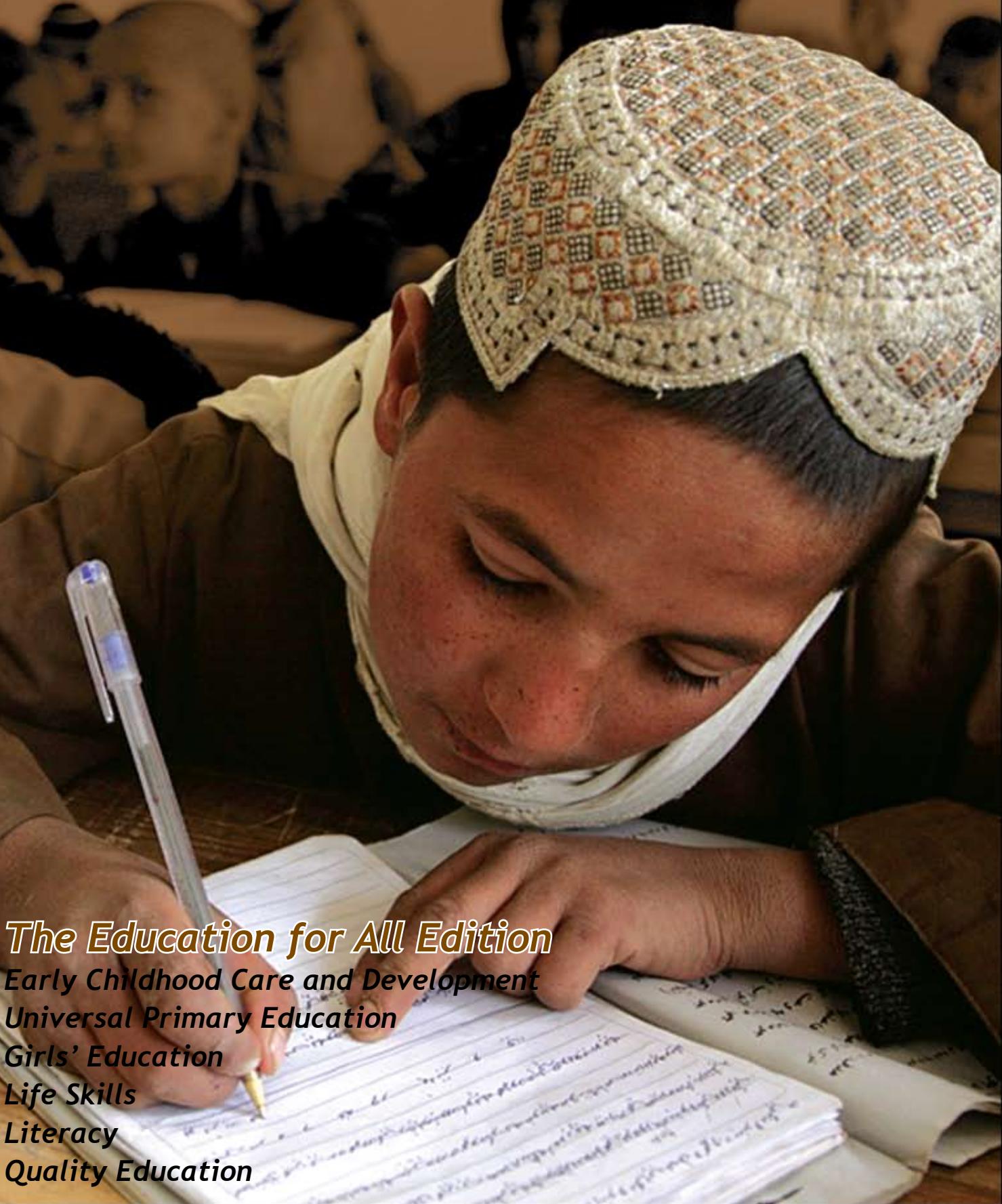


AFGHAN UPDATE

Summer 2010 / No. 23



The Education for All Edition

Early Childhood Care and Development

Universal Primary Education

Girls' Education

Life Skills

Literacy

Quality Education



Foreword: Education for All Goals

Ten years have passed since 164 governments met in Dakar (Senegal) for the World Education Forum and adopted the six Education for All (EFA) goals. At that time, 57 per cent of the 104 million children worldwide not enrolled in school were girls and two-thirds of the 860 million of all illiterate adults were women. In 2000 the international community made a strong commitment to expand education opportunities for children, youth and adults by 2015.

