



**“MY FUTURE
LOOKS BLEAK”**



Save the Children

Children's lives one year since the Taliban take-over

Acknowledgements

Firstly, Save the Children would like to acknowledge the 240 girls and boys across Afghanistan who took part in this consultation. We are grateful for their time and thank them for sharing so openly their views, experiences and hopes for the future. Their enthusiasm and passion to have their voices heard and speak out on behalf of other girls and boys in their communities has been an inspiration to all of us.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

When the Taliban regained control of Afghanistan in August 2021, the international community reacted swiftly. Billions of dollars in international aid were withdrawn and Afghanistan's foreign currency reserves were frozen. The economy went into freefall and public services collapsed. In the past 12 months, poverty, food prices and unemployment have dramatically increased, and drought continues to tighten its grip on the country.

Almost 50% of the population in Afghanistan is under 15 years old, making this humanitarian crisis, a children's crisis.¹ It is therefore critical we hear from children themselves about how their lives have changed in the past twelve months, what challenges they face, and what they think aid organisations should know and do, moving forward. Supporting children's right to participation, Save the Children consulted with 240 children – 122 girls and 118 boys – between 9 and 17 years old (inclusive) across 28 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), covering seven provinces in Afghanistan. Data collection took place from 29 May to 2 June 2022.

The key findings from these consultations are summarised below:

Children identified two key reasons for the changes and challenges in their lives. On one hand, restrictions introduced since the Taliban took control have changed what day-to-day life looks like for children and their families. Many girls and boys said that this limits what they can and cannot do. On the other, children believe that the economic crisis – associated with unemployment, high prices of food and other items, and the drought – has led to poverty and hunger in their families and communities.

Children's supportive environment has changed significantly in the last year. Adults are stressed, worried and desperate, which affects how they interact with each other and with children. Communities are less close than they were before, because families have to focus on their own survival and can no longer help others. Relationships between community members are strained and more tense. Due to restrictions and the economic hardship, social activities that used to bring communities and families together, such as weddings, Eid celebrations and visiting one another, no longer take place the way they used to or not at all. Similarly, children's relationships with their parents worsened in the past

year. Whereas before, their parents would listen to them, children no longer feel heard or as supported as they used to. Parents are less patient and get angry more easily. In some cases, this is also leading to more violence in the home.

In many cases, parents have no other choice but to make heart-breaking decisions to keep their families alive, affecting girls' and boys' ability to enjoy their childhood. Girls in particular (across all age groups) spoke about child marriage, explaining this happens more often now than before. Girls worry they too will have to get married early, which they feel robs them of the opportunity to go to school and have a brighter future. Another way in which families try to cope is by sending their sons, including those below 18, and sometimes as young as 13 years old, to other countries to work. As boys travel without formal documentation and enter other countries through informal routes, they are separated from their caregivers, become unaccompanied and are exposed to significant risks.

Girls and boys across all age groups are also spending more time working and doing chores than they used to, to support the household, often at the expense of going to school or playing. Children, but boys in particular, are engaged in hard and sometimes dangerous forms of child labour, such as carpet weaving, working on farms, in mines or in brick factories. Especially for boys, this may require them to leave their homes and travel alone to other provinces, becoming unaccompanied and separated from their caregivers. Girls and boys told us working makes them tired and sad, saying they would prefer to study. Having to find work and earn an income puts a lot of pressure on boys.

Children's opportunities to learn have significantly changed in the past year, due to a combination of restrictions and the economic crisis. Most girls are no longer allowed to attend school above grade six due to the Taliban's ban on secondary school girls attending classes. Families and community members may further reinforce this, even for younger girls, not just by restricting girls from attending school, but also by demotivating them because adults no longer believe going to school makes a difference in their future. Families not being able to afford a burqa or hijab, as well as a lack of female teachers (who are the only ones allowed to teach girls) further prevents girls from attending school. In addition, children, in particular boys, drop out of school to work, or children drop out because their families cannot afford

¹ Afghanistan: Humanitarian Response Plan (2022); accessible [here](#).



PHOTO: SAVE THE CHILDREN

Children's health has deteriorated in the past twelve months. Girls and boys said they feel sick and weak more often, and mentioned having headaches, body aches, fever, a cough and stomach aches. They linked this to the lack of (healthy) food, but some of these symptoms may also potentially be linked to the heavy work children are engaged in, the stress they experience or limited access to clean water and limited hand washing practices. Moreover, accessing medical care has become very difficult. Health facilities may be too far away, but even when they are close, children's families cannot afford treatment. In addition, children said there are fewer doctors and medication shortages. Children and their families try to cope by borrowing money, using traditional medicine, or by simply waiting at home, hoping they will get better.

The changes and challenges in children's lives have left children extremely worried about their own future and the future of Afghanistan. Children can no longer do the things they like doing and should be doing at their age. In addition to the day-to-day worries about having food on the table and survival, children are worried and feeling hopeless about the longer term and what their lives will look like in Afghanistan. Children across all age groups mentioned various symptoms of psychosocial distress, such as feeling stressed, anxious and depressed. Especially girls are disappointed in how their lives have changed and what this means for their futures, as they feel they no longer have the rights and freedoms they used to.

Despite the hardship children are going through, children envisioned their future, as one in which they help others in their community, for example as teachers, doctors, midwives, or teaching others skills to earn a living. However, they also recognised how essential it is for them to go to school and study to be able to achieve these dreams and for Afghanistan to have a brighter future. Children provided recommendations for what they feel Save the Children and other organisations should focus on. These are listed in chapter 6.

school-related expenses. Learning spaces may not be conducive to learning, or may even be deemed unsafe by parents and children. Lastly, there are fewer teachers in schools (some have fled the country, others left because of the lack of salary) and many of them have to teach subjects they have not studied for. Children described teachers as being demotivated because they do not receive their salary (on time). This in turn demotivates children to study. The current situation in Afghanistan makes it harder for children to be hopeful about their studies and focus on their lessons.

Opportunities for children to play and see their friends have become limited, affecting their wellbeing and relationships with their peers. Girls in particular are affected by restrictions put in place by the de facto authorities (for example, having to wear a hijab or burqa, having to go with a *Mahram*, being banned from parks), but in some provinces certain public places have been closed for everyone. Because families are struggling to make ends meet, children cannot afford to go places or do activities with others, or they have to spend their time working instead. Lastly, some children described feeling unsafe or scared in public places, as restrictions are violently enforced. All these barriers prevent children from playing and meaningfully interacting with their friends, which they themselves identified as being important for feeling happy, being healthy, and dealing with the challenges in their lives.

Because of the economic crisis, children and their families are cutting down the number of meals they eat, and eat fewer diverse food groups. Prices in the markets have skyrocketed, leaving many households unable to afford the types and amount of food they were used to. Children shared they eat fewer meals a day, and when they do eat, they will eat bread or rice. For many children meat, vegetables and fruits have disappeared from their diets. Girls and boys worry about the lack of food and not being able to eat healthily, describing a lack of energy, losing weight and finding it hard to do their daily activities, such as working and studying.

"Children used to go to school, play, talk and laugh with their friends but now they have to leave all the things they love to do."

Girl 9-14, Kabul

1. INTRODUCTION

This August marks one year on since the Taliban took control of Afghanistan. Prior to August 2021, the country was already experiencing multiple, compounding humanitarian crises, characterised by decades of conflict, insecurity, the COVID-19 pandemic, and drought, leading to increased poverty and hunger across the country. When the Taliban took power in August 2021, the international community reacted swiftly. Billions of dollars in international aid were withdrawn and Afghanistan's foreign currency reserves were frozen. The economy went into freefall and public services collapsed. Poverty, food prices and unemployment have dramatically increased, and drought continues to tighten its grip on the country.

Almost 50% of the population in Afghanistan is under 15 years old, making this humanitarian crisis, a children's crisis. Save the Children believes it is therefore critical that humanitarian actors listen to children and ensure that their experiences and ideas influence the humanitarian response. At the same time, humanitarian actors should provide children with a platform that amplifies their voices, so they can advocate for change in their own lives. Children's right to participate in decision-making on issues that affect their lives should be supported at all times, even more so when other rights are under threat.

In support of that commitment as a child rights organisation, Save the Children consulted with 240 children across seven provinces in Afghanistan from 29 May to 2 June 2022, to hear from them how their lives have changed and what challenges they have faced since August 2021. This report presents the findings from these consultations and brings to the forefront what children want us and other humanitarian actors to know and do.

Almost 50% of the population in Afghanistan is under 15 years old, making this humanitarian crisis, a children's crisis.

AFGHANISTAN'S CRISIS IN NUMBERS

The following statistics illustrate how dire the situation for children and their families is.

An estimated **18.9 million people**, including **9.2 million children**, are facing critical levels of hunger, according to the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification update for June-November 2022.



Almost **6 million people** are on the brink of famine, according to the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification update for June-November 2022.



77% of children report going to bed hungry at some point in the past 30 days. Girls are almost twice as likely to report frequently going to sleep hungry than boys (Save the Children).

18 million people need health support, which represents a **20%** increase since 2021, according to the Humanitarian Response Plan for 2022.



97% of Afghans are at risk of falling below the poverty line this year, according to the United Nations Development Programme.



8 million children need support to access education in Afghanistan, according to the Humanitarian Response Plan for 2022.



850,000 out of **1.1 million secondary school girls** are not attending classes due to the ban on secondary school girls attending school, according to Save the Children and UNICEF.

4.5 million children need mental health and psychosocial support according to UNICEF.



In addition, Save the Children published a Multi-sectoral Needs Assessment report in March 2022, providing critical data on the humanitarian situation in Afghanistan.

[**THIS REPORT CAN BE ACCESSED HERE**](#)

2. OBJECTIVES

The aim of this children's consultation was to:

- Identify the most pressing needs, problems, risks and concerns for children today with regards to the crisis, identified by children themselves.
- Understand who is most greatly impacted by urgent needs not being met and problems children have identified.
- Supporting children's right to participation, by:
 - Using the findings to inform Save the Children's response plan both in the short and longer term, with a focus on hunger, education, health and nutrition and protection, to ensure our interventions meet children and their families' needs;
 - Adapting ongoing interventions where possible, based on what children told us;
 - Identifying ways in which children can play an active role in the response and its decision-making processes, based on their ideas and recommendations;
- Influence national and international clusters and ensure children's inputs are considered in these platforms;
- Inform advocacy and influencing at local, national and international levels focused on hunger, education, health and nutrition and protection.

In support of these objectives, the children's consultation sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the challenges that girls and boys, their families and their communities are facing at the moment and how has this changed in the past year?
2. How are children adapting to the challenges they face?
3. What are the key actions girls and boys believe could help in tackling hunger, education, health, nutrition and protection issues in their community?
4. What recommendations do children have for strengthening the humanitarian response, including the extent to which children are involved in decision-making?
5. What else do girls and boys think is important we know?

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 APPROACH

This children's consultation used a qualitative approach to answer the questions outlined above with girls and boys, aged 9 to 17 years old. For this consultation, child participatory methods and tools were used that have been tried and tested by Save the Children in other children's consultations.

Based on the overall research questions, multiple child participatory data collection tools were identified (see table 1 below). They were subsequently adapted to the overall objective of the consultation, targeted age groups and the context of Afghanistan. These tools

helped guide and structure Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with girls and boys in age-appropriate, participatory and context-sensitive ways. Using multiple tools also allowed for triangulation of data.

Tools were designed to focus on topics that would be appropriate to discuss in group-settings (for example excluding any questions specifically soliciting answers that could lead children to disclose sensitive information, which could put them at risk), whilst offering participants the opportunity to share reflections privately after the FGD at their own discretion if it concerned a more sensitive topic.

