waiving, and embroidery were among those most commonly reported. Several particularly vulnerable girls (orphans and those from extremely poor families) were reported as collecting garbage or begging, placing them at additional risk.

Respondents also used economic justifications to explain child marriage, with FGD participants explaining "*the problem that affects most of the poor and needy girls is financial difficulties. For example, they are forced into underage and forced marriages.*"[15] The selling of daughters was mostly cited as *"an issue of family poverty that families are forced to sell their daughters for a small amount of money because they have nothing to eat."[16]* While previous research on the topic had found that self-reported household economic status did not linearly correlate with child marriage,[17] these findings suggest a shift in the scope of child marriage due to the worsened economic climate.

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[10] UN OCHA, "Afghanistan Humanitarian Needs Overview," January 2022.
[11] Paula Kantor and Adam Pain, "Running out of Options – Tracing Rural Afghan Livelihoods", for AREU, 2011, p. 40.
[12] FGD5, parent/caregiver, female, Herat.
[13] UNICEF, "Afghanistan Humanitarian Situation Report No. 8," 31 July, 2022.
[14] Save the Children, "Afghanistan Multi-sectoral Needs Assessment", January 2022.
[15] FGD12, local protection actor, male, Badghis.
[16] FGD9, local protection actor, male, Badghis.
[17] UNICEF and Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, "Child Marriage in Afghanistan: Changing the narrative", Martyrs and the Disabled, 2018.

Picture 1 - Motorcycle repair workshop

"This shop is where I used to work as an apprentice in a motorcycle repair factory until last week. Working in this place was hard because I had to show up early in the morning and open the shop. During the day, I had to repair broken and damaged engines and parts with my employer. It was challenging, and I was not very interested in doing it. Sometimes, my employer misbehaved with me because I did not know the work well and was unfamiliar with the system. I had to work to earn money, but with time and the difficulty of the work, I gave up with my mother's advice. Also, my sisters were alone at home. Overall, the hard work and the low income made my mother no longer allow me to work here." [Pv3, host, male child, 14, Badghis].

Climate

At the COP27 conference in November of 2022, no representative was present from Afghanistan. However, Afghanistan is, according to the UN, the "sixth most affected in the world to climate-related threats".[18] Droughts are increasingly common, and temperatures have risen twice as rapidly as the average worldwide.[19] This drives a range of child protection risks, contributing to physical and individual dangers as well as worsening economic challenges. Children interviewed highlighted both direct and indirect impacts of climate change:

- Flooding places children at risk directly and constrains their environment, preventing them from safely crossing rivers, for example, and so limiting access to schools and other services.

  "I remember that there was a flood almost three years ago, and it swept away most of the houses along with their household goods and caused a lot of damage to our neighbours and other people."[20]

- Climate change has destroyed farmlands and livelihoods in rural areas.[21] With more than half the population experiencing crisis or emergency levels of food insecurity,[22] households turn to negative and short-term coping mechanisms to address this, for example selling productive assets for immediate relief.[23] Some participants also underlined migration as a coping strategy, often putting children at higher risk of child labour and leaving school.

  "People who were working on their agricultural land in rural areas suffer from the drought. They did not have access to sufficient water to cultivate crops and agricultural products, so they left their communities and moved to the village nearby the city where their children can find a job or start begging."[24]

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[18] UNAMA, "UN in Afghanistan Calls for Urgent Collective Climate Action in the Country", November 2022.
[19] World Bank Group, "Climate Risk Country Profile: Afghanistan", 2021, p1.
[20] CS3, male child, Herat province.
[21] Ibid.
[22] UN OCHA, "Afghanistan Humanitarian Needs Overview," January 2022.
[23] Save the Children, "Afghanistan Multi-sectoral Needs Assessment," January 2022.
[24] KII13, local NGO, female, Herat.

Picture 2 - River in Badghis

"Whenever the flood rises, no one from the other side of the valley can passage here. Boys cannot come to school or go for the work they might have in the market. Two years ago, two children fetching water from the valley drowned in it. I do not know their names. They were from the other side of the valley. My parents don't let us play in the valley or go to the other side of the valley. We cross the valley and bring potable water from the spring whenever needed. [..] The villagers should build a bridge over the valley here. However, the people are mostly poor, so they have not been able to do such a thing yet." [Pv4, male child, 14, host Badghis]

Education

In these districts, as in Afghanistan generally, boys and girls face difficulties, worsened in the past year, on school access, attendance, and quality. In line with barriers reported by United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA) and Save the Children,[25][26] this study revealed a combination of demand and supply side barriers that continue to exacerbate education gaps, placing children at risk. The closure of girls' schools in particular calls for alternative means of support; this limits girls' future careers and learning, and in the immediate contributes to negative mental health and makes child marriage more likely.