Afghanistan also committed itself to achieving the EFA and Millennium Development Goals by 2020. The Constitution and the Education Law of Afghanistan guarantee all children the right to education regardless of their gender, abilities, disabilities, or their backgrounds and circumstances. All children have the right to quality education in their home communities as part of early child development, pre-school, primary and secondary education programmes, particularly for those who are currently excluded from the mainstream education system or vulnerable to marginalization and exclusion.

The Ministry of Education has taken various measures to ensure access to quality education for all during the past few years, which are reported in the National Education Strategic Plan (NESP II/2010-2014):

- Approximately 26,000 children are enrolled into kindergardens run by different Government entities and mainly administered by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, Martyrs and Disabled across the country.
- School enrolment has grown from 900,000 in 2002 to around 7.3 million in 2009 from grade 1 to 12, among them 37 per cent are girls.
- There are nearly 12,000 schools across the country, more than 4,480 established since 2002. Nearly 3,500 school buildings have been constructed or rehabilitated and a further 924 are currently under construction.
- Community-based schools (335,540 students in 2008) have been an effective solution to provide educational access to children in the areas without any school facility.
- The number of teachers has grown eightfold from 20,700 to 158,000 in 2008, of which 28.8 per cent are females.
- Over 61 million primary and secondary textbooks are being printed and distributed. A new curriculum framework and syllabus have been developed for secondary education, as well as for Islamic education.

Despite major progress since 2002, the education sector still faces challenges to achieve quality education for all children by 2020, including insecurity and attacks on education. This publication intends to share some of the progress made so far by the Government of Afghanistan with the support of the international community, including UN agencies, and also highlights the challenges ahead to promoting the six EFA goals: Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD); Universal Primary Education (UPE); learning needs of young people and adults; adult literacy; gender equality; and quality of education.

UNESCO-Kabul

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Goal 1: Early Childhood Care and Development

For all children, and also adults

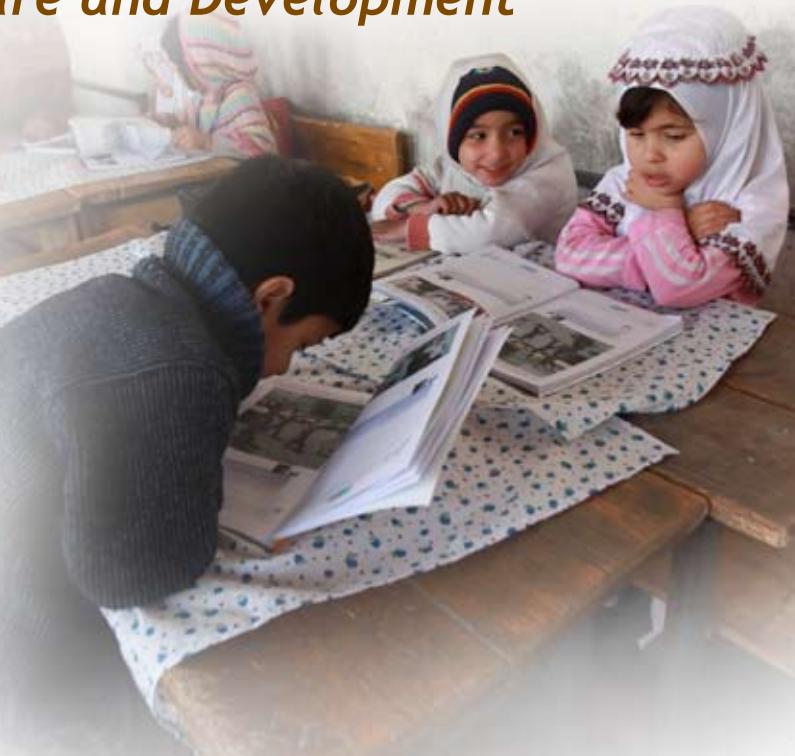
Most children starting school in Afghanistan are first generation learners; their parents have had little or no formal education. In order to improve the chances of children to succeed, as well as to help children learn and develop to the best of their abilities, the Ministry of Education (MoE), with support from UNESCO, UN-Habitat and UNICEF, is currently implementing large scale literacy programmes for women and youth throughout Afghanistan. Literacy programmes are part of the “early childhood care and development programmes” which include a variety of initiatives such as school readiness, play groups, health care services or nutrition.

As more mothers, who are generally the primary caregivers in Afghan families, will be able to read and write, such literacy courses will improve, over time, the literacy rate in Afghanistan. To complement these efforts, school readiness programmes need to be introduced for first generation learners, children from minority groups, and children affected by drugs, abuse and neglect, as well as children with disabilities.