Table 1: Tools used in data collection

Tool	Brief Description of Tool	Age group
Body Mapping	Body mapping is a participatory activity, which uses a drawing of a body and body parts to ask questions about children's experiences over the last year.	9-14, 15-17
Mapping my Day	Mapping my Day is an activity that relies on children drawing what they do in a day, to understand their daily routine and how they feel about it; what they would change about the routine and how.	9-14, 15-17
Visionary Tree	The Visionary Tree is a participatory activity to understand children's dreams and vision for the future. This includes insights into how children would like to be more involved in the humanitarian response.	15-17
Messages to Aid Organisations	Messages to Aid Organisations is an activity during which children write a message to aid workers in their community. The message could be about what support they think aid organisations should provide in their community, something that children think the aid organisations do not see or have forgotten, a recommendation for them, or something that children want to share to help aid organisations to understand them better. In addition, children are asked to tell us what they would do to help children in Afghanistan if they were the boss of Save the Children.	9-14, 15-17

3.2 SAMPLING

Data collection covered the seven provinces in which Save the Children directly implements projects (see Table 2 for sampling by province). A purposive sampling approach was used to identify participants, from a sampling frame that includes all children participating in Save the Children projects. Only children currently supported through our projects were selected, to ensure follow-up support could be made available where necessary. This also ensured data was collected in communities that know and trust Save the Children.

In the sampling approach, children were divided into sub-groups, splitting younger (9-14 years) and older children (15-17 years), girls and boys. This allowed for the tailored use of age-appropriate tools per group as well as analysis and disaggregated findings by sub-group.

To determine the sample size, the general rule of thumb in qualitative research that saturation is reached between three to six focus groups per particular sub-population of interest was applied.² To be able to draw conclusions for each of these sub-groups, at least four FGDs were conducted per sub-group. The geographical spread of Save the Children's operational areas, as well as the groups of children accessible through the projects in these areas were also considered. Communities covered included both host communities as well as internally displaced ones, but this categorisation was not used to design the sampling approach. Efforts were made to ensure equal numbers of girls and boys were included.

Each FGD consisted of six to ten participants, to ensure there was enough time and opportunity for all children in a group to share their opinions about the topics of discussion. In total, 240 children took part in the consultation, of which 122 were girls and 118 were boys.

Table 2: Number of FGDs per province, by sub-group

	9-14 years old			15-17 years old		Total
Province	Boys	Girls	Mixed	Boys	Girls	
Balkh	1	1	0	1	1	4
Faryab	1	1	0	1	1	4
Jawzjan	1	1	0	1	1	4
Kabul	2	1	0	0	1	4
Kandahar	1	2	1	0	0	4
Nangarhar	2	0	0	0	2	4
Sar-e-Pul	1	1	0	1	1	4
Total	9	7	1	4	7	28

3.3 TRAINING, DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The data collection team consisted of Save the Children staff from the Education, Child Protection and MEAL teams. A two-day Training of Trainers was organized for MEAL staff (in English), who in turn trained the data collection teams in their provinces (in local languages, Dari and Pashto). The training covered the overall objective of the consultation, the research questions and each

specific tool, an orientation on facilitation and note taking good practices, as well as on the note taking templates (tailored to each tool). In addition, the training covered Child Participation and the Nine Basic Requirements for Meaningful and Ethical Child Participation, the risk assessment and mitigation measures, a refresher on Psychosocial First Aid (PFA) and referrals, and safeguarding in MEAL. Based on feedback received during the training, data collection tools, including their translation, were tweaked.

² Namey, E. *Riddle me this: How many interviews (or focus groups) are enough?* (2017); accessible [here](#).

Data was collected from 29 May until 2 June. MEAL staff in each province oversaw data collection for their locations. FGDs were conducted in local languages. At the end of each day, debriefings were organized with the MEAL team and the consultation lead to discuss progress and challenges. MEAL staff, together with the data collection team, transcribed notes into digital note taking templates and then translated the notes from Dari or Pashto into English. During translation, teams ensured the choice of words in English matched the words children had used in Dari or Pashto, to stay as close to what children shared with us as possible.

Qualitative data was then compiled and an inductive coding approach was used to identify themes and trends. Words such as *most*, *many*, *some* and a *few* were used to illustrate how frequent and prevalent certain themes, topics, or experiences were shared by children and/or across groups of children. The research questions were used as a guide and analysis was conducted for the four population sub-groups. Technical Advisors and MEAL staff overseeing data collection processes in the provinces supported the analysis processes. Where appropriate, secondary data was used to put findings into context.

3.4 MEANINGFUL AND ETHICAL CHILD PARTICIPATION

This children's consultation was designed, planned for and implemented using the Nine Basic Requirements for Meaningful and Ethical Child Participation (transparent, voluntary, relevant, respectful, inclusive, child-friendly, safe, supported by training and accountable).³ The Nine Basic Requirements were reviewed and actions identified for each, to ensure quality standards were met.

Ethics Review

Ethical approval for this children's consultation was obtained from the Ethics Review Committee of Save the Children United Kingdom. As part of the Ethics Review Process, the Terms of Reference, data collection tools, and the informed consent process were reviewed. Feedback from the Committee was used to improve processes further, prior to data collection.

Informed consent

Informed consent and assent processes were implemented with all participants and their caregivers, to ensure participation was voluntary. Consent and assent could be withdrawn at any point during the

process and if a child did not want to participate, they did not have to, even if their caregiver(s) did consent.

Where possible, consent and assent were obtained before the day of data collection, but this proved challenging in some of the most remote locations, so occasionally it was obtained on the day itself. Children and their caregiver(s) received relevant information (for example, the purpose, how children can contribute, that participation is voluntary and renegotiable, and how to contact Save the Children to share feedback and concerns) verbally and in writing – through a Participant Information Sheet, using age-appropriate language. Similarly, children and caregiver(s) could express their consent and assent in writing or verbally.

At the start of each FGD, facilitators shared relevant information again (using the Participant Information Sheet as a guide) and offered children another opportunity to confirm their willingness to participate.

Inclusivity

Data was collected with girls and boys in separate groups, in light of the context and to support gender-sensitive approaches. Female facilitators and note takers conducted the sessions with girls, whereas male facilitators and note takers conducted the sessions with boys. This helped ensure girls and boys of both age groups could participate in these sessions. It also provided ample opportunity for girls and boys to express their opinions freely and create a safe space, in particular for girls, to discuss issues that may be more sensitive. In one province, one FGD group was mixed due to small number of girls and boys enrolled for a particular project. A risk assessment was done in collaboration with the local *Shura*⁴ and class teachers prior to the FGD. The facilitators ensured girls and boys participated equally and notes were reviewed to ensure they included the voices of girls and boys.

FGDs were organised in locations where Save the Children conducts project activities on a regular basis, ensuring the spaces were safe, child-friendly, and accessible. Staff selected diverse groups of children, and not just those girls and boys who are normally the most outspoken and outgoing during project activities or in their class.

The tools and facilitation styles could be adapted during the FGD, depending on children's levels of comfort and ability to write down their opinions. However, it was not possible to make major adaptations to the consultation design and tools to facilitate the participation of children with significant intellectual disabilities or significant sensory impairments.

³ The Nine Basic Requirement for Meaningful and Ethical Child Participation (2021); accesible [here](#).

⁴ *Shuras* are community groups or councils with a leadership role.

Risk Mitigation

To support the design, planning and implementation of the children's consultation, a risk assessment was completed and relevant mitigation measures were identified. This included the risk of children becoming distressed during the consultations, risks of harm, abuse and exploitation of participants, children missing school because of the consultation, and data protection risks. The risk assessment was submitted as part of the Ethics Review process. The most pressing risks and their mitigation measures are explored below.

- Save the Children Education and Child Protection staff, with support from our MEAL staff, conducted the FGDs with children. All staff have signed the (Child) Safeguarding Procedure and have been trained in (child) safeguarding, including reporting concerns. In some of the provinces, safeguarding focal points were present during the data collection.
- These Education and Child Protection staff are trained in identifying child protection risks and providing PFA. They are also familiar with referral pathways for particular needs and concerns. This helped ensure staff could provide support and/or refer children, if any concerns were identified during the FGD.
- The activities and tools were designed to ask questions about the experiences of children in general, rather than eliciting children's personal experiences in detail (with a risk of disclosure in a group setting). Facilitators were also trained in responding appropriately to children disclosing sensitive information within the group, to avoid further risk.

- To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, names of children were only collected as part of the assent process and kept separate, but were not documented during the FGD itself. In the notes, children's responses were not connected to their name, but rather to a code, to allow for distinction between different children during analysis. The report does not disclose the specific communities where data was collected and only refers to provinces. Pictures taken during the FGDs do not disclose the identity of children who took part and were taken by a trained member of staff, in line with all relevant guidelines.
- As much as possible, the data collection teams planned FGDs outside of school hours. In some communities, this meant data collection teams had to be flexible and change the timing of the FGD to ensure children could attend classes.
- In advance of data collection, Save the Children sought authorization from local authorities.

Accountability

In line with the objectives of the children's consultation, Save the Children will use the findings to inform its own response, to influence national and international clusters, and to inform advocacy efforts at a local, national and international level. In addition, Save the Children has developed a plan to share findings with children who took part in the FGDs and other children in their communities. We will also communicate how these findings have been, or will be used. To support this, an adolescent-friendly version of the report will be produced in local languages. For each province, concrete actions are being identified to ensure children can play a bigger role in the humanitarian response.



3.5 STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

Strengths

- Because Save the Children staff working in these areas collected the data, and children have been receiving support from Save the Children, children felt comfortable sharing their opinions with our teams.
- The data collection teams consisted of staff who have extensive experience engaging with children. This helped create an open environment for children to share their opinions and staff were able to encourage children to participate in different ways (for example using role-play, energisers, etc.).
- Data collection teams reported that during most of the FGDs, children were extremely engaged and eager to share their thoughts. This meant that various sessions took longer than anticipated, but children appreciated the opportunity to share their opinion.

Limitations

- Tools could only be piloted in one province, generating limited information on how well tools worked. However, based on the training and the pilot, it was identified tools took more time than initially estimated. Therefore, the Mapping my Day tool was made optional, to reduce the length of the FGDs, but the tool could still be used if there was enough time to further explore children's day-to-day lives or if the Body Mapping tool proved too complicated for a particular group of children.

- The initial sampling design included more FGDs with boys aged 15-17. However, due to the nature and target groups of existing projects in some provinces, the number of FGDs for this subgroup had to be reduced. Although more boys aged 9-14 were consulted compared to boys aged 15-17, the overall number of FGDs between girls and boys is still comparable and saturation for boys aged 15-17 was reached through the four FGDs that were conducted.
- Some of the questions in the data collection tools were difficult to answer for some of the younger children. Facilitators made sure to carefully explain each of them and phrase the questions in different ways to help children understand them, using simple and child-friendly language throughout. However, the Visionary Tree was the most challenging one for children and the data from this activity was limited. When Save the Children feeds back the findings to children, these sessions will be used to discuss what role children would like to play in the response, to address this gap in data.
- Children who took part in the consultations are already being supported by Save the Children, and by extension have had access to some form of education activities and are able to leave their house. This means we have not been able to hear from those children who face even greater barriers to leaving their houses (predominantly girls aged 12 and above). Their day-to-day lives have changed even more fundamentally than what is described in this report and their well-being will have deteriorated even more.



PHOTO: SAVE THE CHILDREN

4. FINDINGS

Children have told us in detail how their lives have changed in the twelve months, how this is making them feel, and how they try to cope. Many of the changes in children's lives are connected to one another and children rarely spoke about one particular change or challenge in isolation. The findings below try to reflect this as much as possible.

