HUMANITARIAN NEEDS

Decades of conflict have severely strained the education system in Afghanistan. Worsened by years of under-development, public schools do not have sufficient capacity to meet education demands and are not able to ensure minimum quality standards. While Afghanistan has made progress towards improving children’s access to education during the past decade with primary school enrolment rate increasing from 1 million to 8.5 million between 2002 and 2019, continued conflict, poverty and targeting of schools has put more stress on an already over-burdened education system. About one third of school-aged children, approximately 3.7 million children, remain out-of-school.

About 60 per cent of out-of-school children are girls and in some provinces as many as 85 per cent of girls are out-of-school. While girls’ access to education may be limited by cultural expectations, in many cases it is also tied to perceived and real security risks, as well as the appropriateness of the school curriculum and physical set-up under local cultural norms. An estimated 95 per cent of children with disabilities do not attend school. Children with disabilities are less likely to have their voices heard in society and are at higher risk in natural disasters. Their disabilities also place them at a higher risk of physical abuse, and often exclude them from receiving proper nutrition and other forms of humanitarian assistance. Around 11 per cent of people in Afghanistan are estimated to be living with at least one form of physical disability and they are often likely to be among the poorest members of the population.

Compounding the already concerning state of education for children across Afghanistan, reports of attacks on schools have continued throughout 2019, putting children at risk of death, injury and increased risk of them dropping out of school. While verified and aggregated data on such incidents is not widely available, a number of concerning incidents have been reported of child casualties due to explosions and of girls being sexually harassed and abused on their way to and from school.

Attacks on education, affecting the safety, access and mobility of students and teachers, does not only result in casualties and displacement, but also hinders the timely delivery of educational supplies such as textbooks and teaching and learning materials. As of December 2019, 488 schools were reported to have been forcibly closed due to insecurity, affecting around 150,000 (72,000 girls and 78,000 boys) children. Uruzgan (204 schools), Paktika (117 schools) and Logar (64 schools) are the top three provinces with the highest number of closed or damaged schools. There is, on average, nine per cent lower enrolment in education in areas that had a security incident the previous year. Only half of the schools in Afghanistan are housed in buildings.
Two million children in need of education live in conflict-affected areas. The Whole of Afghanistan Assessment showed that 19 per cent of crisis-affected and displaced households have unmet education needs, 27 per cent of whom are non-displaced drought affected households where children are likely to be relied upon to work instead of going to school. The North had the highest reports of school-aged children out of school, either due to conflict or natural disaster (19 per cent), or removal from school to work. In the East, 10 per cent of households said that schools within walking distance of where they were living were closed due to conflict or natural disaster, compared to only 1 to 3 per cent in all other regions. Hard-to-reach areas showed a higher rate of school closure with one third of educational facilities in the Central Highlands and South closed due to conflict.

Continuity of education is a significant problem in Afghanistan, with many children unable to progress from one stage of study to the next, largely due to capacity limitations in the nearest formal Government schools. Where there is a high concentration of internally displaced people or returnees, schools are often overburdened and unable to cope with the influx of children in need of education. Many returnee children are unable to enrol in schools due to insufficient or inappropriate documentation, while others are forced to enter in the wrong grade or be taught in an entirely unfamiliar curriculum or language. As needs continue to grow, an estimated 1.7 million children (902,400 boys and 817,600 girls) will be in need of
education in emergencies support in 2020. These include displaced children affected by conflict and natural disasters, returnees from Iran and Pakistan, and vulnerable out-of-school children.

GETTING VULNERABLE CHILDREN BACK IN SCHOOL

In 2019, nearly 210,000 emergency affected children were provided with education through 6,388 temporary classrooms and community-based schools. Furthermore, in 2019, 8,305 teachers (4,483 men, 3,821 women) were recruited and 11,216 teachers (5,835 men, 5381 women) were trained on child-centred, protective and interactive learning methodologies, classroom management, social cohesion and peace education, life skills and psychosocial support. The quality of teaching was improved through standardisation of Teacher Training Packages in coordination with Ministry of Education and partners.

Education for children in emergencies serves as a form of protection for children by keeping them away from common forms of harm and risk, including child labour, or playing in areas with mines and explosive remnants of war. Education is fundamental for human, social, and economic development. Access to safe education in emergencies provides children with a sense of normalcy which many have lacked for years and with an opportunity to play and interact with peers.

Education partners have been collaborating with protection agencies to jointly prioritise the highest-need districts and are increasingly integrating protection programme into education, such as the inclusion of basic psychosocial first aid, training teachers to recognise signs of distress in children and when referrals are needed. A Comprehensive Safe Schools Framework with linkages to child protection is also under development.

Community-based education for children with disabilities

Farid was three years old when his father divorced his mother. By age four, he had already suffered several types of violence. Farid was sent to live with his aunt when he was seven and became separated from his mother and younger brother who continued living with his stepmother and father.

Farid’s aunt has been supporting him through her wages of approximately 3,000 AFN (about US$39) per month which she earns through her embroidery services. Farid is living with a mental disability which makes him more at risk of being isolated and deprived of access to education. Only five per cent of children with disabilities and special needs are enrolled in school and drop-out rates are high. A common belief is that children with disabilities cannot learn and the lack of special education facilities for these children such as access ramps for children with physical disabilities reinforces this exclusion.

Community-based schools can be a lifeline for children like Farid living in remote parts of Guzara District in the western province of Hirat as they are centrally-located and have flexible timings. When staff from an NGO came to Farid’s village, his aunt immediately enrolled him in the programme. "Farid has a disability and cannot go to public school. He will miss all the learning opportunities and our home is also far from the public school, and Farid is afraid of losing his way," she said.