Bibi, 4 years old, comes together with her mother and other relatives to the Nejat Outreach Drug Treatment Centre in Kabul supported by UNESCO. Her father and her two uncles are drug addicts. Bibi is suffering. She seems a bit clumsy and insecure, she is sick all the time; she has headaches and often vomits due to anxiety. She is afraid of her father when he takes drugs. The drugs he takes are often wrapped in paper that looks like candy wrappers. Therefore, she is afraid of everything that is wrapped in colourful paper because her father beats her when he is on drugs, so she doesn't want to chew gum, or eat sweets and popsicles like other children.

Early childhood care and development programmes are important for all children, but especially for children like Bibi. The Nejat Outreach Centre provides a safe place where Bibi can play and meet with other children who are in the same situation, as well as talk with adults and receive counselling.

In addition to the health care and nutrition essential for the intellectual and physical development of children, there is also a great need for places where children can play in order to develop social skills, motor skills, and the creativity and imagination they need to learn and develop. Play is vital for children to develop the ability to interact with others, develop language and communication skills, the ability to think logically, and to take into



consideration the needs and feelings of others. Such social skills are vital for the development of a peaceful and prosperous society for all.

It is therefore important that early childhood care and development programmes are not focused on teaching children to read and write, but that they lay the foundation for life-long learning, through play and other forms of social interaction.

Many UN agencies, as well as national and international non-governmental organisations (NGO) are working on ECCD (Early Childhood Care and Development) in Afghanistan, including Save the Children, Swedish Committee for Afghanistan (SCA), UNICEF and UNESCO.

All these UN sponsored initiatives contribute to the intellectual, physical, social and emotional development of children, and are vital for children to succeed in education.

It is important that the united national and the international community continues its support to the Afghan Government - through the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Public Health, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs and other relevant ministries - in making early childhood care, education, and development programmes available to all children. Without this support it will be difficult to reach the goal of access to quality education for all set forth in the Afghan Constitution, the Afghan Millennium Development Goals, the Education Law, and NESP II (National Education Strategic Plan).

Community-based interventions through NGOs

Save the Children

Save the Children was the first NGO to work with Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) in Afghanistan. The programmes are all located in rural areas, focusing on the development of community-based play groups, and parenting education. The play groups are set up in private homes in the neighbourhoods of the government schools that are supported by Save the Children. The play groups mainly target children aged 4 to 6 to help prepare them for school. At the same time Save the Children is also helping and preparing the 26 schools they work with to educate children from diverse backgrounds and abilities. As part of their programme, Save the Children has also developed picture books and short stories for children on how to dress, how to develop good hygiene practises, how to make friends (focusing on positive interaction and non-violent behaviour), how to treat animals with respect, and how to take care of and be a good companion to others. The play groups allow the children time for free play, movement and physical exercise, storytelling and discussions. In the parent groups, parents learn about how children develop, the importance of play, how to make toys from low cost and waste materials, behavioural management (positive discipline), the impact of physical punishment, and developing responsibility.

Swedish Committee for Afghanistan (SCA)

The SCA early childhood care and development initiatives mainly focus on school readiness programmes for children with disabilities. These school readiness programmes consist of teaching basic skills to children with disabilities so that their inclusion in regular schools goes well. To children with hearing impairment, basic sign language is taught; to children with visual impairment, Braille; and to children with intellectual impairment, daily life activities. All children receive training in basic reading, writing and mathematics skills, social skills, arts and sports.

Community-based rehabilitation (CBR) workers identify children with disabilities. When children are found and identified, CBR workers offer home-based training before children are referred to one of the 30 community rehabilitation and development centres or 27 "sub-centres." These centres are located in 13 provinces throughout Afghanistan, run from project offices in Mazar-e-Sharif, Jalalabad, Ghazni and Taloqan. More than 3,300 children with disabilities will participate in the SCA school readiness (preparedness) programmes in 2010. Three hundred and forty children with disabilities are expected to complete their preparatory levels during

UNICEF

Most of UNICEF's programmes for Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) have been focused on initiatives within health care and nutrition, two factors that are essential for the cognitive, social, emotional and physical development of children, and therefore also their ability to succeed with their schooling

UNICEF has also implemented immunisation programmes across Afghanistan with a total coverage of 84 percent for Diphtheria, Tetanus, Pertusis, Hepatitis B and Hib 3 (*Haemophilus influenza*), and 75 per cent for measles. The Ministry of Public Health (MoPH), with the support of UNICEF and WHO, has reached 7.5 million children with nine rounds of national polio immunisation in 2009, and thus helped reduce the number of children with physical impairment. In addition, over 3 million children aged 9-59 months have received Vitamin A supplements, among others, to prevent childhood blindness.