First, we will unpack what children consider the main reasons for the many changes and challenges in their lives. In the second section, we will focus on how children's supportive environment has changed. Thirdly, we will discuss harmful coping strategies and their effect on children. We will subsequently explore changes in children's opportunities to learn, as well as opportunities to play and meet friends, in sections four and five. In section six, we will discuss changes in what children eat on a daily basis. We will then cover how children's physical health and hygiene have changed, as well as their ability to access health services. We will conclude by discussing how children's feelings have changed over time.

4.1 WHY CHILDREN'S LIVES HAVE CHANGED

"Our families are just trying to survive."

Girl 9-14, Faryab

Children identified two inter-related reasons for the changes they have experienced in their lives in the past twelve months. Firstly, many girls and boys associated the changes with the war and the change in Afghanistan's leadership in August 2021. New restrictions that have been introduced since, have changed daily life. Many children – both girls and boys – said these restrictions are having an impact on them.

Secondly, many girls and boys said that the economy in Afghanistan has been suffering. Whereas they described the economic situation as "good" and "normal" in the past, most if not all children said the economic situation is bad now. They explained that unemployment is a big cause of the changes in their lives, as well as the fact that everything they would normally buy has become very expensive. Some children, in particular boys, also mentioned that the drought Afghanistan is facing, has affected the harvest and has led to food shortages. Children said that the economic situation has had a big negative impact on them, causing poverty and hunger in their communities. According to children, life has become difficult.

New restrictions

Since the Taliban took power in August 2021, they have issued various restrictions affecting different aspects of public life. Many policies have had a significant effect on women and girls. Although these restrictions may be issued at the national level, they can – and often are – understood and applied differently at provincial, and even district, levels. Similarly, family and community level norms and perceptions vary, which also affects how restrictions are interpreted and enforced within communities. The lack of clarity and consistency related to policies and restrictions issued in Afghanistan means that children's understanding of those restrictions, and how they affect their daily life, may differ per province and sometimes even between districts.

Children's experience of the war and the change in leadership

Many girls and boys in all age groups spoke about experiencing the war last year, some saying that during that time, they were very scared and anxious, and felt unsafe. They described seeing people being injured or killed, gun fights, explosions, people fleeing their communities, seeing fighter jets and helicopters in the sky bombing villages, etc. Some girls and boys described no longer seeing the military and police in their communities, but instead seeing members of the Taliban, who they did not know and who were strangers in the communities. Some girls (aged 15-17) said this was the first time they saw men who are not police carrying weapons. Some children described these changes as scary. Even though the damage caused by the conflict is still visible (for example, damage to houses and schools), most children said that things are more stable now and there is no more fighting (this is separate from children's concerns about explosions or suicide attacks). According to some children, especially boys, people can travel to other provinces again, which they could not do during the conflict. However, some children are worried about war breaking out again in the near future. A few children are also scared because they have heard people say that ISIS might come back, which could also lead to conflict.

4.2 CHANGES IN CHILDREN'S SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT

"They listened to us a lot last year, but not this year."

Girl 9-14, Sar-e-Pul

Children's relationships with others – their peers, parents and caregivers, their wider family, and their community – are critical to a supportive environment in which they can develop and feel safe. Unfortunately, most girls and boys (all age groups) feel people's interaction with each other, and adults' interaction and communication with children, has changed in the past twelve months. These negative changes – in what is supposed to be children's supportive environment – have affected children's well-being.

4.2.1 Changes in community dynamics

Most children indicated that how people feel about others and interact with one another in the community has changed and that relationships have deteriorated.

Both girls and boys told us that people in their communities are not as close as before. Many children said that because families have lost their sources of income and struggle to get by, they are unable to help others and families only focus on themselves. Many children described that people have less compassion or empathy now. A few boys explained that before, if someone faced difficulties,

people would help them, but now people have lost their own income and they can no longer help poor people in the community. The economic difficulties also prevent people from visiting each other or organising gatherings among neighbours, because of the cost involved.

"Most of the people lost their kindness, they supported each other in previous years but this year they don't help and support each other due to the poverty and a lack of money and jobs."

Girl 15-17, Balkh

"The social relationships have decreased among communities, there is no sympathy and friendliness among people in the community because all the people are facing their own problems."

Girl 9-14, Kandahar

PHOTO: SAVE THE CHILDREN



Many children also said that adults are struggling mentally because of the economic crisis, unemployment and since the Taliban regained power. They explained that adults are sad, worried, stressed, angry, hopeless and even desperate. Children believe that this is why people are less nice to each other and get angry more easily. Some children, especially girls, said there is more conflict and tension in the community now, compared to before, and that people argue even over small things.

The children who shared their thoughts about how people communicate with each other (mostly girls, some boys), often mentioned that people do not listen to each other anymore, do not take each other's advice and some also mentioned that people trust each other less.

Children did not single out any specific groups within their community, that are now liked less than before (for example, people from a particular ethnic background), but a few children did mention discrimination between different (ethnic) groups, although without further elaboration or specifying which ones.

However, it did become clear from some comments (made by a few girls and boys), that children and adults are distinguishing between people who are rich and those who are poor, which may create division in communities. For example, the relationship between people who still have a job and those who do not have a source of income may be strained. People with a job ("rich people") are worried that others who do not will ask them for a loan; however, even people with a job cannot afford to share some of their income with others, because they need to pay for food and hope to save money to leave the country. Not being willing (or able) to give a loan may be seen by others as being unkind (one girl 15-17 said: "they don't help us, so we don't like them"), given how common it used to be to help each other within the community or family. Some comments also revealed resentment towards people who were in charge of bigger businesses, but who left the country.

4.2.2 Changes in children's relationships with their parents and within the family

Across groups of girls and boys of all ages, children shared that in the past twelve months, the interaction with their parents has deteriorated and children feel less supported. Children linked these changes to the lack of family income and the high prices in the market, which caused them to notice that their parents are worrying constantly, are preoccupied all the time, and appear sad and hopeless. Despite these changes, most children continue to identify their parents and close relatives as the first people they would go to if they needed help.

Changes in parenting

Many children (across all age groups) feel their parents no longer listen to them and that their opinions are not valued, which has left them feeling upset and frustrated. One reason why children seem to feel this way is because their parents cannot provide the things they ask from them. For example, some children explained that they ask their parents for food and other items they need (for example, school materials, new clothes), but their parents cannot afford to buy it for them. This makes them feel like their parents do not listen to them, and they said this was different before last year (when their families still had money). A few children mentioned that they in turn have become less respectful to their parents (for example, not listening to them).

Some children – especially girls – also mentioned they feel their parents do not pay enough attention to their feelings and emotions. They explained parents do not want to hear about their problems. A few girls mentioned that their parents do not listen to their opinion when it comes to really important matters in their lives, such as going to school (both age groups) or being forced to marry (girls aged 15-17).

Issues around child marriage are further explored in section 4.3.1.

Vulnerable groups in the community

Within the community, children identified particular groups as being most vulnerable and therefore most affected by the current crisis. Groups that children believe are most vulnerable are children, poor people, children with disabilities, orphans and children living/begging on the streets, pregnant women, families headed by women who have lost their husbands, and people who used to work for the previous government, the police or army.

“If we start discussing our problems with our parents, they simply stop us by saying that they have got their own problems to deal with [...] Sometimes we cry when we are alone.”

Girl 9-14, Faryab

“Because of these changes, people are depressed and upset. [Parents] don’t listen to us if we ask them for what we need. They cannot buy it for us and sometimes hit us to stop asking for food from them.”

Girl 9-14, Kabul

“Previously our parents loved us a lot, but not now.”

Girl 15-17, Nangarhar

Although many children no longer feel listened to, in one FGD in Jawzjan, boys (aged 15-17) indicated that their parents listen more to them now than before because of the training their parents received from Save the Children.

Some children – especially boys – mentioned that their parents, in particular their fathers, no longer have as much time to spend with them and are no longer helping them or encouraging them as much as they used to (for example encouraging them to study). A few boys mentioned that this is because their parents are out of the house a lot and come home late, for example trying to find work or earn some money, or trying to find food. Some children also spoke about their fathers being away from home, having left the country to work in other countries, which is discussed in more detail in section 4.3.2.

Changes in safety at home

In addition to children feeling less supported by their parents, it also became clear from children’s responses that the home might feel less safe than before. Many girls and boys mentioned that their parents are less kind to them, are less patient, get angry more often or talk aggressively, compared to last year. A few children also observed that family members within the household talk to each other less and a few children mentioned their parents argue more. A few children – predominantly girls – said adults in the family sometimes hit children, for example, when they are angry or frustrated. A few children said violence in the home has increased.

“Before, our parents spoke well with us and listened to our voice, but there is no work for them, they are jobless this year and they get angry more.”

Boy 9-14, Sar-e-Pul

Relationships with relatives and social activities

Some children – predominantly girls – also shared that there is less interaction between their family and other relatives, which makes them sad. They described that before, their relatives would visit the house often and that they would visit their relatives as well. Children explained that because of the economic crisis, their own families and their relatives no longer have money for transport to travel to each other, to afford enough food to host guests, to bring along presents or to organise picnics. A few girls also mentioned they no longer visit relatives because they cannot afford a hijab or burqa (which they need to leave the house), that they cannot go without a *Mahram* (a male chaperone), and they are scared of the consequences of leaving the house without a hijab or burqa, or *Mahram*.

“Last year we travelled everywhere; we went to our relatives’ homes because we had money, this year we can’t.”

Boy 9-14, Balkh

“My relatives and neighbours were visiting our house before the Taliban took control of our area and now, they are not coming to our house.”

Girl 9-14, Jawzjan

Festivities that children and their families would normally attend and are an important part of social life have also changed. Some children specifically spoke about how celebrating Eid has changed, for example because they cannot celebrate with their relatives, their family is unable to afford the typical food to celebrate (such as dry fruits and cookies), or unable to afford new clothes. Children were sad that they could not celebrate Eid in the joyful way they used to.

Similarly, a few children mentioned that weddings are smaller or have been postponed because families cannot afford it. A few children also mentioned they could no longer attend weddings. Boys often cited financial reasons, whereas girls would not be able to go because they have to wear a hijab or burqa but they do not own one, or because they can only attend if they are accompanied by a *Mahram*. According to a few children, people are also less interested in wedding parties, because music is no longer allowed.

“In the past, we were going to weddings but now we do not have money.”

Boy 9-14, Kabul

“Last year we could dance and clap, but this year we can’t.”

Girl 15-17, Sar-e-Pul

4.2.3 Changes in relationships between children and adolescents

Often children described negative changes in their relationships with other children, whereas only a few children said that the interaction and communication among children and adolescents is good. Adolescents (for example older brothers and sisters) would normally be supportive of children, but some children said they now have less time for them, and listen less to what they have to say.

“My brother used to ask about my lessons and now he is very busy and doesn’t ask for weeks.”

Boy 15-17, Faryab

Who do children ask for help?

Most girls and boys (across all age groups), ask their parents for help, mentioning their father more often than their mother. They might also ask their siblings or other relatives, such as uncles or older members of the family. If their family members are unable to provide support, children rely on members in the community such as their neighbours, but this was mentioned by only a few girls and by some boys. Boys specifically mentioned asking others for help (including their friends) when discussing how they adapt to the challenges in their lives.

Some children spoke about help in the context of the economic difficulties they and their families face, and that asking for help often means asking for money (a loan) to cover costs the family can otherwise not afford.

Although in other contexts, children often see their teachers as a trusted source of support, only some boys mentioned that they ask their teachers for help. This could be explained by the fact that both girls and boys are going to school less or not at all, and because teachers are less motivated than before (see section 4.4).