On the demand side, economic hardship, food insecurity, child labour, child marriage, cultural norms and a perceived limited value of education reportedly keep children out of school. Respondents underlined that families cannot afford books, uniforms, clothes, and food to enable school attendance, nor the opportunity costs when children do not work. On top of that, the quality of education, the limited job opportunities, and for girls, the lack of opportunities to continue studies after sixth grade make parents/caregivers question the value of school overall. This underlines the worsening impact of new policies on the educational situation for all girls, not just those of secondary school age.

> *"With the bad economic situation people cannot provide for their children's needs and requests. [..] The second obstacle is the IE who disallow girls' education beyond sixth grade and, thus, girls stay in their homes all the time and get depressed. How girls and boys are affected is different. Girls are sold or forced into marriage and boys are sent out to work or they become a wage worker."[27]*

Informal means of education used by girls and boys to continue learning emerge as an area to investigate. Madrassas and mosques are both alternative locations for education which have been used to allow boys to learn in more rural communities where educational facilities may be limited, and as a place for girls' education. One mother explained, *"Because we don't have female teachers, we have no girls' school in our community; instead, they go to the mosques where the Mullah teaches them."[28]* Others learned more informally from family members in the home – for example, brothers tutoring their sister. Such practices could be reinforced through the provision of electronic or paper-based learning materials.

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[25] Ibid.
[26] Save the Children, "Afghanistan Multi-sectoral Needs Assessment," January 2022.
[27] FGD15, local protection actor, male, Ghor.
[28] FGD11, female parents and caregivers, Badghis.

Picture 3 - Losing access to education in Herat

"This is our school, and there is only one school in our village where both boys and girls' study.

The girls study only up to sixth or eighth grade. Also, the girls who are in seventh-grade study with other girls in separate classrooms because the Taliban does not allow them to study above the sixth grade.

Previously, female students studied up to 12th grade in our school, but since the Taliban banned the school for female students of seventh to 12th grades, they no longer come to school. This year, they all attended the school at the beginning of the year, but the headmaster dismissed their classes.

When the girls were banned from going to school, some of them were crying. My cousin also cried. She said that she would not be allowed to go to school anymore.

I am very happy to go to school, and I am trying to study hard to be an engineer in the future." [Pv2, male child, 14, host, Herat]

Box 1 - Structural challenges: key child protection needs raised and solutions proposed

- **Poverty**: To address poverty, participants expressed urgent needs such as provision of food, clothes, and shelter to survive winter and the months following, with some households "*only waiting for immediate aid from the NGOs.*"[29] To overcome poverty and food insecurity related challenges in the long term, respondents called for activities such as skills and vocational training for adults and children, agricultural innovations to increase food production, water wells, and livestock/monetary capital. Community sensitisation on children's rights were frequently proposed to address some of the negative coping mechanisms employed like child labour, child marriage and the selling of children. As one 13-year-old girl explained, *"Parents should be informed about the rights of children so that they do not give the girls into early marriage."*[30] Climate: Dams were suggested both to prevent floods and create a water depot for times of drought. To overcome drought-related agricultural challenges, various participants called for irrigation systems and the provision of drought-resistant seed.

- **Education**: Participants expressed a strong need for the establishment of more, safe schools for boys and girls. 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.

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[29] FGD14, female parents/caregivers, returnee, Ghor.
[30] CS8, female child, returnee, Jawand, Badghis.