With support from UNICEF more than 1.2 million primary school aged children will be dewormed during 2010. Children infected by worms are less able to learn and develop in comparison with healthy children.

Goal 2: Universal Primary Education

To ensure all children participate

To ensure that all schools in Afghanistan become inclusive and child-friendly, welcoming all children regardless of their abilities, disabilities, backgrounds or circumstances, UNESCO is working with the Ministry of Education on inclusive education in Afghanistan.

In 2007, the Ministry of Education, with the support of UNESCO, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the Mine Action Coordination Centre of Afghanistan (MACCA) started the Inclusive Education pilot project. In accordance with the principle of the right to Education for All the project promotes quality basic education for all children in Afghanistan, particularly for those who are most vulnerable to exclusion from and within the education system, and to ensure that all children enrolled in the education system participate actively in the learning process. In addition, the project aims at changing the attitude of teachers in the teaching process so that they welcome children of all abilities, disabilities and backgrounds into their classes.

To address the many barriers to education that are faced by Afghan children, the UNESCO project funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) focuses on two specific objectives: 1) improving policy development and coordination on education in general and inclusive education in particular; and 2) strengthening capacities within the Ministry of Education to create inclusive, learner-friendly environments

in schools. Through this project, UNESCO is now supporting 29 inclusive pilot schools in Kabul.

Since 2007 this project has made some impressive achievements. In the first phase only three schools in three districts of Kabul, in all 33 children, were enrolled. Thirty teachers and 60 parents received training. The training of teachers focused on learning how to teach children from different backgrounds, how to manage classrooms so that all children actively participate, and how all children can benefit from the learning process, while parents learned different techniques on how to support their children at home, such as sign language and daily living skills.

During the project's second phase in 2008, there were 12 pilot schools with a total enrolment of 90 students. In addition, a further 90 teachers and 160 parents received training. At present, the number of inclusive education pilot schools has increased to 29 with a current student enrolment of 200. In total, 250 teachers and 350 parents have received training on Inclusive Education, as well as awareness on the Rights of the Child. In addition, the principals of these schools as well as the head masters and deputies also received awareness training on inclusive education.

Implementation of pilot schools

Three different areas of Kabul, of differing socio-economic standing, were chosen as pilot areas. Schools in these areas were then identified and teachers and school principals were approached and were introduced to the programme. Following the identification of schools, local mosques announced the project to community members and encouraged community members to bring their children to the schools. However, it was a long process and it took about a month before parents started bringing their children to the schools.

During a 9-month period, teachers and parents receive regular training. The school principals and head masters are also included in the training sessions. Ultimately, the teacher training aims to improve the skills of teachers and their knowledge of Inclusive Education so that they recognise the barriers to education and can actively seek ways to remove those barriers for children who are excluded.

Parents receive information on the rights of all children to education. Now, children with speech impairments, deaf children, children with epilepsy, children with skin diseases, and other children are all attending the pilot schools.

Goal 3: Girls' Education

A must for sustainable development

Ten years ago, in Dakar (Senegal), the United Nations Girls Education Initiative (UNGEI) was launched. UNGEI is a partnership that embraces the United Nations system, governments, donor countries, non-governmental organizations, civil society, the private sector, communities and families. It provides stakeholders with a platform for action to increase the enrolment rates of girls in school.

If girls remain uneducated they are likely to become illiterate, impoverished and less prone to raise healthy and educated families. Society cannot afford to allow another generation to forego its potential. That is why the Millennium Development Goals of the United Nations, as well as the goals of Education for All (EFA), call for gender parity and equality in education.

Sustainable development and the eradication of poverty will only be achieved with quality education for all - girls and boys alike. Since girls face much greater obstacles, special efforts are needed to get them in school and to ensure that they complete their education. UNGEI's vision is a world where all girls and boys will have equal access to free, quality education.

In Afghanistan: a long way to go

Afghanistan has one of the highest proportions of school-aged (7-12 years) children in the world: About one in five Afghans is a school-aged child. Despite success in sending children to school, trends in gender disparity in education remain worrisome. The literacy rate for young women, aged 15-24, is 18 per cent, compared to 50 per cent for boys. Primary school completion rate for boys is 32 per cent, versus 13 per cent for girls. In terms of cohort tracking, merely 30 per cent of girls reach grade 5, compared to 56 per cent for boys.