Farid has since been attending classes for four months. "I study every day from 1 pm to 4:30 pm. I have learned a lot during this period. Now I can write: ‘Mother,’ ‘Baba’ and so on. We really love our
teacher who is extremely caring and kind”. He further added, “I am happy to be able to read and write and hope this project goes on for years to come to include poor and destitute children, orphans, and the mentally and physically disabled”.

According to the 2020 Humanitarian Needs Overview, 1,720,000 emergency-affected children (902,400 boys, 817,600 girls) are in need of education in emergencies support this year. Children with disabilities and special needs are one of the most marginalized and excluded groups in society. Facing daily discrimination in the form of negative attitudes, lack of adequate policies and legislation, as well as a lack of provisions at schools and other structural considerations for children with physical disabilities, they are at high risk of being denied their rights to healthcare, education, and even survival.

However, as demonstrated by the case of Farid, children living with disabilities can reach their full potential with strong involvement from their family and community and when provided with accessible and inclusive learning spaces. “It has been one year since I have been living with my aunt, she is 28 years old and single. I love my aunt because she is the only one in my life who has always protected, loved and taken care of me”.

Community-based education

209,000 children are enrolled in Community Based Education (CBE) in Afghanistan, of whom more than half (55 per cent) are girls. CBE consists of grades 1-3 for children aged 7-9. In addition, Accelerated Learning Classes provide older children with catch-up classes to facilitate their return to the formal education system by helping them to complete the first 6 years of primary school in 3 years and enabling them to join a secondary school in Grade 7. CBE aims to address the barriers to education by bringing the school to villages. For example, education within walking distance is particularly critical for girls, and remains essential through adolescence. Girls’ enrolment rates drop by about half at grade six level, with a more significant drop in rural areas. CBE aims to address needs in hard-to-reach and insecure areas, scattered villages, and underserved pockets of society.

ONGOING CHALLENGES

Education partners continue to work with the Ministry of Education to ensure that the most vulnerable school-aged children and their teachers have access to safe, inclusive and quality education in a protected environment. Furthermore, continued engagement with the Ministry of Education, as the primary duty-bearing institution for the well-being of school-aged children, is essential to ensuring a successful transition from community-based classes to formal government schools.

However, security challenges, especially in hard-to-reach and non-state armed group (NSAG) controlled areas, continue to pose a challenge to humanitarian organisations working in education. Success is linked to organisational and community acceptance which can take time to establish and can be mitigated by engaging partners that already have presence in the province, while investing in effective coordination with local authorities and influencers such as community and religious leaders. Emergency schools take longer to establish if there are few trained teachers in areas of displacement due to conflict, poverty and natural disasters.

Girls are more likely to be deprived of their right to education, especially in NSAG-controlled areas. The 2019 Assessment of Hard-to-Reach Districts showed that in 91 per cent of settlements in hard-to-reach districts (hard-to-reach because of physical access barriers) most girls aged 6-17 were not able to attend school in 2019. With 60 per cent of out of school children being girls, investment in dedicated resources for girls, including safe schools as well as the recruitment of female teachers, remains a critical factor for the future of Afghanistan.

Due to the long-term nature of education, partners continue to advocate with donors for multi-year funding opportunities to ensure sustainable education outcomes. Advocacy is ongoing with the Ministry of
Education to strengthen support for education through increased financial resources for the delivery of quality, sustainable and accessible education in Afghanistan. Afghanistan’s Law on the Protection of Child Rights – previously referred to as the ‘Child Act’ and passed by Presidential decree in March 2019 and currently being debated in Parliament – must be enforced to ensure children’s rights to go to school. Additionally, the Law provides for equal rights of boys and girls, including those with disabilities, to free and mandatory education up to the completion of secondary school and no person, including parents, can deny children of these rights.

The consequences of children not attaining quality education or having their education interrupted has immediate and long-term effects on their psychosocial well-being, cognitive development, and ability to integrate into the skilled labour market. Almost half of the population (48 per cent) are under the age of 15 years which is the highest in the world. In 2020, children comprise 56 per cent of people in need in Afghanistan. Persistent violence, discrimination, and denial of access to essential services – particularly education and healthcare – undermine their right to a safe and secure environment. According to a nationwide study of the mental health situation in Afghanistan conducted in 2018, almost 10 per cent of children encounter challenges in fulfilling daily life habits (going to school, playing etc.) due to mental health problems, with grave consequences for their education and development, especially for those living in conflict areas.

Making a difference for internally displaced children

Atal is a 13-year-old boy living in Hakim Sahib Adda Village in Kandahar City along with his five brothers, five sisters, mother, and father. Atal, along with his family were displaced from Shah Wali Kot District due to heavy conflict in their village. In fact, all the residents in the village where he lives are internally displaced from neighbouring districts and provinces of Kandahar Province.

Atal’s father works as a day labourer, but as the work is irregular, the family lacks a stable income inhibiting Atal and his siblings from attending government-run schools, which are far away incurring transport costs that they cannot afford. Thanks to community-based education classes established for displaced and returnee children, Atal is now studying in third grade.

Atal said, “We left our village thinking that we will have a better life, but who knew that we would face more problems than ever?” He added, “But, the good thing for me is this that now, every day, my brothers, sisters and I are going to school and learning for hopes of a good future. I want to be a teacher, and this class is an opportunity that will help me to fulfil my dream.”

An education partner provided all the necessary materials for the classes, in addition to hygiene kits to ensure that students receive a quality education and are not further marginalised. Atal’s teacher said, “Atal is one of my most active students. He is very punctual and always active in class.”