Some children described that other children and adolescents get angry more easily and are less patient with each other than before. For example, if they make a joke the other child gets upset quicker. Some children (both girls and boys from all age groups) also mentioned that children and adolescents are less nice to each other and sometimes even rude. One girl (15-17) told us that now “even younger children do not respect us and tell us we do not have a right to go outside”, referring to the restrictions placed on girls’ ability to leave the house.

Most children linked the changes in interaction with adolescents to them being worried, stressed and upset by the challenges they face, in terms of unemployment, what they experienced during the war and other financial problems.

Most children explained that in the past twelve months, they have not been able to see their friends as much as they used to. Some children said their interaction with other children had changed because of this (see also section 4.5). Not being able to spend time with friends has left children feeling upset and less connected.

4.3 Harmful strategies to cope with change

“Going to work has a bad impact on me.”

Boy 9-14, Kabul

Families are struggling to cope with the economic hardship, and it is clear from what children told us, that increasingly parents have no other choice but to make heart-breaking decisions to make ends meet and keep their families alive. Children told us about these decisions, and how they affect them.

4.3.1 Child Marriage

In most of the groups of girls and some groups of boys (across all age groups), children spoke about child marriage as something they had heard about in the community or something that had happened to someone they know personally, like a friend, classmate or their sister. Some children explicitly said child marriage has increased during the last year.

According to children, child marriage is happening because families do not have enough money and are poor. This way of coping mainly affects girls, including very young ones. A few girls mentioned that if a girl in the family gets married, there is more money to take care of, and feed, their siblings. In addition, because older girls are no longer allowed to go to school, some parents believe that getting married instead will give them a chance at a better life.

“[Girls] marry old men to rescue their other siblings from poverty.”

Girl 9-14, Kabul

Caregivers assume that when they marry their daughters, the new husband will financially take care of their daughter and the family will be better off as they will have fewer mouths to feed. It is also tradition in some communities in Afghanistan that the groom gives the family of the bride money as part of the marriage, called a *walwar*. For many desperate families facing economic hardship, this money makes a huge difference. One girl even mentioned that families have been accepting lower *walwars* in the past year, so they can get their daughters to marry sooner.

Girls described how other girls in their community had been forced to give up school by their parents and/or move away to other areas when they married. Girls are worried and scared that they too will have to get married at a young age and that because of early marriage, they will never be able to go to school again and that they will not have a future.



A few girls said that having to marry at such a young age with an older man makes them feel depressed and that it would lead to a horrible life. They said they had hoped to be able to get married in their own time, when they are ready. Girls feel their parents do not listen to their opinion when it comes to marriage, which leaves them feeling frustrated and powerless.

“I had the desire to get an education, but my parents engaged me.”

Girl 15-17, Nangarhar

“I feel so bad because all my friends left. I feel like my turn will also come; I will marry an old guy too and my life will be horrible.”

Girls 15-17, Kabul

“[Our parents] go against our wishes and give us marriage orders. They do not focus on what we want.”

Girl 15-17, Sar-e-Pul

4.3.2 Family separation and unaccompanied and separated children

The economic crisis and severe drought has forced caregivers to make other impossible decisions that have a profound impact on children's daily lives.

Some children spoke about adults and families from their communities leaving Afghanistan and moving abroad, because of financial reasons or because they are concerned about their safety. A few children specified that their father had to leave the country and that they miss him.

“My father left the country to get a job and went to Pakistan, because there is no work here for my father”

Boy 9-14, Nangarhar

Importantly, girls and boys in all age groups also shared that boys under eighteen (sometimes as young as 13 years old), have left the country to find employment elsewhere, for example in Turkey, Iran, or Pakistan. Most children talked about the lack of jobs in Afghanistan as the reason why they are sent abroad, so they can send money home to support the family.

For example, some of the girls and boys told us about their male cousins or brothers who left Afghanistan to find work. In one instance, a boy mentioned that his friend was forced by his family to move abroad to find a job even though he did not want to. Another group of boys (aged 15-17), said they were making plans to leave the country. A few children indicated they now speak less often with their brother, cousin or friends who have gone abroad, even though they used to be close.

“We are jobless and we have a plan to go outside the country.”

Boy 9-14, Kabul

“My brother left school and emigrated to work, to support us.”

Girl 9-14, Balkh

As boys travel abroad, they become separated from their parents or caregivers and often have to undertake these dangerous journeys to other countries without formal documents (such as personal identification or a visum) and through informal routes (for example having to rely on traffickers), which comes with significant risks. In section 4.3.4, child labour within Afghanistan is discussed in more detail.

4.3.3 Selling children and selling organs

A few children have heard that parents have to sell their children (both girls and boys) because of poverty. A few children explicitly mentioned children are sold on the street or at the markets. Parents have to take these desperate measures, for example to feed their other children or to cover a debt.

Children described this as a separate issue from child marriage, although there may be some overlap if a child is subsequently forced to marry the person that bought them. However, marriage with a dowry has different social, cultural and personal implications for

the spouse – whether a child or adult – than selling, which is considered a financial transaction and may not lead to a marriage recognised at community-level.

Once sold, these children are at high risk of forced labour, being forced to engage in illegal activities and child trafficking. A few girls mentioned they are worried they might be sold too, if the economic situation of their family worsens.

“We have seen that people sell their daughters to others because of poverty. They sell their eight-or-nine-year-old daughters in the market since they don’t have anything to eat and wear, and if they get sick they don’t have money to treat them so they say it’s better to sell their children.”

Girl 15-17, Kabul

A few children had also heard about adults selling their organs (for example, a kidney) because they were in need of the money.⁵ Children mentioned this to explain how desperate families are, but they did not say that this has happened to any of their peers or that they are scared this might happen to them.

4.3.4 Child labour and chores at home

In general, girls and boys across all age groups indicate they themselves and children in general are spending more time doing chores and working, than before the past year, at the expense of going to school or playing. Because many people have lost their jobs and because prices are high, many families struggle to get by. Children are taken out of school and now have to support the household instead, as a way to cope.



⁵ Child Protection actors in Afghanistan have informally discussed and reported the issue of organ harvesting/selling as a growing concern in certain provinces. This is likely to be reflected in the needs assessments currently ongoing through various agencies.

“Parents are not allowing their children to go to school and they are forcing them to work.”

Boy 9-14, Nangarhar

“We did not do heavy work last year, but we do this year, and also most of our classmates left school and our parents do not let us to go to school.”

Boy 15-17, Sar-e-Pul

For example, some girls (both age groups) told us that last year, they were doing what they loved and enjoyed – such as going to school and spending time with friends etc. However, this past year, this is no longer possible because their parents force them to work or do chores, and because older girls are no longer allowed to go to school, they have more time to help the family. In addition, many boys (both age groups) described having to work more than last year and having to leave school to do so, with only a few boys saying they are still able to study and play with friends. A few children specifically described having to work because their father no longer has a job or because they lost the breadwinner of the household. If children are unable to find work, they may even resort to begging on the street.

Types of work and chores that girls do

Most girls (across both age groups) are spending more time working than before to help generate extra income, with girls being taken out of school to support the family. Their work often happens in and around the home, because of the restrictions on girls and women preventing them from going outside (alone).

Work girls do includes tailoring, embroidery, carpet knitting or weaving, and other handwork, as well as going to other people's houses with their mother to clean. Some girls also mentioned working on the farmlands of their family, to contribute to their household's livelihoods. Girls and women can work on the farms in rural areas because the lands are considered private property rather than a public space. A few girls said they now have to work a lot, whereas some others described the work they do as “hard work” and “heavy work”.

“Last year we used our hands to write, but now we use our hands to weave rugs because we don't have money and we have to work hard.” Girl 15-17, Sar-e-Pul

Many girls also mentioned doing more chores around the house compared to before, like taking care of their siblings, preparing food, cleaning the house and washing clothes, as their parents leave the house to earn money.

Types of work and chores that boys do

Boys too are pulled out of school by parents to work, but compared to girls the work boys engage in takes place outside the home. When talking about the work boys do, they often described having to do “hard work” and it being physically tiring. A few boys even described waking up tired in the morning. Boys are working at the market (for example polishing shoes, working in stalls), at mechanic shops or restaurants, collecting scrap, plastic or iron, or working on the farmlands. Some boys said they go along with their father and work directly with him, for example on the farm or in the shop that the family owns.

“Before, we were going to school, but now we are going for wages.”

Boy 9-14, Kabul

“Last year we did not work, but this year we are involved in child labour, which is so heavy.”

Boy 15-17, Sar-e-Pul

Children also said boys are working in mines, brick factories, and recycling companies (for example to recycle plastic), but this is without safety measures, which leaves them exposed to the chemicals. These are extremely hard and severe types of child labour and come with additional protection risks, as boys often have to leave their families and communities because the mines and brick factories are far from villages, leaving them unaccompanied and separated from their parents or caregivers. For example, boys aged 9-14 from Nangarhar province said that many children (sometimes with their families) have left the province to work in the brick factories and a few girls aged 15-17 in Kabul province talked about children leaving their communities to work in places far away in Afghanistan.

Boys also do chores for the household, for example taking care of the livestock, collecting firewood, doing groceries and fetching water.



How children feel about this change

Children described a range of emotions when talking about having to work, clearly showing a negative impact on their well-being. Many children associated negative feelings with having to work, such as being sad, unhappy, tired or exhausted, and even being depressed. Children said they would like to go to school instead.

A few girls described being sad when they have to work and see others go to school. In addition, some girls are worried about the future, for example, whether the work they do will continue to help generate an income (like worrying about the price of rugs dropping or people not being able to afford them) and whether they would be able to hold jobs in the future like (young) women used to in the past. Some boys (both age groups) mentioned they are unhappy because they cannot go to school anymore, now that they have to work. Moreover, boys said they are unhappy and feeling hopeless because they are unable to find work. A few boys said that especially older boys are affected by this, because they carry more responsibilities within the family, which creates extra pressure. In some cases, this is having a major impact on boys' well-being: in a few groups, children talked about suicides happening among adults and boys because of the economic situation, as well as men and boys being addicted.

Many children were generally positive about doing chores at home, because they feel happy and proud that they can help their parents. However, some girls and boys were unhappy about doing chores because it makes them tired or because it left them with no time to do studies. Girls in particular would like to do fewer chores moving forward.

4.4 Changes in children's opportunities to learn

"My dream is to start school again."

Girl 15-17, Faryab

Over the past year, children's opportunities to learn have changed a lot. According to children across all age groups, in the past schools were open, they had school materials, and both girls and boys were happy they could attend their classes. Some children said that COVID-19 prevented them from going to school in the year before, but that they kept studying and in some cases, girls and boys said that at least they could continue to follow classes online.

Children told us this has all changed, due to the Taliban's restrictions on secondary school girls attending classes and because of the impact of the economic crisis. Many children mentioned that there are fewer students and teachers in school now compared to before and that girls' schools have remained closed.

Most children said that older girls (14 and above) are affected most by the current situation because they are no longer allowed to attend school. Many girls said that whereas boys are still allowed to go to school, they are affected too because they now have to work and drop out. When comparing between responses of groups of girls and boys and between different age groups, boys were more likely to go to school than girls and young children were more likely to go to school than older children were.

We will explore the various reasons why going to school and things in school have changed below.

4.4.1 New Restrictions

Most girls and boys (across all age groups) mentioned that girls can only attend classes up to sixth grade in Government schools, but that older girls attending above grade six, are no longer allowed to attend school due to the restrictions imposed by the de facto authorities.

In addition to this formal restriction, some girls shared that their parents, brothers and members of the community reinforce these restrictions for girls, even for younger ones. Community perceptions of what is appropriate for girls therefore also affect a family's decision on whether to let girls attend school. A few older girls mentioned that they had tried to talk to their father, mother and brother to convince them to let them return to school, but these girls still reported no longer being able to go to school.