The main factors preventing parents from sending their daughters to primary school are accessibility, insecurity and poverty. Limited access is due to a lack of basic school infrastructure and a shortage of female teachers, while traditions and doubts about the political neutrality of schools result in attacks and threats against students and teachers, especially in rural areas. Gender discrimination in Afghanistan is deeply rooted in the society and violence against girls and women is widespread. Today, women hold 68 seats of the 249 seats in Parliament. This is the result of a minimum quota specified in the Constitution. However, unless women can also take part in local-level decision-making processes, it will not make a major difference in women's political participation.

Early marriage plays a significant part in the education gender gap. The lack of access to education results in the absence of female medical personnel and teachers, which in turn makes access to medical services and schools difficult for women. According to a survey completed by UNICEF in 2003, early marriages account for 43 per cent of all marriages, with some girls being married as young as 13 years of age.

AGEI (Afghanistan Girls Education Initiative): a specific partnership

The Afghanistan Girls' Education Initiative (AGEI) was launched in Afghanistan in March 2007 as part of the UN Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI). Its key objectives are to lobby for strong national political commitments towards an increase in girls' education in the country, to function as a network hub for girls' education and to assist the Ministry of Education with the design and implementation of activities likely to increase the enrolment and retention of girls as outlined in the National Education Strategic Plan (NESP).

Major partners at the national level include the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, Afghanistan Women's Educational Centre (AWEC), BRAC (Bangladesh NGO), Canadian Embassy, Danish International Development Agency, Ministry of Higher Education, Ministry of Women's Affairs, OXFAM, Partnership Advancing Community-based Education in Afghanistan (PACE-A) - composed of CARE, International Rescue Committee (IRC), Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and Aga Khan Foundation (AKF) - Save the Children Alliance, Swedish Committee, Swedish Embassy, USAID, World Bank, UNESCO, United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).

Unless accelerated action is taken to bring about parity in education Afghanistan is unlikely to meet Millennium Development Goals 2 (universal education) and 3 (gender parity) by 2015. For every three boys enrolled in school today, five girls must be enrolled tomorrow. To stop discrimination and violence against women, awareness must be raised, cultural practices changed and multiple efforts in legislation implemented to address the socio-economic and legal status of women.



Goal 4: Life Skills

More than education



According to government statistics more than one million Afghans over the age of 18 are using hard drugs. No one knows the exact figure for children and youth.

Drug prevention education is an important part of life skills education which, according to the World Health Organization, aims at developing “abilities... that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life.”

Life skill education is about teaching children to learn how to communicate effectively with others, how to make friends, how to be empathetic, and how to make informed and wise decisions so that they are better prepared for life.

Parents and teachers are often reluctant to discuss issues such as drugs with young children, fearing it may encourage them to experiment with drugs, which would be dangerous to their health. They often wait until children are in secondary school to talk about the subject, forgetting that millions in Afghanistan drop out of school during their primary

education or before entering into secondary schools. All these children are therefore left “uneducated” about the consequences and dangers of drugs.

Life skills are taught to children and youth in many UN supported education programmes in Afghanistan. UNESCO supports Nejat (which means blessing and protection in both Dari and Pashto), an Afghan NGO working on drug prevention and rehabilitation programmes. All education programmes should ideally have life skills components.

Masood, already 20 years old, went to school for seven years and completed his primary education. He never learnt anything about drugs in school. When he was 13, he went to Iran with a friend to find work. He worked at construction sites under hard conditions, and was introduced to drugs by his work mates. When his family found out, they managed to get him back to Kabul and brought him to the Nejat Rehabilitation and Training Centre. Now going through a long and painful detoxification process, he explains: “If I had known about how bad drugs are, I would never have tried them. They only brought pain and misery.”

Masood now wants to work with other children and young people to prevent them from making the same mistakes. Through this UN sponsored life skill education programme, children and young people such as Masood learn about the dangers of using drugs and how sharing needles and syringes can lead to hepatitis and HIV infection.

But life skills education deals with many other issues affecting the lives of Afghan children. Conflict resolution is one of them: Afghan children see and experience violence every day. Most experience or witness physical violence at home, in school, on the play grounds or on the streets. Children too often see conflict as being “resolved” through violence, a behaviour they may copy when they grow up, unless taught otherwise.

To break this cycle of violence, for a more peaceful society, parents and teachers are being taught positive discipline techniques. A first step is to create “violence-free zones” at home and in schools, since children who experience little or no violence when growing up are less likely to be violent towards others as adults.

