

Save the Children in Afghanistan

Save the Children has been by the side of Afghan children and families for the past 18 years – years of war, political turmoil, economic ruin, oppression of girls and women, drought and, now, emerging hope. Our courageous national and international staff has kept humanitarian relief and essential development programs operating continuously throughout the country's transitions, and today is working as diligently as ever to help tens of thousands of children and their families, especially mothers, as they continue on the long road to socioeconomic and political recovery. The challenges for these children and women are daunting:

- Instability and violence remain a factor in much of Afghanistan. Although Kabul is bustling with people, traffic and small-scale commerce, many parts of the country remains extremely underdeveloped and insecure.
- Although landmine and unexploded ordnance (UXO) clearance is underway, Afghanistan is one of the world's most heavily mined countries. Despite the successes of Save the Children's well-known Landmine Education Program, which has been implemented through many colleague organizations, school teachers and communities, these insidious devices still injure or kill hundreds of people annually: children while they are playing or collecting water and firewood, and adults while they are working in their fields and traveling.
- Extreme poverty, reflected in the fact that the average Afghan household's monthly income is \$6, pervades the country, and most families lack the opportunities, resources and, sometimes, the skills and knowledge to restore their economic livelihoods.
- Malnutrition is pervasive in Afghanistan, and a recent nutritional survey conducted by Save the Children found that many children are malnourished because they simply do not have access to food rich in vitamins, nor do their mothers know some of the essential facts about good nutrition.
- There is poor access to good health care throughout the country. For every 1,000 Afghan children born, 165 die within the first year, the vast majority from preventable diseases. Women have little access to reproductive health services; the maternal mortality rate for Afghan women is one of the world's worst.
- Access to quality education is also quite limited, still, in Afghanistan, especially in rural areas. Although an estimated 6 million children are enrolled in school this year, several million more children are not enrolled.

Save the Children began work with Afghan refugees in Pakistan in 1985, and we started cross-border programs in Afghanistan in 1989. Then, in 1995, we initiated health, microcredit and landmine education programs from within- the country. In late 2000, Save the Children undertook a number of initiatives to help families survive a devastating drought, and to conduct nutritional surveillance activities, in northern Afghanistan. Through early 2003, we had provided 674,000 children and adults in 15 districts with lifesaving food rations. Additionally, 14,300 families received wheat seeds; we made over 1,000 drought coping loans worth \$100,000 to families, and we organized "food-for-work" and "cash-for-work" projects to provide families with food and income in exchange for labor to repair or rebuild schools, health clinics and roads.

Now, Save the Children is sustaining and, wherever possible, expanding essential development programs that are addressing the urgent and long-term needs of some of Afghanistan's most vulnerable children and families. We believe that a critical step in the rebuilding of Afghanistan will be to ensure that women and girls have equal access to health services and education, and that all development programs take their needs into account. This is not only the right thing to do; it also will have a lasting positive impact on present and future generations of Afghans and on the world community.

HEALTH – In Kabul and in several provinces in northern Afghanistan, we help protect the health of children under age 5 and women of childbearing age by working with hospitals and health clinics to immunize children and monitor their growth; to control diarrhea and pneumonia, which are both preventable killers of children; to train medical staff about the treatment of these and other common childhood illnesses; to distribute medicines, and to heat hospital rooms in the winter. In communities near hospitals and clinics, Save the Children conducts educational activities so adults, especially parents, can learn how to help prevent children's illnesses, and, when children are sick, recognize early symptoms of common diseases and seek prompt treatment for them. We also partner with UNICEF and the Afghan Ministry of Health to improve government capacity to plan and implement life saving immunization programs. And, we conduct community-based research to identify barriers to good child health.

EDUCATION – Save the Children works with the Ministry of Education in Afghanistan to increase access to education through school construction and rehabilitation, and through community mobilization. We support associations of teachers and parents (both mothers and fathers) that work to promote education in their communities and take a role in education decision-making. These associations also organize community contributions to school construction. In two northern provinces, for example, women in PTAs made warm and colorful gilims (rugs) for all classrooms so children do not have to sit on bare cement floors when they are in class.

Save the Children is also working to improve the quality of education by supporting teachers with expert technical assistance and training, and by supplying teaching and learning materials such as library book boxes, which contain.

This year, Save the Children started a community-based early childhood development program that works with communities to establish home-based playgroups, facilitated by women from the community, for children age 3 to 6 years. The aim of the program is to increase community awareness of the importance of play for pre-school age children's development, and to strengthen their engagement in providing opportunities for young children's full development.

LANDMINE AWARENESS – Since 1996, Save the Children has educated tens of thousands of Afghan children about the dangers of landmines and unexploded ordnance -- first in schools and then in non-school settings during the Taliban era. As schools reopen and children return to their classrooms, a "training of trainers" program for teachers has been implemented with the goal of having 4,000 teachers able to instill landmine awareness in children. In 2002 "Quick Impact" landmine awareness activities were introduced in schools to reach over 268,000 children; staff from 84 partner organizations were trained to provide landmine awareness education, and 21,000 notebooks and 7,000 calendars with information about landmines were distributed to students.

In 2003, in light of Save the Children's landmine education success in the formal school sector, the Ministry of Education has asked us to address landmine education in the non-formal education sector in order to reach particularly vulnerable children. In response we plan to train at least 4,500 teachers through our Landmine Education Program and enable them to reach 400,000 children throughout Afghanistan. Additionally, we are working to address the needs of children and their families living in mine/UXO contaminated areas by using community-based, informal programs, such as "child-to-child" groups, to reduce children's risky behavior in these areas.

CHILD PROTECTION AND PARTICIPATION – In Kabul and the northern city of Mazar-i Sharif, we work with children and communities to help them take action on issues that children identify as threatening to their safety. With our support of innovative activities like "child-to-child" groups, children are encouraged to voice their concerns about things that cause them harm, worry and anxiety. We then work to mobilize children and their parents to seek solutions to these problems, and we are even able to provide small grants to community groups so they can make appropriate changes in their neighborhoods. For example, people in one Kabul community have worked to make a busy and dangerous traffic crossing, where children were having accidents, safer. In another community, families have decided to cover hundreds of open wells, which children were falling into when they went to collect water for their houses. In addition to these practical child-focused activities, Save the Children is working to raise the profile and capacity of child protection and child participation work throughout Afghanistan by training our colleagues from government ministries, partner non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and UN agencies in community-based child protection work.

ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES AND FOOD SECURITY – Since 1996, in four districts of northern Jawzjan province, Save the Children's Group Guaranteed Lending and Savings (GGLS) programs have given more than 3,000 women access to credit and opportunities for saving. These women – who are primarily carpet weavers and principle wage earners for their families – face much more difficult borrowing terms from carpet dealers, who are their only other access to credit, and they would definitely not have access to savings opportunities without our programs. In 2001, in order to improve our own efforts to help these women, and others, better their economic status, Save the Children started to research how families actually "build" their livelihoods. This field-based research, combined with our continuing interest in children's nutritional status, has led us into a partnership with several government ministries, UN agencies and other NGOs to pioneer and pilot a National Food Security and Nutritional Surveillance System, which is already providing important information to help improve development programs in northern Afghanistan. Eventually, the system we are developing will be used by the government and other organizations in all 32 provinces of Afghanistan for planning as well as monitoring and evaluation of factors and programs that affect the livelihoods and well being of Afghan families.

June 23, 2003