2.2 Physical child protection risks

Physical harm within and outside the home

In addition to the contextual risks detailed above, children and their caregivers outlined distinct physical threats to their wellbeing. Three main types of physical protection risks outside the home were highlighted:

- **Security-related attacks and threats.** The DfA have published an improvement in security since they gained power. Respondents generally agreed that security has improved; however, this does not always translate to the individual level. As one young girl explained, *"With the new government coming into power, the wars and conflicts have stopped but nothing has changed with the level of violence in the community. Now, we are unable to go to school or outside the house."*[31]
- **Harassment and / or physical violence and sexual abuse.** Parents frequently spoke of fear their children would be exposed to danger or sexual harassment and abuse while performing daily chores such as gathering firewood or fetching water or looking for work. One parent explained, *"when children go to the plains and cities to collect firewood (fuel) or garbage, they are harassed and even sexually abused."*[32] Outside the home, while girls may be more subject to harassment, boys also face gender-specific risks: boys are sent away to work, facing multiple child protection risks including robbery, physical abuse, and detention along the way.[33] In addition, participants noted that boys are generally the ones forced to work in hazardous jobs.
- **Risks due to inadequate or ill-adapted infrastructure.** Children in rural locations spoke of travelling long distances to access services – including water. Parents and children reported physical risks on these paths: walking alongside busy highways, for example, or falling into dried out wells. Mines remain a concern despite efforts to clear them. Respondents also noted that the lack of walls around schools or separate latrines could prevent girls from being able to attend.[34]

Picture 4 - A child-friendly space created by War Child

"Another place I like is Conix (Child-Friendly Space). Three months ago, I used to go and study at Conix

It was a nice place. We were happy, we played with the other children, had access to toys, and had cake and juice at Conix every day. In Conix they taught us reading, writing, poetry, and life skills.

We only studied in Conix for three months. Currently, one of my sisters goes to Conix, and she is happy because they play games with the children and read stories and poems to them.

Everyone child wanted to go to Conix and study there, but after three months, they told us that our class had ended. We do not go to Conix anymore." [Pv1, male child, 15, IDP, Herat]

While important child protection stakeholders such as UNICEF are developing guidance and policies for children in urban settings, underlining the complexity of needs in urban environments, relatively less guidance exists around child protection in rural development planning. Ad hoc efforts such as the construction of better ventilated and sanitary toilet facilities in Badakhshan by Mission East can serve as positive examples. However, the perspectives highlighted here make clear that the integration of child perspectives in such planning efforts is needed to help to identify potentially unforeseen limitations of infrastructural development.

For many children, physical dangers do not end when they return home. Studies have highlighted how in post-conflict and protracted displacement settings, patterns of violence are generally heightened. Households face

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[31] CS6, female child, 13, IDP, Badghis.
[32] FGD2, parent/caregiver, males, IDP, Herat.
[33] KII2, War Child, male, Western Afghanistan
[34] As highlighted in many past evaluations of girls' education projects.

constant pressure, with weakened protective structures in place to protect the children. Parents interviewed seemed aware of the dangers and risks related to violence against children but lacked the appropriate coping mechanisms to respond differently.

> *"Please do not say about beating children and using violence against them because we do not have any option."[35]*

A higher proportion of girl parents reported implementing 'harsh parenting' including resorting to physical punishment. For girls orphaned or separated from their parents, reliant on the care of relatives, the risk of violence is particularly high. As one girl explained, *"My uncle's house is dangerous for me because it is where I am always beaten, punished, insulted, and humiliated. At my uncle's house, I always feel sad and tired. I am afraid that they will beat or insult me because I am not their child. Even though I do everything for them, they still don't like me."[36]*

Schools are another 'safe' place where violence occurs, as respondents cited overcrowded classrooms and teacher stress as common causes.[37]

Picture 5 - Photo of river in Badghis crossed to go to school, the market or work

"I pass this place every day to go to the market or work. It is perilous here for other children and me, especially when the river water rises in winter. Many children fear crossing this place when it rains, or the water level increases. I have been forced many times to go to the market by another longer route." [Pv3, male child, 13, Badghis]

Lack of access to healthcare and health education

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 to attempt to receive more support from a different organisation.[38]

> *"When children collect garbage, their hands become contaminated. However, their mothers do not know how to make their children wash their hands and change their clothes before eating something and coming to the living room. Thus, when they do not pay attention to the issue, they become sick and have to spend 1,000 AFN to provide their children with healthcare services. If their children earn 100 AFN a day from collecting garbage, they have to pay the earnings for ten days for their medical costs."[39]*

Girls in particular are less likely to receive needed healthcare, with both access and a lower value placed on their wellbeing driving this. As a key informant in Herat explained, *"Unlike boys, girls do not receive proper health care services because their parents pay more attention to their sons because they will be the breadwinner of the household while the girls will marry and leave the home."[40]*

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[35] FGD1, parent/caregiver, female, IDP, Herat.
[36] CS12, female child, 13, Ghor.
[37] FGD16, parents/caregivers, male, Ghor.
[38] KII14, international NGO, male, Badghis.
[39] FGD3, local protection actor, male, Herat.
[40] KII13, NGO, female, Herat.