Another related life skill is the respect for and the appreciation of others: children are often being teased and bullied if they look different, speak a different language, learn or walk in a different way,

Goal 5: Literacy

A national priority

or have a different background from the majority of the other children in school. To succeed in bringing all children into school and learning, stigma and discrimination in schools and communities must be reduced. In the 29 pilot schools for inclusive education of the Ministry of Education, children with different abilities, disabilities and backgrounds are learning and playing together. The teachers appreciate the contribution of children however large or small these may be. This lays the foundation for a more tolerant society.

Terje, a consultant at UNESCO, declares: "It is not enough for children just to be told 'no.'" Terje dwells on yet another life skill: logical thinking. "Children need to learn that every action they take has a consequence. They need to learn about decision-making processes and how to analyse the different consequences an action may have, before they take it!" And the need for children to understand who will help them make wise and healthy choices throughout their lives.

With the support of UNESCO and UNICEF, life skills education has now been introduced in the 29 pilot schools for inclusive education in Kabul, reaching thousands of children. However, much remains to be done. Teaching these skills is about quality education and therefore is expected to be part of all education programmes.

In May 2010 the Ministry of Education, UNESCO, UNICEF, MACCA and the other members of the Inclusive Education Coordination Working Group, will launch the "Embracing Diversity - Toolkit for Creating Inclusive, Learning-Friendly Environments."

Life skills education is an important part of this toolkit, and it will help principals, teachers and education planners to reform schools and become more responsive to the diverse needs of children, parents and communities.

If Masood, as a child, had learnt life skills when he went to school, his life would probably have taken a different course. Teaching life skills aims at helping children to make wise and healthy choices for their lives, build self-confidence and reduce stigma and discrimination, reduce self destructive behaviour, and help future generations of boys and girls in Afghanistan live productive, peaceful and prosperous lives.

'My house was burnt, and our family lived without any shelter. My mother still wanted me to go to school, but my school was also destroyed and it was too hot to study under the sun during the summer time. So I left school...' explains Hamida, aged 19, who joined literacy classes recently. Similar experiences are common in Afghanistan.

Since 2001, the Government of Afghanistan and international organisations have developed several frameworks aimed at educational reform. The combination of Afghanistan's dire economic situation, insecurity, and the lack of educational opportunities have resulted in the emergence of an illiterate generation. The illiteracy rate among Afghans, one of the highest in the world, is not solely attributed to poverty, but rather to a myriad of social and economic factors which include shortage of qualified teachers, especially females, insufficient learning spaces and materials, poor institutional capacity to plan and manage educational programmes, political and cultural conservatism, and traditional family structures.

Families struggling to meet their basic survival needs often do not perceive enrolment in school or attendance of adult literacy courses as a primary concern with long-term benefits. Instead, children are encouraged to work in order to contribute to the family income. As a result many children in Afghanistan are deprived of basic literacy and educational skills.

The Government and international organisations are concerned about a cyclical dynamic resulting in yet another generation of Afghans growing up lacking basic literacy, educational, and life skills.

According to the National Risk and Vulnerability Report 2007/8, the estimated national adult literacy rate (aged 15 and above) is 26 per cent, with 12 per cent for women and 39 per cent for men. In rural areas where approximately 74 per cent of all Afghans reside, the situation is more acute, with an estimated 93 per cent of women and 65 per cent of men lacking basic reading and writing skills.

The National Education Strategic Plan (NESP) identifies literacy as one of its priorities for recovery and reconstruction, and the new NESP II (2010-2014) aims at "increasing the literacy rate, providing literacy courses for 3.6 million learners by 1393/2014 (at least 60 per cent being women)." To achieve the national literacy goal the Literacy

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Initiative for Empowerment (LIFE), a global strategy led and supported by UNESCO, has been designated as the national literacy framework for Afghanistan by the Government in order to enhance more collaborative and coordinated efforts among literacy stakeholders. A common vision, guiding principles, and a sound national strategy for implementing literacy programmes were set out in the National Literacy Action Plan (NLAP). The NLAP sets the framework for Government, donors and all literacy stakeholders.

Besides such policy level interventions, many significant efforts have been taking place at the local level in order to reach out to marginalised rural populations. Literacy programmes of UNESCO, UNICEF and UN-Habitat have made remarkable efforts with their large-scale interventions.

Literacy is not only a reading and writing skill but also an instrument for various social, cultural, political and economic benefits, and the significance of literacy in promoting democracy, health, and education for all children is well documented. Moreover, literacy skills can change the lives of people who experience continual insecurity and prolonged conflict, such as in Afghanistan. The conflicts have destroyed self-esteem of many individuals, family ties, community networks,

and has devastated the nation. Literacy can heal such wounds in these cases. Voices of learners are the testimony of their new lives after becoming literate.

