



ARNEC
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Hard times for children: A focus on Afghanistan

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COVID, climate, conflict...displacement...the world for children has rarely been more difficult. With each new crises, we need to continue to speak up for the ones that preceded it, along with the crises that continue to unfold each day—from Haiti to Madagascar, from Venezuela to Ethiopia, from Yemen to Ukraine. Let's take the case of children in Afghanistan.

Before the onset of the Afghan political crises, as many as 18.4 million Afghans needed humanitarian assistance. This represents almost half of the entire population of the country, including 8.2 million children.ⁱ In January 2022, the UN estimated that 24.4 million people need such assistance, a 30 percent increase.ⁱⁱ It was estimated that in June 2021, 46 % of all civilian casualties consisted of innocent women and children, and violent attacks have only increased.ⁱⁱⁱ

As conditions deteriorated, displacement followed. UNHCR estimated that 80 percent of internally displaced persons were women and children.^{iv} Millions more

are refugees fleeing to neighboring countries for their safety. Displacement increases the risk for women and children. Population movement is likely to continue throughout 2022, bringing more economic hardship and stress, anxiety and danger for women trying to care for their children.

According to the World Bank, because of the political turmoil of 2021, 10 million Afghans were known to be at high risk of falling into poverty.^v More recently, the International Rescue Committee reported that 97 percent of the population face poverty and that starvation could kill more Afghans than the last 20 years of war.^{vi} Water shortages, lack of access to adequate nutrition and health services continue. Such conditions have dire consequences for the developing child, undermining the ability to provide nurturing care:

- Acute malnutrition has been identified to be above the threshold levels in 27 out of the 34 total provinces. Undernutrition is contributing to 45 % of child deaths.^{vii}
- Children are at risk due to lack of access to preventative health care, and in 2021 there was a rapid increase in the reported cases of measles across the 321 districts in the country.^{viii}
- Between August and October 2021, 16 % of the Afghans reported that there was at least one member within the immediate family who had incurred some form of disability.^{ix}
- A survey by Save the Children found that a third of families have lost their entire household income since August. 18 % of families have sent children out to work, with more than one million children thought to be working.^x
- According to UNICEF Humanitarian Action for Children report of 2022, over 10 million school-aged children in Afghanistan need education assistance, in addition to the 4.2 million children already out of school.^{xi}
- Girls in conflict affected areas are vulnerable to multiple types of risks that range from gender-based violence to early marriage.^{xii}

The reality behind these numbers lies in the individual stories of children shut out from education, girls unable to attend school, mothers watching helplessly as opportunities shrink, children becoming sick and unbearable stress mounting. As if COVID and conflict are not enough, climate change brings drought, crop failure and water shortages.

Courageous efforts are being made by community-based organizations and international groups working inside and out of Afghanistan to support women, to bring attention to the continued crises and to find new solutions. But so much more needs to be done.

The world cannot turn away from this picture. We cannot become complacent as other crises mount. We must continue to bear witness to the realities of children in Afghanistan and others around the world. We must work to increase humanitarian assistance and advocate for improved policies so that children do not continue to suffer. We must promote peaceful solutions to conflict. All children deserve nurturing care and strong families and productive communities. Every action towards this goal brings hope for change.

The views expressed above are those of the authors. ARNEC Conversations is a knowledge platform providing free space for the ECD community to exchange insights and advance the agenda for young children in the Asia-Pacific region.

ⁱ Moving Minds Alliance and ECDAN Joint Statement on Early Childhood Development and the Afghanistan and Haiti Crises, https://movingmindsalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/mma_ecdan_joint_statement.pdf?fbclid=IwAR0nNb6ux_7lj123qIvpLVPeaTlaAAzVQajczk-pyCLRqKTLHkHztq1rtIs Accessed March 13, 2022

ⁱⁱ Get the Facts: What's Happening Now in Afghanistan | USA for UNHCR <https://www.unrefugees.org/news/get-the-facts-what-s-happening-now-in-afghanistan/> Accessed 31 March 2022

ⁱⁱⁱ Humanitarian Action for Children 2021 - Afghanistan, Revision 1 (August 2021), <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/humanitarian-action-children-2021-afghanistan-revision-1-august-2021>, pg#1, Accessed 9 March 2022

^{iv} Afghanistan Refugees 2021: Facts & Crisis News | USA for UNHCR <https://www.unrefugees.org/emergencies/afghanistan> Accessed 14 March 2022

^v The World Bank in Afghanistan, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/afghanistan/overview#1> Accessed 14 March 2022

^{vi} International Rescue Committee (IRC) (15 February 2022), Six months on from change in power, IRC warns starvation could kill more Afghans than last twenty years of war as 97 per cent of population faces poverty, <https://www.rescue.org/press-release/six-months-change-power-irc-warns-starvation-could-kill-more-afghans-last-twenty-years> Accessed 9 March 2022

^{vii} UNICEF Humanitarian Action for Children (2022), <https://www.unicef.org/media/112576/file/2022-HAC-Afghanistan.pdf>, pg#2, Accessed 31 March 2022

^{viii} Humanitarian Action for Children 2021 - Afghanistan, Revision 1 (August 2021), <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/humanitarian-action-children-2021-afghanistan-revision-1-august-2021>, pg#2, Accessed 9 March 2022

^{ix} Whole of Afghanistan Assessment (WoAA 2021), https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/REACH_AFG_WoAA2021_Key-Provincial-Findings.pdf, pg#4, Accessed 9 March 2022

^x Save the Children (14 February 2022), AFGHANISTAN: A Fifth of Starving Families Sending Children to Work as Incomes Plummet in Past Six Months, <https://www.savethechildren.org/us/about-us/media-and-news/2022-press-releases/afghanistan-starving-families-children-work-income-plummets-six-months> Accessed 9 March 2022

^{xi} UNICEF Humanitarian Action for Children (2022), <https://www.unicef.org/media/112536/file/HAC-2022-Overview.pdf>, pg#6, Accessed 31 March 2022

^{xii} Girls' Education Must Come First (6 March 2022), <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2022/03/06/girls-education-must-come-first> Accessed 14 March 2022