Participants often identified an urgent need for local health centres. Some of the districts visited face additional limitations due to seasonal accessibility - for example in Ghor, health care services to remote areas pause from September to May because of the snow in more remote areas.[41]

> *Box 2 - Physical challenges: key child protection needs raised and solutions proposed*
>
> - **Physical harm inside and outside the home:** *Outside* the home, 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. Children lack awareness regarding some basic protective measures; to protect against threats such as dangerous highways, mines, and abuse, preventative measures need to be strengthened. Improved access to WASH services would eliminate risks associated with fetching water, as well as the danger of poorly constructed wells. The construction of bridges, or basic footbridges can facilitate safe passage during periods of flooding. *Inside* the home, while many respondents recognised the dangers in abuse, they lacked requisite skills to cope with stress; awareness and sensitisation campaigns need to link participants to PSS services, as well as provide alternatives to abuse and maltreatment, particularly positive coping mechanisms.
> - **Health and healthcare needs:** Participants 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. Community engagement to address this and to combat entrenched social norms around gendered access to health care is critical to ensuring equitable access to health care.

2.3 Individual child protection risks

At an individual level, 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, with many parents reporting that their children at the very least suffer from sadness, worry and stress as a result of financial limitations, and other more complex conditions. One NGO staff member interviewed for this research explained:

> *"The ground realities make the children suffer from mental health problems. However, all people regardless of their ethnic affiliation, gender, and living condition suffer from the current problems and limitations. Although the children of a few households that have stable financial conditions have relatively comfortable lives, a vast majority of children suffer from mental health problems."[42]*

The above sections have noted the impact of restrictive gender norms and practices have for women and girls in Afghanistan. Respondents underlined the shrinking public space - including around education - available to women, and increased reliance on child marriage as an economic coping mechanism. Restrictive social norms, more broadly enforced since the change in government, have isolated girls. As their world has gotten smaller, girls report a range of mental health challenges, including sadness, depression, anxiety, and hopelessness.

> *"I am not allowed to play outside the house. For example, my mother claims it is not good work. However, my brothers can play with their friends outside the house. In fact, I can't go to school since primary school is allocated for boys. Even if girls go to school, it is mostly possible for young girls since teenage girls aren't allowed to do so."[43]*

Yet, child protection support services are virtually non-existent: reports indicate that following the change in government, services have declined further, with more than 86% of adults in a recent survey reporting no such services were accessible.[44] While several parents interviewed reported wishing to see a doctor for their children, a positive evolution in a context where mental health issues have largely been stigmatised, in the locations visited,

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[41] Ibid.
[42] KII15, international NGO, male, Ghor.
[43] CS8, female child, 13, returnee, Badghis
[44] Save the Children, "Afghanistan Multi-sectoral Needs Assessment", January 2022, https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/Afghanistan-MSNA-Full-Report-March2022.pdf/.

they have no options to do so. The widespread nature of reported MHPSS needs suggests that integrating PSS across all sectors is relevant and necessary for Afghan children's wellbeing.

Marginalised children are at particular risk for this and other child protection risks.

- Unaccompanied and Separated Children (UASC) are often at heightened risk of violence and exploitation; UASC abroad face risks of deportation, detention, violence, and torture. Many UASC and homeless children are employed in dangerous jobs, in often hazardous work conditions. For girls, the risk of violence and exploitation is particularly high when orphaned or separated. One girl, forced to live with her abusive relatives described being subjected to daily abuse.
- IDP children were widely described as facing additional mental health problems, lacking access to services, and facing additional risks of violence compared to children in other communities. One IDP girl in Herat, for example, told the research team that several girls had been kidnapped from her area, and not heard from again.

Box 3 - Individual challenges: key child protection needs raised and solutions proposed

- **PSS**: The urgent need for PSS—identified across the board – requires it to be immediately mainstreamed into other child protection support services; PSS services should be integrated as much as possible into other services to provide much needed support. Accessibility to particularly vulnerable individuals should be built in, consulting such individuals in the best way to do so.
- **Supporting at-risk groups**: Marginalised groups, including IDPs, UASCs, female heads of households, girls, children with disabilities and children from poor households are most vulnerable to shocks, and as such at additional risk to child protection challenges. Additional efforts are needed to ensure such groups are engaged with and targeted by programming inclusively.