“My whole life I felt excluded. This is about to change now.” Farida, a 65-year-old sounds excited. She is studying in a UNICEF-supported literacy centre in the northern region. In spite of being kept under a lid, her thirst for knowledge has persisted over time. She and 19 other women and girls gather every day but Friday in the living room of a student whose family has positive views towards education.

Mahtab, 22 years old, graduated from UNESCO’s Enhancement of Literacy in Afghanistan (ELA) programme in the village of Ghari Ghalamak in Bamyan. She states that her experience with the literacy programme has been life changing in many ways: “My father, who was previously opposed to my attending the classes, is now pleased to know that his daughter is able to read medical prescriptions and can bargain better with shopkeepers for our family. He is now the strongest supporter for me to continue my education!”

Seema, who joined LCEP-2 (Learning for Community Empowerment Programme) of UN-Habitat, told her story of the first letter she wrote to her son working in Iran: “In the beginning, I thought it would be better to ask one of the neighbours to write it, but I changed my mind and started to write it by myself. I could complete writing the letter without a lot of difficulties. I was very happy to have been able to write the letter with my own hands because I had never touched a pen before. In response to my letter, my son had written ‘Dear Mother! Your letter is more precious to me than any trophies of the world. I have read your letter so many times now. Your letter has increased the strength of my heart.’”

As the EFA Global Monitoring Report 2006 (UNESCO) maintained, definitions and understandings of literacy have broadened considerably, and “literacy is no longer exclusively understood as an individual transformation, but as a contextual and societal one.” As shown by these stories, literacy can be a useful tool in daily life, and can strengthen self-esteem, empower people, and can affect even their family members positively. Literacy is not a panacea, but the first important step towards empowering people, family and community, which could eventually become a big step for peaceful nation-building in Afghanistan.

Together to support EFA Goal 5: UN interventions for literacy

In order to achieve the literacy goals set in the National Education Strategic Plan (NESP) II, the Ministry of Education prioritises some key areas where further improvement is crucial, which are: 1) equitable access to literacy centres, 2) curriculum and learning material development and revision, 3) training of teachers and literacy supervisors, 4) academic supervision, and 5) coordination and management. Literacy programmes of UNESCO, UNICEF and UN-Habitat have been supporting the Ministry while addressing some of these key areas.

UNESCO (Programme for Enhancement of Literacy in Afghanistan - ELA):

- Target provinces: 18 provinces
- Beneficiaries: 600,000 youth and adults (60% are female)

UN-Habitat (Learning for Community Empowerment Programme - LCEP II):

- Target provinces: 20 provinces
- Beneficiaries: 312,000 youth and adults (60% are female)

UNICEF:

- Target provinces: 34 provinces
- Beneficiaries: Youth and adult females

UN Joint Programme for Literacy (Literacy and Education in Afghanistan, Right Now! - LEARN)

- Implementing agencies: UNESCO, UNICEF, UNFPA, WFP, WHO, FAO, UN-Habitat and ILO
- Target provinces: 4 UNDAF priority provinces
- Beneficiaries: 15,000 youth and adults (60% are female)

Goal 6: Quality Education

A social philosophy

Many children experience rejection from their schools and communities, and as a consequence often suffer rejection from their parents as well.

The mother of a young boy in one of the inclusive education pilot schools highlights how her son's attendance at the pilot school has changed both their lives:

"When I brought my son to school three years ago the principal didn't want to accept him. My son had difficulties speaking, he was shy, and he couldn't run around like other boys his age. Then one day I heard that the school had introduced a new programme called inclusive education. When I came to the school, my son was invited to join the first grade. Soon he started speaking and made friends. He still cannot run like the other boys but his legs have become stronger, because they are filled with confidence and pride that he too is going to school and is no longer an outcast."

Inclusive education was introduced in Afghanistan by the Ministry of Education, UNESCO and UNICEF in 2007. In November 2008, Mr Wardak, then

newly appointed Minister of Education, delivered a message of hope at the 48th International Conference on Education in Geneva. Despite the many challenges facing the Afghan education system, he mentioned the progress made since education was reintroduced for both boys and girls in 2001.

"Inclusion is a social and educational philosophy. Those who believe in inclusion also believe that all people are valuable members of society, whatever their difference or diversity. In education, this means that all children, irrespective of their abilities or disabilities, socio-economic background, ethnic, language or cultural background, religion or gender attend the same community school together... Inclusion and inclusive education do not look at whether children are able to follow mainstream education, but rather at how teachers and schools can adapt educational programmes to meet individual needs."