This restriction is compounded by the lack of female teachers: a few girls said that their family members do not allow them to go to school because there are no (or not enough) female teachers, and male teachers are not allowed to teach girls. In most provinces in Afghanistan, it is challenging to hire female teachers.⁶

“Last year there was no gossip, but this year we can’t go out because everyone will talk behind our back, saying we are female, we should stay home and we don’t need to go outside the house.”

Girl 15-17, Kabul

“Last year everyone was able to go to school but this year only children under sixth grade can go to school which is very disappointing and is a negative change. Some fathers don’t let their young daughters go to school since their teachers are male. If the teachers were female they may let their daughters [go]. We want female teachers to teach so everyone will be able to go to school.”

Girl 9-14, Kabul

In addition, some girls (both age groups) mentioned that they now need to wear a hijab or burqa if they want to go to school, but not all families can afford to buy this for their daughters, which prevents them from going to school (and leaving the house in general). Girls are scared to go to school without a hijab or burqa. This shows how new restrictions and economic barriers further reinforce one another.

4.4.2 Economic barriers

Many girls and boys in both age groups described that children have had to leave school due to the economic difficulties their families face. To illustrate this, a few boys aged 9-14 shared that children, whose parents have a job, are still able to go to school.

Both girls and boys explained that children have dropped out of school because they now have to work to support the family (see also section 4.3.4). Either children have dropped out of school completely to work full time, or some children work in addition to going to school, but this leaves them with less time to study than before. In addition, some girls and boys explained they and other children they know could no longer attend school because their families cannot afford the school materials, such as pens and notebooks, and other related expenses.

“I was asked by my parents not to go to school because they cannot afford my educational material expenses.”

Girl 9-14, Jawzjan

“My father is jobless, my brothers collect old iron from the street to sell it to buy food for us, so my parents cannot afford school’s expenses; it is better to stay alive than to study.”

Girl 9-14, Kabul

The economic situation has also changed how much and what children can eat (see section 4.6). Girls and boys said that without enough food, they feel weak and cannot study well. Some children also mentioned that they find it more difficult to focus on their studies and remember things, because they worry about the challenges in their lives.

⁶ According to the [Afghanistan Needs Overview 2022](#) (January 2022), “qualified female teachers are scarce in remote and hard-to-reach areas, largely due to a lack of girls’ enrolment past primary grades, which further limits access for girls, making the issue a cyclical one.”

4.4.3 Learning Spaces and Facilities

Children also observed changes in the spaces where they learn, which make it more difficult for them to study. Some girls and boys (except girls aged 15-17) mentioned there are no books in school this year, and that the school furniture and equipment is old. A few boys mentioned they do not like going to school because there are no school materials and there is no electricity. A few girls and boys mentioned their schools were damaged in last year's conflict, but this was not mentioned as frequently as other barriers.

How safe schools are perceived to be by children and parents, also impacts children's ability to go to school. Some boys also said that whereas last year, they were unable to go to school because of the conflict, they can now go back to school again because the security situation has improved (referring to the period of conflict when schools were closed). However, a few girls and boys mentioned they do not go to school because they or their parents are worried about their safety. Whereas in one province children were specifically worried about suicide attacks and explosions, some other children – especially girls – spoke about their safety in general terms, which could be linked to parents' concerns about their daughters going to school on their own.

4.4.4 Teachers

Children described big changes in relation to their teachers, comparing now to a year before. Boys aged 9-14 and 15-17, as well as girls aged 9-14, said that there are no more, or fewer, teachers in schools, either because they have left Afghanistan, or because they no longer receive their salaries or receive their salaries late so they are trying to find work elsewhere, to support their families.

Some children said their lessons are now not as good as before. According to boys, teachers that do still teach are not teaching well because they are demotivated, since they are not receiving their salary (in time). Some girls and boys also said that their teachers are not qualified and teach subjects they did not study for. Due to a shortage of teachers, they try to cover multiple subjects and sometimes, older students teach younger children (mentioned by boys). This can demotivate children further from attending school if they know and see that their teachers are demotivated, or not very knowledgeable on the subject matter they teach.

A few girls and boys (in four provinces) shared that teachers treat them badly and hit them. This may link to teachers' own well-being: they too face economic difficulties and may be under more pressure as they

have to teach larger classes of students, for example due to the shortage of teachers or because there are not enough Community Based Education (CBE) classes in the area.

“Last year teachers were very keen on lectures but now their interest in giving lectures has reduced.”

Boy 9-14, Nangarhar

“Violence increased in the school and teachers hit the children when they don't bring homework.”

Boy 9-14, Faryab

4.4.5 How children feel about this change

Children said that they like(d) going to school, because they can learn new things and they can meet their friends. They also enjoyed playing at school, doing sports and school competitions. Not being able to go to school makes children – in particular girls – upset, disappointed and even depressed. A few girls mentioned they feel sad when they see other children go to school and a few others said that they feel sad and even ashamed they are unable to read and write.

The restrictions placed on girls' opportunities to study – not just 7th to 12th grade, but also difficulties women face attending university (some saying women can only attend if they are accompanied by a *Mahram*) – have left girls feeling demotivated. Girls in all age groups described this demotivation and hopelessness, which is sometimes further reinforced by those around them. A few girls mentioned that people in the community or even their family members ask them why they are still going to school, when there is no point and that they should leave school and find work instead. The girls and boys who still study, said they find it more difficult to stay motivated, because they feel the future looks bleak and it is unclear how studying will benefit them.

“In the past we always thought about studying hard and we studied hard too, but now our families are saying that you are not going to reach your goals.”

Girl 15-17, Balkh

4.5 Changes in children's opportunities to play and meet friends

"Public places and parks should be open."

Boy 9-14, Faryab

Children told us that playing with friends and spending time together is very important to them, because it makes them happy, helps them relax and it keeps them healthy, both physically and mentally (for example when talking about playing sports). Some children also said that playing allows them to make new friends. However, children's opportunities to play and meet friends have significantly changed in the past year.

Girls and boys said that before, they would go to parks, amusement parks or playgrounds, as well as to the shops, market or the city (centre) to spend their free time with friends. They would play there, go shopping or have picnics. However, children say they now no longer go to these places and as a result, spend less time with friends, which has affected children's relationships with each other (see section 4.2.3).

Many girls said they are no longer allowed to go to these public places and enjoy fun activities with

their friends, due to the restrictions put in place by the de facto authorities. A few also mentioned they do not own a hijab (for example, because they cannot afford it), so they cannot go, or because they need a *Mahram* to accompany them (which may be difficult when their male family members are at work throughout the day). A few girls said that even with a *Mahram*, they cannot go to these places and only boys and men are allowed to go, whereas in other provinces, some girls mentioned these places are banned for everyone because it is not considered appropriate. Because many girls are no longer able to go school, they also miss out on time with their friends there. For example, a group of girls aged 15-17 said they used to meet their friends at school but no longer do since they cannot go to school anymore.

The economic crisis has also affected children's ability to spend time with friends. Many girls and boys said that children in general can no longer go to these places, because they have to work instead and do not have time to play and have fun. This especially prevents boys from spending time with friends. For example, a few boys aged 9-14 said that they cannot see their friends because they have to work. In addition, children said their parents do not have money to pay for these activities, for example, money for transport, to buy snacks and food or to play games in these places.

"We cannot go to places we used to go because we don't have money to pay for a taxi. Parks are banned. We cannot go alone but [only] with a Mahram. Life got tough, we could go alone whenever we wanted but now we cannot go without a Mahram."

Girl 9-14, Kabul

"I used to go to the city park, but now it is closed."

Boy 15-17, Faryab

Reducing expenses

When we asked children how they cope with the challenges in their lives, some mentioned they try to reduce their expenses where they can. For example, they no longer ask their father to give them pocket money or to buy them new clothes for Eid celebrations. This can be further linked to changes in children's social activities with relatives or friends.

Some girls and boys also feel uncomfortable or even scared to go to these public places because there is more violence now in the community with the enforcement of the new restrictions. For example, a few children described children who try to play at the playground being beaten, or people hitting and shouting at women and girls if they do not follow the rules on how to dress.

Changes in what children and adults wear

One of the big changes children have seen in their communities since the de facto authorities have been in power is what clothes people wear. Although boys (and men) were also described as having to make changes to what they wear, both girls and boys mostly spoke about women and girls now having to wear a hijab or burqa, and black clothes, if they want to leave the house. Some girls described being sad and frustrated that they are no longer able to wear their favourite clothes. Girls clearly experience this as another way in which their freedom to choose and express themselves is being restricted.

It is important to note the impact these changes have on children's well-being. Children said that not being able to go to these places and spend time with their friends, makes them feel sad, hopeless and depressed. Children believe that having fun and playing is important to be able to feel happy. For example, one group of girls mentioned that going to Save the Children's Child Friendly Space and playing there with friends is how they adapt to the challenges in their daily lives.

"We want to go to a place where we can improve our feelings, like a park or garden."

Girl 15-17, Nangarhar



4.6 Changes in children's meals

"Previously our food was good, but now it is bad." Girl 15-17, Nangarhar

Unsurprisingly, the economic crisis has led to significant changes in what children eat and how much they eat. According to girls and boys across all age groups, what and how much they eat and drink has changed a lot in the past year and for the worse. Children shared how the lack of food has affected them.

4.6.1 Changes in the types of food children eat

Most children explained that before the past year, they used to be able to eat properly and eat healthy food items. Many girls and boys described being able to eat food items such as meat, fish, eggs, vegetables and fresh fruits on a regular basis. In addition, some children said they used to be able to eat any type of food they liked, whereas now they can no longer eat their favourite foods. A few children also mentioned that they used to be able to enjoy treats more often, like cookies, Pepsi or ice cream.

Most children described the types of food they no longer eat. Many girls and boys indicated they do not have meat in their family meals anymore. Similarly, many children indicated they no longer eat vegetables or fruits with their meals and only a few boys (aged 9-14) still eat vegetables regularly. Some children specifically mentioned that meals now only consist of dry bread or yoghurt, but a few girls said that even bread is hard to come by because flour has become very expensive. A few boys mentioned they are now eating potatoes or rice only. In addition, oil has become so expensive that many families can no longer prepare meals with oil, which is essential for cooking.

"We ate meat and everything last year, but everything increased in price and we cannot eat."

Boy 15-17, Sar-e-Pul

"Our economic situation was better last year and we used to have better food than what we are having now. We have not had meat in our diet for weeks now. The price of flour has doubled over the past year. No one has ever experienced this sort of economic hardship in the past."

Girl 9-14, Faryab

Changes in what children eat seem to be more significant to them than changes in what they drink, as only a few girls and boys (young and older) described what they drink. They now only drink green tea or water alongside their meals, and can no longer consume milk. However, some boys worried about how the drought may affect their access to drinking water.

Most girls and boys said that what they eat has changed so much because the price of food items has increased and their families can no longer afford to buy food items, such as meat, fruit, vegetables, oil, etc. Some children said that because their fathers have lost their jobs, they do not have enough money to buy more food or items other than bread. Only older boys in Sar-e-Pul and Jawzjan mentioned that the changes in what they eat are related to the drought Afghanistan is experiencing.

4.6.2 Changes in the number of meals per day

Many children said that before last year, there used to be enough to eat and that they would eat multiple meals a day, including smaller snacks (usually eating three times a day at a minimum, but often four to five).⁷

Most children told us that the number of meals and snacks they eat in a day has decreased a lot. Some children also mentioned that meals have become smaller. This is different from before, when children said they could eat as much food as they wanted when they felt hungry during the day.

⁷ Between March 2022 and May 2022, Balkh, Faryab, and Jawzjan were classified as IPC Phase 4 (Emergency), and Kabul, Kandahar, Nangarhar, and Sar-e-Pul were classified as IPC Phase 3 (Crisis). Food security significantly deteriorated compared to the first half of 2021. The current classifications for these provinces are predicted to stay the same between June 2022 and November 2022. See [here](#) for more details.