2.4 Through a child's eyes: mapping safe and dangerous places

In addition to speaking about child protection needs and challenges faced, children interviewed were asked to **map out safe and dangerous places** within their communities, highlighting spaces to leverage and risks to target through programming. This exercise served both methodological and analytical purposes:

- **Methodologically,** the mapping exercise enables a change in the power dynamics inherent to a question-and-answer centred interview between an adult and child. Rather than simply answering questions, it places the child in the position of a 'co-constructor' of knowledge, working with the enumerator to explain their spatial environment and the boundaries of their commonly accessed spaces in a visual fashion. Such visual exercises can also help children who are less at ease verbally to express themselves by allowing them to anchor their answers to something tangible in front of them.
- Rather than seeking to reproduce exactly the physical set-up of their communities, children were asked to focus on places which were important to them, and to their families. **Analytically**, this thus allows for an alternative means of drawing out children's voices, triangulating the information gathered through the other qualitative methods with their perspectives. This thus further helps to understand the social environment in which these children live, and what they see as critical to their own needs and well-being.

Through a Child's eyes – Safe places

SCHOOL

From establishing village schools to constructing bridges over the river and alleviating governmental restrictions for girls, all children greatly valued school and wished for solutions to increase access to school.

"School is also the best place that we can make a better future life for ourselves. At school, I study the lessons and learn knowledge, I wish to become a doctor or engineer and serve my homeland." [CS5, male child, 13, Badghis]

HOME

As the place where family comes together, their home is the space where children feel happy and safe. However, separated children explicitly missed this safe space, experiencing emotional and physical abuse by their caretakers, and girls in general wish they could leave the house more often.

"Here is the house where I live happily with my father, mother, sister, and brother. I feel safe in my home." [CS4, female child, host, 16, Herat]

PLAYGROUND

Boys and girls largely appreciate play and having fun with friends, but face barriers such as the lack of a playground for boys and social restrictions to play (outside) for girls.

"During the administration of the current government, we have nowhere to play and spend time with our friends." [CS4, female child, host, 16, Herat]

MOSQUE

The mosque is not just a place of hope and worship for children, but also an alternative to the lack of access to formal education especially for girls, although when growing older, girls are restricted from access to the mosque.

"Another place is the mosque to learn religious studies; because we cannot go to school, it is good that we can go to the mosque." [CS4, female child, host, 16, Herat]

Through a Child's eyes – Dangerous places

WORKPLACE

While child labour seems to be taken as a given, nearly all children dislike work – they prefer going to school, want to have fun and play, and fear harassment and injuries.

"Drug-addicted people also come in the wreckage when I go there to collect garbage. I am afraid of this place because thieves and drug addicts may attack me." [CS12, female child, orphan, 13, Ghor]

RIVER AND VALLEY

A source of water, the river/valley is mostly perceived as a dangerous place, risking drowning when water level rises. Children wish for a bridge to cross the river, creating safer access to school.

"The valley is a mixture of good and bad places. This valley is where we get water from, and the cultivation water also comes here. However, it is also very dangerous. There is a lot of flooding from the valley in the spring and the rainy seasons." [Pv4, male child, 14, host, Badghis]

STREETS AND CITY

Children fear the streets due to the high risk of traffic accidents and physical and sexual harassment, in particular in the city where some children stay in the streets overnight after a workday.

"We usually work in crowded places in the city. [..] When we can't get home, we stay in the city and sleep at the intersections and parks. The drug-addicted people beat us because they also collect plastics." [Pv1, male child, IDP, 15, Herat]

MOUNTAINS

Children are often sent to the mountains for gathering firewood but face many dangers, including unexploded mines, heights, wild animals, and physical and sexual harassment.

"The mountains are dangerous because they have very high altitudes, deep valleys, and mines that have remained there since the years of war." [CS3, male child, host, 14, Herat]

3. AGENCY AND ACTORS OF CHANGE

Photo taken during photovoice with 13-year-old boy from Ghor province

Respondents interviewed highlighted the complex web of stakeholders involved in supporting children in the districts visited. Children and adolescents are dependent not just on their parents but on the community and local leaders to access existing support, which itself is governed by providers (generally, UN / NGO / CSOS) and governmental priorities. Exploring these dynamics and existing actors in each location is key to operating successfully in newly accessible locations.