Inclusive education is therefore about ensuring that all children have access to quality education. Inclusive and child-friendly schools offer better

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learning environments for all children; involve all parents; offer better working environments for all teachers; and will help the entire community to develop and prosper. Therefore, inclusive education is about quality education, not merely for a privileged few, but for all.

International organisations have supported the Ministry of Education (MoE) in establishing classes in small communities which are located far away from schools. Access to education in the villages and neighbourhoods where children live is therefore another important aspect of quality education. Hundreds of community classes have been established across Afghanistan.

Even if the nearest school is not far away, some children still experience difficulties gaining access - often because they are girls; belong to an ethnic, language, or religious minority; have to work; or if they have a disability that makes it difficult for them to attend school. UNICEF, UNESCO, Mine Action Coordination Centre of Afghanistan (MACCA), Handicap International, and many Afghan and international NGOs have supported the Ministry of Education in reducing some of the many physical, social and attitudinal barriers that prevent children from attending school or from completing their education. Ramps have been constructed, school feeding programmes have been introduced, or girls have been given food, cooking oil or stipends to encourage their families to allow them to attend school.

Quality education is also about creating flexible solutions for working children, nomadic (Kuchi)

children, and those who have been displaced because of conflict and war.

To improve the quality of the education system, teacher education and training must also be improved. UNESCO, JICA, the Afghan Association of the Deaf (AAB), the Family Welfare Foundation (FWF), and SERVE as well as others are currently working with the Kabul Education University and the Teacher Training Directorate (under the Ministry of Education) to improve teacher education and training programmes. To increase the ownership of communities for education, teachers need to learn how to make education relevant to the needs of all children and families throughout Afghanistan.

Education programmes concerned with quality education also value the knowledge children bring, and must build on this knowledge, and create links to the knowledge children acquire in school and to the curriculum, incorporating indigenous knowledge, and where possible providing education in the mother-tongue of children, and should prepare children for a life in the 21st century.

In spite of all the challenges still facing the Afghan education sector, when looking at all the thriving programmes that have been introduced, and the millions of children who are in school and learning, it is easy to be encouraged. However, these successes can only be sustained with continuous efforts by the Ministry of Education, and with increased support from the UN and the international community.

The impact of the armed conflict on education in Afghanistan - 2009

2009 has seen a significant increase in the number of incidents against schools: 610 attacks were recorded in 2009, compared to 348 in 2008. Those include the burning down of schools, threats to teachers and students, especially girls, and throwing acid on girls and female teachers. For the larger part, groups opposing the current government perpetrated those attacks, as well as communal and traditional elements mostly opposed to girls' education. Incidents spread throughout the country with a notable increase in areas around the capital, such as Kabul, Wardak, Logar and Khost, and in the eastern provinces of Laghman, Kunar and Nangarhar. The situation in the southern region remained of great concern while attacks have spread to northern provinces, previously considered as relatively safe.

2009 also saw a significant increase in the number of explosives placed in and in the vicinity of schools; armed or artillery attacks against schools; schools were affected by military operations and used for political and military purposes. Monitoring indicated an alarming number of schools closed in certain areas such as in Helmand. The stationing of security forces near education facilities also contributed to schools being affected by collateral damage leading to destruction, deaths and injuries. The number of killings and injuries, abductions and threats against students and teachers also increased during 2009. Violence peaked in August 2009 during the Presidential elections, when schools were used as polling stations throughout the country. 249 incidents were reported in August 2009, as compared to 48 reported in July 2009, and 38 in September 2009. 174 instances of explosives placed inside or in the vicinity of schools were recorded in relation to the elections, and the number of threats received by education officials in relation to the use of schools was of particular concern. Local armed groups stated that schools could not be used as polling stations as a pre-condition to their reopening.

Lailoma, from CARE International, indicates the responses put in place by the communities to better protect their schools: "Parent and teacher associations were established, as well as community-based child protection committees in some provinces." Those district-based committees are composed of community members, health workers, doctors or school department officials. Lailoma explains: "They organize night guards or negotiate with insurgents through community members and local mullahs. In some cases, this led to the school changing its name to madrassa."

In addition, organizations such as Save the Children, International Rescue Committee or CARE have conducted training with teachers and community members on the Convention on the Rights of Children in the context of Islam, school protection, corporal punishment, and community mobilization. These initiatives resulted in increased school safety and higher girls' attendance rates.

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