Many children – girls and boys in both age groups – indicated that the number of meals (including smaller snacks) has gone down from four or five a day, to two or three per day. Some children, mostly girls and a few boys across both age groups said they have even gone down to one meal a day. The one meal a day was often not a cooked meal.

“We do not have much to eat.”

Boy 9-14, Nangarhar

Whereas for some girls and boys, one out of these two to three meals is a full meal, with cooked food and more than just bread, other children mentioned that a full meal is rare, and only happens once a week or sometimes even once a month. The other meals children consume often consist of bread only, or sometimes just potatoes or beans.

Whilst describing the decrease in how much they eat, some children explicitly said they are hungry, with a few children describing that they or their siblings go to sleep hungry. This also means that those children who do go to school, are likely to be hungry, which affects their ability to study.

“This year, our parents tell us to eat less and once a day.”

Girl 15-17, Sar-e-Pul

Children identified decreasing the amount of food consumed within the household as a way to cope with the economic difficulties families face, specifically mentioned by girls in both age groups. Even though girls mentioned this more than boys, there was no indication that girls had to cut meals so boys in the family can eat more; instead, girls may be more aware of this coping mechanism because they help prepare the meals. A few children also described that people try to borrow money from others to buy food, as well as older members of the household skipping meals.

4.6.3 How children think changes in their meals affects them

All the groups of children talked about various negative effects of not eating enough (healthy) food that they are familiar with and experience themselves on a day-to-day basis. Children said that not having enough food affects girls and boys in the same way.

Many girls and boys across all age groups said that if children do not eat enough they would fall sick (most children in fact reported feeling sick more often this year than the year before – see section 4.7.2). Many said that children, themselves included, lose weight when they do not eat enough (some indicated they already have lost weight over the past year), that it can slow down children’s growth and lead to malnutrition, especially among children below five years old. A few girls and boys said that malnutrition eventually leads to death.

“We get thinner every day.”

Boy 15-17, Sar-e-Pul

In addition, many girls and boys across all age groups described feeling weak as an effect of not having enough to eat. Some children also mentioned that because they feel weak, they cannot do their work and chores properly. Related to this, many children (many girls, some boys) mentioned that without eating enough they are unable focus on studying and learning.

“If children don’t eat enough food, they cannot learn their lessons.”

Boy 9-14, Faryab

Other effects some children associate with not eating enough are developing stomach problems or “stomach aches” (mostly boys 9-14 years old) and skin diseases. A few children – both girls and boys – also said that not eating enough affects their feelings (for example, they become upset more easily and they become impatient), or the dynamics within the family.

“If children don’t eat full and proper food they get ill and weak, they become malnourished. When their body gets weak, they become sick very quickly. They can’t grow and they cannot learn.”

Girl 9-14, Kabul





4.7 Changes in children's physical health and hygiene

"We get sick more than last year."

Boy 9-14, Balkh

Most children believe their health has worsened over the past year, since the regime changed and the economic situation has worsened. Almost all girls and boys – irrespective of their age – described either physical or mental health issues they are suffering from, or a combination of both. According to some children, the drought is also leading to water shortages, which is likely to create further health risks. Changes in children's feelings and mental health are discussed in section 4.8.

4.7.1 Children's hygiene practices

As mentioned above, some children spoke about the drought Afghanistan is experiencing. In addition to it affecting their families' economic situation, a few also said this is causing shortages in water for drinking and washing.⁸ Boys seemed to speak more often about drought and a lack of water, compared

to girls, most likely because boys are more engaged in farming and are therefore more aware of water shortages.

Children did not talk much about hygiene practices and how these have changed the past year. When children spoke about washing themselves, many mentioned it in the context of ablution before their daily prayers, which is very important to them. Only a few children mentioned washing themselves specifically to maintain their hygiene.⁹

Most children talked about washing their hands and face in the morning after waking up and a few boys mentioned washing their hands after work, but children rarely mentioned washing themselves more fully, brushing teeth, etc. Most children said washing themselves makes them happy, because they feel refreshed and clean.

⁸ Even though only few children spoke about water shortages, we know from [Save the Children's Afghanistan Multi-sectoral Needs Assessment Report](#), (Arlini, S M and Burgess, M, 2022) that across these seven provinces in Afghanistan, 36.4% of households report not having access to having sufficient drinking water. This means that many households could divert to unprotected water sources, which is especially worrisome given 34.7% of households use effective water treatment methods.

⁹ In that same report, 33.8% of households report not having a stable supply of water for domestic use. In addition, two-thirds of respondents (adults) only use water for handwashing and 70.7% of households reported not received hygiene awareness sessions. This is likely to be similar among children, indicating insufficient hygiene practices, which increases health risks.

Menstrual hygiene

Some girls felt comfortable enough to talk to us about menstrual hygiene, which is an incredibly sensitive topic in Afghanistan. The girls shared that when they have their period, they do not have any pads that they can use. As an alternative, girls currently use old cloths, which they consider unhygienic and uncomfortable (because it irritates their skin). They worry about getting ill or having an infection. Some girls also mentioned that they have bad cramps during their period, but that they do not have any painkillers, and that they worry about anaemia, because they do not eat enough.

Girls mentioned they feel shy to talk about this topic, even with their own mothers. They feel uncomfortable asking their mothers to buy pads or underwear for them, or to ask them for medication to ease the pain of the cramps. At the same time, families are unlikely to be able to afford these items.

Without the right items to manage their menstrual hygiene, girls face significant health risks. This is especially worrisome given the barriers children face to access health care (see section 4.7.3). The lack of menstrual hygiene items may also further affect girls' ability to leave the house and go to school.

4.7.2 Changes in children's physical health

Many children said that they – and other children in their community – are suffering from sickness and that they feel weak or a lack of energy to do things such as playing, study, working or chores. Some children mentioned they suffer from fevers and coughing, as well as stomach aches.

Many children believe that they are falling sick and feel weak because during the past year, they have not been able to eat enough, whereas before they could eat normal amounts and they could eat fruit and vegetables. A few boys also mentioned that they are more tired and feel weaker because they now have to work, to support their family.

These symptoms could also be linked to various others factors: for example to children being outside early in the morning or late at night when going to work or going home, when it is still cold; or to a lack of access to clean drinking water or insufficient hygiene practices (see section 4.7.1).

Children also indicated they often have headaches and that their bodies are aching (this was mentioned by many girls and some boys), which could be the result of hard labour they have to do, such as manual jobs or carrying heavy loads, as well as the lack of food. In addition, children described that they are not growing and are losing weight (mentioned by girls and boys in half the groups). A few children specifically said malnutrition is a problem among children. This was consistent with what children described as negative effects of not eating enough (see section 4.6.3).

Some of the physical issues children described – such as headaches, pains, and lack of energy – can also be psychosomatic, caused by stress and other negative emotions children experience on a day-to-day basis.

“We don't have food and it affects our health. We cannot study well, our body grows slow and feels weak. We are not as active as we were.”

Girl 9-14, Kabul

4.7.3 Changes in access to health care

The economic crisis has had a significant impact on families' ability to access health care and seek treatment for illnesses. Many children described difficulties getting help when they were sick.

Some children indicated there is no clinic or hospital close enough to visit. A few girls even shared that if a child falls sick or a mother needs support giving birth in their community, they cannot get to a doctor in time and they will die.

However, most girls and boys said they could not get help because of financial reasons, for example, not being able to pay for doctor's fees or the medication they need, even if a clinic was nearby. A few children also said their families could not afford transport to the clinic or hospital. Children said that before, their parents could afford treatment, but now they cannot because of the difficult economic situation.

Some children (mostly girls and some boys across all age groups) said that even if they could go to a clinic to get help, there would not be (enough) doctors, not enough facilities to treat them, or any medication. According to some children, doctors have left (for example because they do not receive salaries or because they left the country) and there are not enough female doctors. This specifically poses a barrier to girls and women to access health services, especially sexual and reproductive health services.

According to many children, clinics do not have enough medication or they have none at all, whereas before last year, clinics used to have enough medication. A few children mentioned that medication used to be free, but now they are referred to drug stores to buy medication, which makes them even less accessible as families cannot afford them. A few children also said there are problems with the quality of the medication that is available.

“Most of our doctors left our village. We don’t have enough medicines, and sometimes patients die before reaching the hospital.”

Girl 15-17, Kabul

“Most of the qualified doctors left our area and we are not treated properly when we are sick.”

Girl 15-17, Balkh

“[We do not] have enough medicine in our clinics.”

Boy 9-14, Nangarhar

Children described various ways in which they cope with these challenges. Most children indicated that if they need help when they are sick, they ask their parents, other relatives or members in the community for help. A few children mentioned that their family will borrow money from others (for example relatives or neighbours) to cover the costs involved in seeking treatment. However, a few children also shared that because everyone is struggling financially, people are less able to help each other. In one group, girls even explained they hide from their parents that they are sick, because they know their parents cannot pay for treatment. A few children also mentioned they will rely on traditional medicine, or their parents will keep them at home to take care of them until they get better (unless it is very serious) and may give them some paracetamol.

4.8 Changes in how children feel

“I became upset and hopeless.”

Girl 9-14, Jawzjan

Children spoke to us very openly about how they feel about the changes in their lives, which has been reflected throughout the sections above. This section brings together changes in children’s feelings and their outlook on the future, as a way of concluding the findings section.

Girls and boys shared that before, they lived a relatively good life, could do normal things children do, and had hopes and dreams for their futures. Children explained they were happy, had fewer worries and were optimistic about their lives. This has all changed now, but many children – most girls and a few boys – mentioned that they do not have much choice but to adapt and get used to the new situation.

However, it is clear these changes are taking a heavy toll on children’s well-being and have heavily affected how children feel on a daily basis and about their future. Girls and boys predominately associated negative feelings with all the changes and the uncertainty in their lives, mentioning feeling sad, upset, stressed, angry, disappointed, demotivated, scared, worried, and depressed. Some children (mostly girls) also mentioned trouble sleeping at night, because they lie awake worrying about their problems and have bad dreams. In addition, some children mentioned difficulties concentrating when they study, and forgetting things more quickly than before (in general, not just when studying), which can be explained both by the stress they are experiencing, and the decrease in food intake (see section 4.6.2).

“With all of these troubles, staying positive seems to be impossible.”

Girl 9-14, Faryab

“Because of poverty children cannot enjoy their childhood and that makes them very hopeless and depressed.”

Girl 15-17, Kabul

“We are disappointed and always ask ourselves whether Afghanistan will prosper and develop or not.”

Girl 9-14, Balkh

"I think about children's future."

Boy 15-17, Faryab

Girls expressed in more detail how their mental health has been affected, compared to boys, who were more likely to speak about being sick more generally (see section 4.7.2). Nevertheless, significant concerns such as addiction and suicide, were mentioned in the context of boys (and adults), rather than girls, indicating that boys' mental health is also being impacted significantly.

Across all age groups, children reported these symptoms of psychosocial distress. Experiencing such psychosocial distress for extended periods has a negative impact on children's development, in particular during the early years of their life.

Finding hope in prayer

Children identified prayer as an important part of their daily routine. Many children mentioned praying right after waking up in the morning. A few children said praying makes them feel happy and gives them hope for a new day. As a few girls said (aged 15-17 in Faryab), *"We have hope because we are Muslim."*

Most girls and boys, throughout the discussions, said they are sad and worried about the economic situation in Afghanistan. They worry and feel stressed continuously about family members having lost their jobs, finding work themselves, about having enough food to eat, and being able to afford

other important things, such as doctor's fees and school materials. They are upset they have to work, because they want to study or play with friends instead. Changes in their supportive environment, not being able to see friends (or seeing them less), and restrictions on playing, not only make children unhappy and frustrated, but also affect their resilience to deal with the stress they experience. Some girls specifically described feeling isolated, now that they are restricted in leaving the house and cannot see relatives and friends when they want to.