3.1 Critical stakeholders in the provision of child support

Generally, NGOs / CSOs are consistently identified as the providers of child protection support, although the DfAs have a fundamental role in allowing them access, and seek to impose their own programmatic priorities. Permissions or Memorandum of Understandings (MoUs) from the authorities are needed to be able to implement. Recent research conducted in parallel has underlined that the relevant authority (or authorities) may vary from one province to another for the same research or activities. For example, in Ghor the provincial governor's office has recently been more involved in research permissions, while in Herat this has been handled by the relevant Directorate. This is not always understood at the local level, where perceptions place the NGOs as deciders as who will receive aid. FGDs made clear that targeting is not done transparently, with respondents complaining of nepotism, or that they did not know why they were not supported.

Interviews reinforced the relevance of community-level work to identify vulnerable populations and help them become aware of potential aid. Respondents underlined common lack of awareness of services on the part of populations needing them. To address this, community leaders underlined their own role as intermediaries,

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proposing approaches to beneficiary selection and noting that they are well placed to identify those in need, as are local councils. This comes with its own equity considerations, as other respondents identified local leaders as embezzling assistance meant for the most vulnerable.

NGOs may be challenged by the fact that the practical limitations that they face in providing aid are not well understood - there were many calls for broader provision of support, reflecting the wide scope of needs, without reflection on the feasibility (financial and otherwise) thereof.

> *"Some of the services non-governmental organisations and offices provide do not include all children. Many children are deprived of the services provided by these organisations. Also, there is no transparency because children receive services based on relationships with the organisations. It is necessary to provide inclusive and extensive services so that all children can benefit from them. Additionally, these services should be provided to remote areas so that families and children who live in remote areas can benefit from these services in an equal and fair way."[45]*

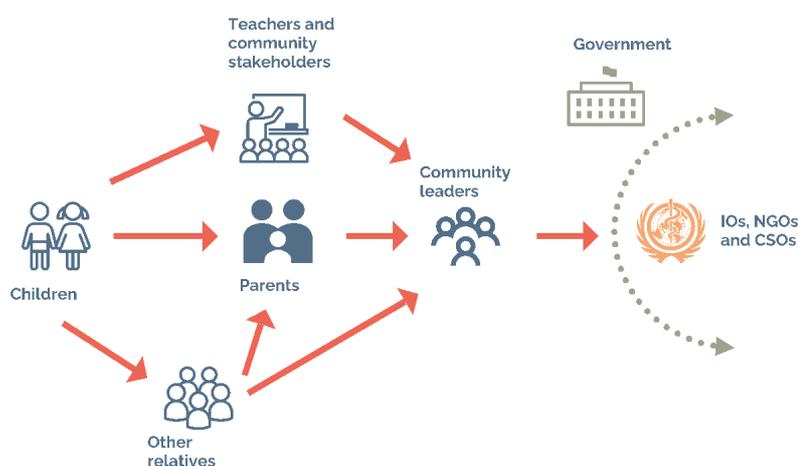## 3.2 Exploring stakeholder dynamics

Examining the roles of these stakeholders within the communities visited highlights similar dynamics and challenges across provinces.

Past research by Samuel Hall and other actors on parent-child relationships on questions linked to child protection in Afghanistan have found that decision-making within households can be more complex than a simple male head-of-household decision as is sometimes the stereotype, but also that real and perceived agency around many decisions linked to child protection (child labour, child marriage, for example) is limited.[46] Respondents to one FGD in Herat, for example, when describing child protection issues which their children – and others – now faced, nearly all removed the element of choice from the path leading to these, explaining for example,

Figure 2 - Actors and advocates supporting and limiting children's access to child protection support offered by IOs / NGOs / CSOs

> *"(...) because her father is unable to work and does not have any source of income, we have to make her (11-year-old daughter) marry so that we can make a life using her dowry. The rest of my daughters go to school."[47]*

● While male heads of households do have the strongest voice, and final decisions generally rest with them, a range of stakeholders within and around households can impact these decisions.

● Children interviewed as part of this research largely presented a coherent picture of their interactions with different stakeholders, with parents, and other key family makers and community members acting as intermediaries between children and organisations providing child protection services, depicted in Figure 2.