Girls in particular, across both age groups, expressed disappointment and anger over the fact they can no longer attend class or go where they want to go. They worry they may never go back to school or get a job, some saying they cannot be independent when they grow up. Some girls said they feel hopeless about their future because they no longer have the rights and freedoms they used to.

"My view is that we have no right to freedom because of these changes."

Girl 15-17, Balkh

"I have been isolated and I have lost my courage."

Girl, 15-17, Jawzjan

"We are worried about our future, as women we don't have the freedom we used to."

Girl 9-14, Kabul



PHOTO: SAVE THE CHILDREN

5. CHILDREN'S VISION OF THE FUTURE

The changes and challenges children face on a daily basis have left many of them hopeless and disappointed, but children do still have dreams about their future. Children envisioned futures in which they themselves play active roles in improving their own lives, and those of their families and their community members. Many children often imagined themselves in jobs or doing things when they are older, which mirrored the needs they identified in their own communities.

Many girls and boys would like to become **Teachers**, because there are **not enough teachers in their communities**. Some children said they would like to **establish schools or education centres** where children can study properly in a calm environment and provide children with **school materials**, even if their parents do not have money.

Some children would like to **work for an aid organisation**, or establish one themselves, so they can support people, especially those who are poor or people with a disability. They want to provide them with cash assistance or jobs.

Some girls and a few boys would like to **become tailors or embroidery designers** to earn a living.

They also said they would want to organize vocational training so they can teach others these skills.

Many girls and boys want to become **doctors**, so they can **treat patients in their community**, in particular children, and provide medication. Some girls want to become a midwife, so women do not have to travel far to hospitals to give birth. A few children would like to **build a hospital** where people who cannot afford it can receive treatment.

Some boys said they want to become **engineers**, so they can build houses for people who need **shelter, build beautiful buildings and construct playgrounds** so children can play.

A few children would like to establish **child-friendly centres** in the future, where children can feel safe and secure, for example for children who have left school, **for children who live on the street or for children who have lost their parents**.

A few girls and boys said that in the future, they would like to **recite the Quran** or become **religious teachers** to help people understand the faith.

When talking about their futures, many children indicated that what they wanted to achieve in life was dependent on their ability to go to school and study. Without an education, they feel they will be unable to do the jobs they would like, and in turn, they would be unable to improve their lives and help their community and country. Children consistently linked the future of Afghanistan to whether people in the country can get educated and read and write. Therefore, many of the girls' and boys' visions of the future were ones in which they could go to school and university.

Lastly, many children said that their dream for the future is peace in Afghanistan and for the country to improve and prosper. A few girls specifically said they hope that in the future, children's rights will be respected and that girls and boys will be treated the same way.

6. WHAT CHILDREN WANT US TO KNOW AND DO

Children were asked to share messages for aid workers in their communities and to explain what they would do if they were the boss of Save the Children in Afghanistan. In addition, children's visions of the future often included recommendations for what they hope to see happen in their communities. These recommendations have been compiled below. Children identified actions that will help ensure children in Afghanistan can learn; that they can get treatment when they are sick; that families have an income; that children are safe; and that children are listened to and their rights are respected.

Education

Most children shared messages with aid organisations about education. Many asked aid organisations to (re)build schools in their area, and to organise more Community Based Education classes, all the way up to 12th grade. This included English and Math classes, as well as classes to prepare for entrance exams or acceleration classes. Many children asked aid organisations to provide school materials to help them study, which they currently cannot afford or are not available in schools. Some children asked aid organisations to ensure teachers receive salaries and a few girls asked specifically to hire female teachers.

Most girls and some boys asked aid organisations to help make education accessible for girls. In various groups, girls aged 15-17 asked if Save the Children and other aid organisations could advocate with the de facto authorities to ensure girls can go to school again.

"We request to set up local education classes for the children."

Girl 15-17, Jawzjan

"Make more Community Based local Education classes for us in our village."

Boy 9-14, Kabul

"Continue the classes till 12th grade, increase the teacher's salary."

Boy 9-14, Kabul

"The schools don't have enough books and equipment, it's necessary for all children to be educated."

Girls 15-17, Faryab

"Please, open schools for all girls."

Girl 15-17, Nangarhar

"We ask you to open our school, bring us school materials and assist us to defend our rights."

Girl 9-14, Kabul

"We ask you to build female schools in our villages and please provide us female teachers."

Girl 9-14, Kabul

"Our request to Save the Children is to generate education opportunities for those girls who do not have access to education or create education classes for the girls [...] to continue their education after sixth grade which was suspended."

Child 9-14, Kandahar

IF I WAS THE BOSS OF SAVE THE CHILDREN:

"... I would provide all education opportunities for all girls and boys around Afghanistan. Because education is something we can do to develop our country."

Child 9-14, Kandahar

"...I would support children to have their rights, build more schools for them and would support them to study and learn."

Girl 9-14, Kabul

"... I would talk with families of those children who are interested to continue education whose parents do not allow them to school and convince them."

Girl 15-17, Balkh

I would encourage children who don't go to school to study and support their families with food assistance to let them go to school."

Boy 15-17, Balkh



PHOTO: JIM HUYLEBROEK / SAVE THE CHILDREN

Food Security and Livelihoods

Half the groups of children shared messages with aid organisations asking for more food and cash assistance, because families are unable to pay for the food and other basic needs. A few children also asked aid organisations if they could help increase job opportunities for their parents.

Some children (especially boys aged 9-14 and girls in all age groups) suggested aid organisations organise more vocational training so that children can learn skills that can help them earn a living. A few girls also suggested training for girls that can help them prepare for the future, by focusing on motivation, setting goals, building confidence, and on how to become a good leader.

IF I WAS THE BOSS OF SAVE THE CHILDREN:

"... I would give food to assist the vulnerable and disabled groups because they don't have money to buy food from the market."

Boy 9-14, Balkh

"... I would provide financial support to the poorest people."

Girl 9-14, Jawzjan

"... I would help people in the community who are jobless and provide food assistance and cash to solve their problems."

Boy 9-14, Balkh

"... I would establish learning centres such as basic education classes and vocational centres for those who cannot read or write to learn something and earn an income."

Boy 9-14, Balkh

Health and Hygiene

Some girls and boys asked aid organisations to build health clinics in their area and to help ensure doctors and free medication are available. Girls specifically requested items to manage their menstrual hygiene.

PHOTO: SAVE THE CHILDREN

“Non-Governmental Organisations should provide health facilities.”

Boy 9-14, Nangarhar

“Our clinic does not have medicines and we want Save the Children to support our clinic.”

Boy 9-14, Sar-e-Pul

“[We need] period pads for menstruation, underwear, liquid disinfectant, and medicine for abdominal cramps.”

Girl 15-17, Kabul

“We need reusable period pads to use when we get our period. We don’t eat full meals three times a day and we get anaemia so we need folic acid.”

Girl 15-17, Kabul

IF I WAS THE BOSS OF SAVE THE CHILDREN:

“... I would support clinics and hospitals with medicines and various medical equipment so people can get quality health services.”

Girl 15-17, Nangarhar

“... I would provide clean water and dig wells for people.”

Boy 9-14, Balkh

“... I would establish a hospital in our village.”

Boy 15-17, Sar-e-Pul

Child Protection and Children's Wellbeing

Some children asked aid organisations to create more spaces for children to play and have fun, for example in child friendly spaces or in playgrounds. This should also include places dedicated to girls only.

A few girls and boys also mentioned that they would like aid organisations to organise awareness raising sessions with parents about child protection and children's rights (for example positive parenting). A few girls suggested to also organise sessions for the wider community and for the mosque leaders, so they can share messages with others. Lastly, a few children also asked for more children's groups.

IF I WAS THE BOSS OF SAVE THE CHILDREN:

"... I would provide trainings for children, community people and community leaders to prevent early marriage. We do not even know that we are getting married. Our family forces us to marry because they cannot provide us food."

Girl 15-17, Sar-e-Pul

"... I would establish vocational centres for the children involved in street working or heavy work, to ensure they can make money and prevent children from heavy work in future."

Girl 15-17, Sar-e-Pul

"... I would support more Afghan children by creating more children's clubs and investing more in children's clubs."

Girl 15-17, Balkh

"... I would make a nursery for the orphan children."

Girl 9-14, Sar-e-Pul

"... I would organise training on child protection for families."

Girl 15-17, Jawzjan

"Children mostly need to play and have fun, so you should build playgrounds."

Girl 15-17, Faryab

"We are requesting from Save the Children to provide us a playground."

Boy 9-14, Kabul



PHOTO: SAVE THE CHILDREN

Whom aid organisations should help

Although most children shared in their messages that everyone needs help, some children asked aid organisations to specifically support children and adults with disabilities, children who are poor (for example those living on the street), and children who have lost their parents/caregivers and are alone (orphans), because they are facing a lot of difficulties.

“Aid workers should help very poor people.”

Boy 15-17, Faryab

“We cannot support poor people, we ourselves are poor.”

Boy 15-17, Faryab

“[Provide] assistance for marginalized groups, because people with a disability cannot work so you should provide cash assistance for them to solve their problems.”

Boy 15-17, Balkh

“Please make more efforts to root out the problems that exist in the community for street children and orphans, and ask other organizations and institutions that support children.”

Girl 15-17, Balkh



Listening to Children

Some girls and boys thought it was good they had an opportunity to talk about these issues because they are important to them and because they could learn more about other children's experiences. Children and girls in particular, said they were thankful that Save the Children took time to listen to them and indicated they would like more opportunities to discuss what is happening in their lives.

"We appreciate Save the Children for asking about problems, challenges, and asking about our ideas and listening to us."

Girl 9-14, Kabul

"Please hold meetings with children more often."

Girl 15-17, Balkh



IF I WAS THE BOSS OF SAVE THE CHILDREN:

"... I would meet all the children and listen closely to their problems and demands."

Girl 9-14, Faryab

"... I would visit children face to face and hear from themselves."

Girl 15-17, Faryab

"... I would ask the countries of the world and the United Nations to do more."

Girl 15-17, Balkh

"... I would support those children who have no rights, to express their needs or thoughts."

Girl 9-14, Kandahar

"... I would help children to raise their voice and concerns globally."

Girl 9-14, Faryab



Some children also thanked aid organisations and Save the Children in particular for the support provided to them and their families. Lastly, there were also some words of encouragement for aid workers in their communities.

"We are proud of them."

Girl 9-14, Kandahar

"We appreciate your hard work, you are so kind and always assist us, you gave us the things we need and motivate us every time."

Girl 9-14, Kabul

"They should not lose their hope."