● Although in some cases they cause some child protection issues, parents emerge as the first point of support for most children. In seeking to access support more broadly, children identified actors ranging from

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[45] FGD18, local protection actor, Ghor.
[46] Samuel Hall's 2018 research for UNICEF on Child Marriage in Afghanistan, for example, found that the research "challenged narratives that suggest decision-making on child marriage is unilateral", explaining that "while decision-making is firmly centred within the family unit, and male household members are likely to have greater or final say, most reported women and other family members being involved in the process. It was common to report that children ought to have a say in their marriage, even if they were not allowed to make the final decisions." (p 11). Research on child returns to Afghanistan found that children were involved in the decision to return in just under 40% of cases. (p. 27, SCI from Europe to Afghanistan)
[47] FGD1, parents/caregivers, female, Herat.

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close relatives (usually male) to teachers and community leaders. One child in Herat detailed, "I share my worries with my parents so that they can help me. However, if someone has harassed me, I will let the CDC head, the community leader, and elders, such as my paternal and maternal uncles, know about It as well."[48] These community level stakeholders, who can support dispute resolution within households and communities, have variable levels of influence when it comes to accessing 'external' (governmental and IO / NGO / CSO – linked) forms of support.

● Community and religious leaders frequently play a 'gatekeeper' role of sorts. Existing research has underlined that "Village leadership can play an important role in maximising the provision of security and public goods in the collective interests of the village population, but clearly, this does not always happen."[49] Organisations must thus understand community dynamics where they plan to implement as part of programme design. This is key to ensuring prior they collaborate with stakeholders who are well-positioned to identify vulnerable households responding to targeting criteria and have the needed means of triangulating information provided.

● Finally, and most critically, organisations wishing to conduct child protection activities are grappling with a new operational context. From a programmatic standpoint, while humanitarian organisations can access new districts for activities, the bureaucracy around programme implementation has been challenging. Although the DfAs have stated support for many projects,[50] they have evidenced, in many instances, a strong desire for involvement in decision-making and monitoring around programmatic activities. MoUs with relevant government ministries are required for implementation, which can slow down planning - and aid delivery - significantly. Government involvement has also sought to focus programming on certain themes. For example, one KII underlined that as communities themselves are requesting food assistance, the government is enforcing a focus on this - rather than planned activities on child protection.[51] A clear tension is evidenced between governmental stakeholders, who expressed that they should be choosing activities and locations for implementation, and NGOs who wish to do so themselves.

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[48] CS3, male child, Herat.
[49] Adam Pain, "Living With Radical Uncertainty in Rural Afghanistan: The work of survival", for AAN, February 2022.
[50] KII18, international NGO, male, Western Afghanistan.
[51] KII19, national NGO, male, Herat.

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4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 Conclusion

Organisations working on child protection in Afghanistan are able to operate in previously inaccessible areas, opening new opportunities to support Afghan children at a time when humanitarian needs are growing dramatically in scale and scope. With over two-thirds of Afghanistan's population requiring humanitarian assistance in 2023[52], the question of where and how organisations can best plan their activities is primordial.

This research interviewed children, parents and caregivers, and involved community members to understand what the key child protection risks and needs are in some newly accessible districts in Herat, Ghor and Badghis – addressing a key evidence gap to allow War Child UK and other organisations to better plan programming efforts. The challenges raised were consistent across the six districts visited.

In addition to considering the scope of needs, organisations in western Afghanistan organisations face a range of logistical and practical challenges. The change in authorities has further disrupted the humanitarian system in Afghanistan, contributing to more widespread needs and requiring organisations to rethink where, how, and under what circumstances they can provide support. Child protection is an especially delicate field. It touches on a number of culturally sensitive practices, in particular linked to gender, and girls and women are less accessible to organisations wishing to support them, and the breadth of immediate needs. The widespread nature of humanitarian need in some cases deprioritises children. For example, in a context where children are suffering from acute malnutrition there is likely to be pressure focused on programming to target that.

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[52] UNICEF, "Humanitarian Action for Children", 2023.

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In planning priorities and activities in new locations then, organisations like War Child will need to take a three pronged approach: *idealistic* – seeking to ensure that Afghan children are able to realise their rights in the same way as children worldwide, and advocating for alignment with global standards; *contextual* - understanding the context within child protection challenges are occurring, to propose solutions which are adapted to the multi-sectoral nature of many of these challenges; and *pragmatic* – considering the widespread nature of needs, taking into account implementation realities such as access, local authority priorities, and other organisations' coverage, in planning programming. An integrated approach to programming is critical to creating space for action on underserved needs such as mental health.

The recommendations proposed in the next section propose high-level recommendations 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, as well as highlighting selected sectoral entry points based on respondent feedback. These have been developed based on critical research findings – and the children's perspectives detailed below.

Child-identified solutions to key child protection needs

Needs assessments frequently focus on household-level perspectives. For organisations wishing to address child protection needs, understanding children's priorities is critical to avoid missing protection needs. In this child-centred assessment, children in each location were asked about their main needs and priorities. There were remarkably consistent across districts visited, as children highlighted educational, environmental, economic, and service-related needs:

Education

- Literacy classes for young women and girls to address limited education provision.
- Community-led sensitisation campaigns on child marriage.
- Walls around schools so girls could play safely, and improved infrastructure more generally to prevent learning disruptions during colder months. This also includes the need for more schools in rural locations.

Environment

- Bridges so that children can cross rivers safely to travel to school, work, and for play.
- Safe places to play, including new playgrounds, in particular for girls.
- Safe and warm accommodations for all children, particularly IDPs and victims of domestic violence.

Income generation

- Income-generating opportunities for boys and girls who work on the street and collect garbage.
- Vocational centres and vocational training to support illiterate and unemployed girls and young women in developing income generating skills.

Access to WASH and health services

- A clean and consistent water supply within communities to avoid dangers and risks from travelling long distances for water, and health and education impacts thereof.
- Construction of local health facilities, particularly in rural areas which currently lack them.

4.2 Way forward

The following recommendations focus on creating a more integrated and coordinated approach to addressing child protection needs, building on existing mechanisms and interventions in Western Afghanistan.

- **Integrate child protection services** into existing health and other programming, with a focus on child-friendly PSS work, into all aspects of humanitarian assistance.

- **Partner with local actors and influence local decision makers** to build their understanding of children's rights. Beyond awareness raising, activities should identify community-based and localised approaches to action on child needs. For example, this could include identifying local advocates, who have been through some of the challenges faced by children interviewed, and can talk to families about alternatives, or identifying where an existing Child-Friendly Space could be used to propose social activities to local children and provide more opportunities to play, or alternative educational approaches.

- **Revive the Child Protection Action Network (CPAN).** the national CPAN has been less active since 2021; it is critical to reinforce it, building on the linkages which exist at the provincial level with the shelters, and the coordination opportunities it offers.

- **Reinforce child-focused guidance on programme design and implementation** at the local level. Additional guidance is needed to include children across the programme cycle. As priorities, guidance should cover participatory programme design approaches, inclusive of child-focused needs assessments such as this one to confirm content *relevance*, and how to work with local stakeholders to target programming as per the design, ensuring *effectiveness*. For example – this could include gathering children's points of view on the development of new infrastructure.

- **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 within all programming are needed to allow women and girls to access aid for themselves or their children; similarly, home-based initiatives can broaden access to support activities. For example, radio programming to provide educational or PSS content could reach girls across many rural areas; under COVID-19, applications have also been developed to provide educational and PSS content to a range of ages. The specific parameters of what can be done will vary by location - women and girls should be consulted on how best to deliver services to them within their communities.

- **Adopt child-focused sectoral interventions:**

  a. **Child protection.** Key influencers at the community level (educators, religious leaders, parents / guardians who have dealt with specific challenges targeted) can be valuable partners in adopting a holistic approach to integrate a rights-based child protection agenda across all sectors of implementation. It is key to bring locally trusted voices to discussions of sensitive topics, such as working with parents to develop non-violent reactions to stress at home.

  b. **Health, PSS and WASH.** Integrate child-friendly PSS services into all sectors' programming, in particular health and WASH. 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. PSS support for children can be conceptualised at three levels for integration into programming, as proposed by UNICEF's *Global Multisectoral Operational Framework for Mental Health and PSS Support of Children, Adolescents and Caregivers Across Settings*, the child and adolescent, the caretaker, and the community levels. More generally, the support of localised health facilities is a key priority identified by children.

  c. **Education: focus on short-term alternative pathways.** From community-based education (CBEs) for children who have been out of school or are continuing to engage in work, to home-based solutions these offer an opportunity for more rapid support. Consideration should be given to support and strengthen local initiatives such as educational programmes within mosques currently engaging with girls, as well as remote (radio and internet) programmes, including increasing access to the latter.

  d. **Food Security and Livelihoods: child-sensitive aid criteria.** Clarity around beneficiary selection can help focus aid for households with children with additional needs.

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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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