Girl 9-14, Kandahar

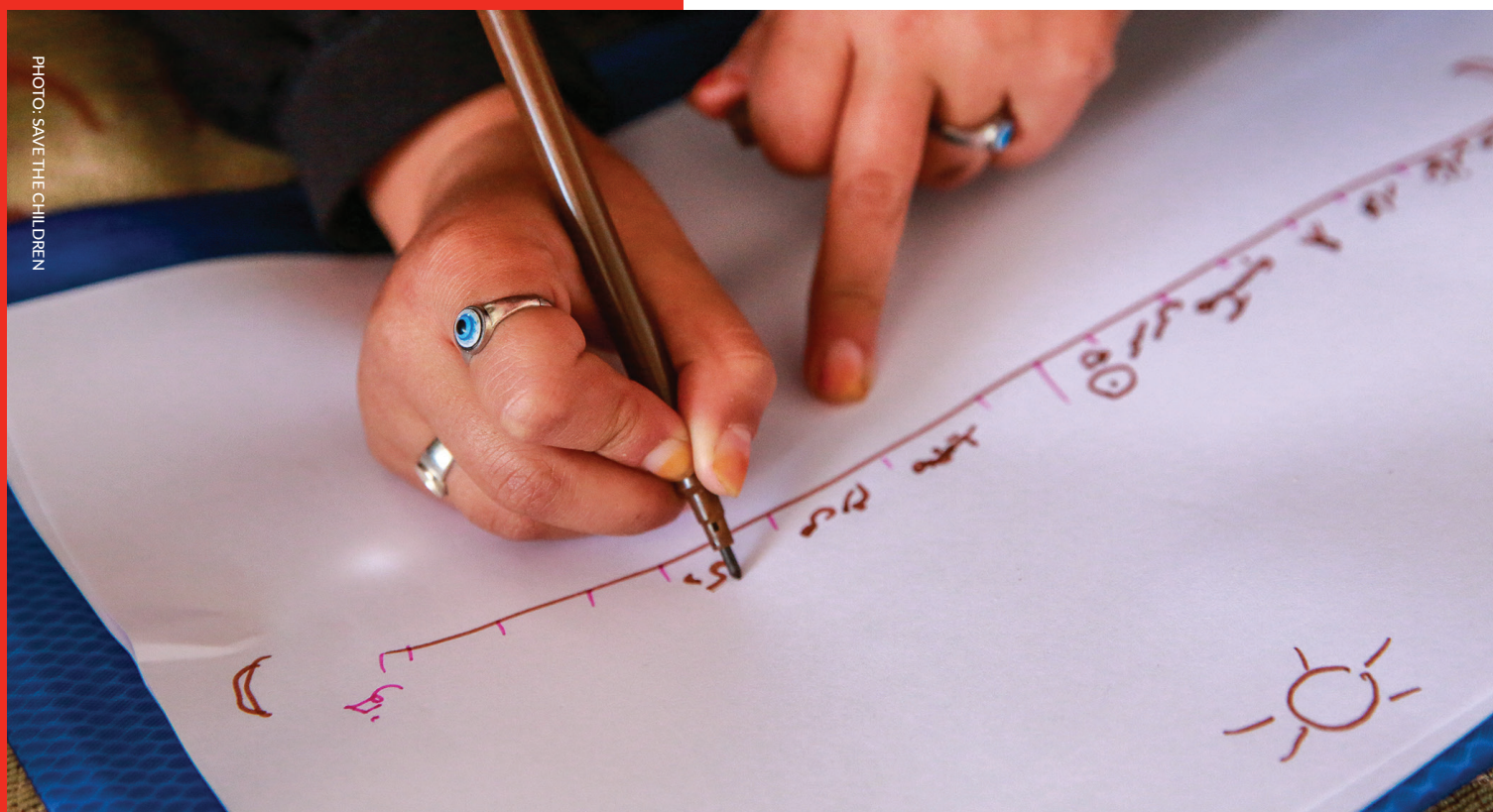


PHOTO: SAVE THE CHILDREN

7. ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS FROM SAVE THE CHILDREN

In light of what children have shared with us about the changes and challenges in their lives, as well as their own ideas for action, Save the Children has identified the following recommendations:

Education

- Continue and strengthen current education programming to provide sustainable education opportunities to girls and boys. This includes the ongoing CBEs and Accelerated Learning Programme classes that reach learners in communities without schools. Ensure Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) continues to be an integral part of the education program, both for learners and teachers, to strengthen the resilience of girls and boys.
- Provide support to at-risk children in school. While girls have had insufficient access to education, and face challenges due to restrictions, boys are also faced with economic burdens at home. It is therefore critical to strengthen the integration of Child Protection and Food Security and Livelihoods interventions for girls and boys through education activities.
- Support teachers to ensure quality of response by providing additional modules on child safeguarding and protection as well as MHPSS, and inclusive education in addition to the established core pedagogy. Teachers should be given the opportunity and encouragement to cooperate with School Management *Shuras* and parents in order to create a strong sense of ownership towards educational programs.
- Expand education programmes to higher grades to provide continuing education to older girls and boys. Currently Save the Children does not offer secondary level classes. This is clearly a gap at the community-level, and will require longer term funding from donors. Higher grades require more specialised teachers, which is a challenge in the Afghanistan context. Partnership with teaching universities and Non-Governmental Organisations that have this expertise can be explored to support this programming.
- Consider meaningful outcomes for education programs aimed towards adolescent girls. Current education programming in this category include the Girls Learn to Teach Afghanistan (GLTTA),

which trains female secondary school graduates to become teachers, and Kankor Boost, which provides supplementary classes for girls to pass university entrance exams. Ensure that GLTTA graduates are properly linked with teaching jobs to utilize their training and that those accepted into university from the Kankor Boost program are not only able to enrol, but also successfully graduate from university.

- Strengthen linkages with the Food Security and Livelihoods sector to identify adolescents and youth eligible for vocational skills training. Combined with the implementation of Life Skills for Success Common Approach, this can help young people acquire the skills needed to identify and capitalise on appropriate work opportunities in the future.

Child Protection

- Strengthen and provide technical support to child protection systems, both formal and informal (community-based child protection networks), through capacity building on: safe identification and referral; community-level monitoring and reporting on child protection risks and vulnerabilities; as well as on support to parents and children on an individual basis. The latter includes for example daily advice, support and monitoring, parenting without violence messages and trainings; tips and tools on engaging and supporting children within the household; case management for risks or evidence of negligence or abuse; and other support as deemed safe and appropriate for targeted community networks.
- Raise awareness on child protection risks and vulnerabilities and implement social and behavioural change programmes, including parenting without violence, which address social and gender norms driving violence and exploitation against children (including providing space in the home for open discussions on issues such as child labour and child marriage where safe for children and possible for staff to broach). Prevention and mitigation of child protection risks and vulnerabilities will be implemented in close coordination with community-based child protection groups and networks as well as directly with girls and boys in an empowering approach to the greatest extent possible.

- In coordination with MHPSS programmes and teams (see below), ensure child friendly and girl friendly spaces include psychosocial support initiatives for girls and boys, including the possibility of longer-term spaces for children such as playgrounds. Work directly with parents or caregivers and community-based networks on how they can support the mental health, well-being and resiliency of girls and boys.
- Mainstream child protection across all sectors to address key child protection risks and vulnerabilities inherent within other sectoral initiatives. Integrate or coordinate with other sectors on shared outcome initiatives, such as addressing well-being and protection risks in schools with education colleagues and increasingly targeting girls and boys impacted by negative coping mechanisms by working in close coordination with other sectors and programmes, such as Cash and Voucher Assistance (CVA) programmes, especially for issues relating to child labour.

Mental Health and Psychosocial Support and Children's Wellbeing Support

- Strengthen community and family MHPSS interventions, focused on how caregivers and communities can support children's wellbeing, focusing on dealing with difficult emotions, listening to their children and coping strategies.
- Strengthen MHPSS support to caregivers, increasing awareness on how their mental health affects their children and the importance of looking after their own wellbeing.
- Create safe spaces (such as playgrounds) where children are given access to their right to play in a safe environment, which promotes and supports their wellbeing.
- Raise community awareness on MHPSS and referral pathways for such services.
- Increase access to focused, non-specialized services to communities to meet the growing MHPSS needs.

Physical Health

- Establish and expand Integrated Mobile Health and Nutrition Teams (IMHNT) to reach more vulnerable and underserved populations, particularly children and adolescent girls, providing access to critical child health, reproductive and maternal health care.

- Establish effective linkages between Community Health Workers (CHWs) and IMHNTs, with training and supervision for health promotion, early identification of childhood illness including malnutrition, home-based care and referral, expand universal coverage of reproductive health care and institutional deliveries.
- Improve Basic Package of Health Service Delivery Point's capacity for infectious disease surveillance, outbreak alerts and response.

Water, Sanitation and Hygiene

- Improve access to Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) products (for example, reusable menstrual pads) and MHM education for adolescent girls. Vocational training for production of reusable menstrual pads could be considered.
- Increase promotion of essential hygiene messages including frequent handwashing with soap. To enable behavior change, in kind or vouchers distributions of soap and handwashing facilities for the most vulnerable households as well as for schools should be implemented.
- Increase sustainable access to water for communities affected by drought and Acute Watery Diarrhea through construction and rehabilitation of water supply facilities and improved access to domestic water treatment systems. Include provision of Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) facilities to institutions (health care facilities and schools) to grant safe and quality access to health care and education services.

Nutrition

- Integrate and expand community-based screening of acute malnutrition (for Severe and Moderate Acute Malnutrition) by improved coverage of family-led Mid Upper Arm Circumference for early diagnosis and referral, treatment and home-based follow-up.
- Link families, particularly children and Pregnant and Lactating Women with acute malnutrition, with multi-sectoral support system including CVA, WASH, health services and distributions.
- Expand training and support to CHWs and Mother Support Groups for community-based Infant and Young Child Feeding in Emergencies and Management of small & nutritionally At-risk Infants under six months & their Mothers (MAMI).

Food Security and Livelihoods

- Increase focus on vocational training and skills building programs for children (linked to education interventions, see above), that empower them to seek better job opportunities and enable them to earn a living.
- It is essential that there is a close integration of Child Protection and Livelihoods approaches in Income Generation projects to ensure parents are informed about the hazards of overburdening and engaging children in income generating activities and negative impacts on children are minimal.
- Consider supporting parents and caregivers to establish stable livelihoods or find employment opportunities, to not only generate an income and meet basic needs, but also to ensure parents and caregivers can spend more time with their children.
- Engage children in community-based interventions focused on preservation and rehabilitation of community natural resources and assets, including supporting them to improve their motivation, set goals, build confidence, and help them become a good leader in their communities.
- Increase interventions that directly target vulnerable children's groups, as identified by children, such as orphans and children working on the streets. This can include case management, support to parents, referrals to CVA programmes, and interventions with local centres to help children get off the streets.

Children's right to participation

- Ensure consultations with children happen on a regular basis so that our programmes are responsive to their priorities, needs, ideas and solutions. Use consultations to share with children how their input has been used.
- Establish and strengthen child-friendly feedback and reporting mechanisms to increase opportunities for direct engagement of girls and boys in our programmes and improve the quality of our work.
- Replicate children and youth clubs across our programmes and use them as a platform for influencing the direction of our work.
- Support children to engage in community monitoring of their rights, such as access to school or child-friendly spaces and create platforms for them to advocate for change.

- Ensure child participation in the evaluation of key outcomes/changes through child-led documentation and dissemination of children's stories of changes through the most significant change approach.
- Consider children's representation in existing community structures where feasible (such as community-based child protection structures and education related committees), and improve the participation of marginalized groups and youth in decision making at the community level by introducing particular criteria for members of the community led committees.

Advocacy

Based on what children have told us about their daily lives and the action they want the international community to take, governments, donors and United Nations agencies must:

- Protect and uphold children's rights, especially the most marginalised and excluded. This includes ensuring equitable access to education for all children, especially girls, training for caregivers and community members on child protection issues and responses, and efforts to guarantee children's most fundamental rights and freedoms, including access to healthcare and quality nutrition.
- Increase the scale of the humanitarian response and expand support for basic services. Children call for more schools, clinics, and access to life-saving services. The issues identified by children can only be partially met by a fully resourced humanitarian response, and governments need to plan for broader types of assistance over the coming months than exclusively humanitarian.
- Tackle root causes, including efforts to address liquidity in the economy, find mechanisms to pay salaries in key sectors, and reduce the financial strain on households to get children out of negative coping strategies.

“MY FUTURE LOOKS **BLEAK**”



Save the Children

Children's lives one year since
the Taliban take-over