



## Bureau for Rights-Based Development (BRD)

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### Children at Risk in Afghanistan By Emily Ulrich

#### Background

At-risk children are an inevitable consequence of Afghanistan being one of the most unstable countries in the world.

According to data produced by UNICEF, in 2014, 29 percent of children in Afghanistan were believed to be bound to the streets as labourers. By 2017, this figure is almost certainly greater, as regional studies continue to report significant increases in the number of Afghan street children over the last decade. Despite this, aggregate data is not easily found, due in large part to the scarcity of government resources available to report and protect these children on a national level.

Whether orphaned onto the streets (street-living children), have a home and family to return to after working on the streets (street-working children), or whose family considers the streets both their home and source of sustenance (street-family children)—shared adversity constrains these children to a life of daily hardship.

#### Problem Statement

A country overturned by war, Afghanistan has experienced a rush of displaced persons, including children, both within Afghanistan and originating from border countries like Pakistan. As one of the poorest countries, Afghanistan's failing economy offers scant opportunity for the 36 percent of its population living below the poverty line. Coupled with having a considerably young population—47 percent of the total population and 53 percent of the poor population younger than 15 years old—it is common for children to get left behind as the family provider fights for the survival of his family, or are, themselves, forced into the role of provider.

Inaccessibility to social welfare programs across Afghanistan further calcify the effect poverty and high child dependency rates have on upbringing. In effect, 40 percent of children in Afghanistan are left in inadequate care and are increasingly vulnerable to life and work on the streets. While resorting to the streets is often families' attempt to escape poverty, life on the streets tends to breed life on the streets in a self-perpetuated cycle, binding future generations to the same fate.

#### Impact on Afghan Society

The problem will have a multi-dimensional negative impact, on Afghan Society and the capacity of Afghanistan to develop and sustain itself in the long run as identified in the key areas outline below;

*Education/Literacy.* As reported by the 2016-2017 *Living Conditions Survey* conducted by Afghanistan's Central Statistics Organization, school attendance rates tend to decrease as students approach higher school levels. Especially at the Secondary level, where attendance rates average a crippling 34.7 percent. Broken down by socioeconomic class, and the disparity steepens. While the richest 20 percent have an

above-average attendance rate of 55.9 percent, the poorest 20 percent have an overwhelmingly below-average attendance rate of 15.6 percent. Accounting for low literacy rates is a combination of three factors. The first is poverty, which has forced over three million children to sacrifice their education to work on the street, according to a recent survey conducted by Save the Children. The second is armed conflict, which draws hundreds of children into war and out of the traditional school system every year. The third is extremist propaganda, which regularly attacks females who seek an education and reinforces antiquated patriarchal structures.

Repeatedly, education is professed as the hallmark of a prosperous nation. With children forgoing their education to pursue life and work on the streets, they are not only putting their daily lives at risk, but they are also threatening the safety and financial security of future generations. This only furthers the existing divide between socioeconomic classes—concentrating knowledge, industry, and power to an elite, and neglecting the rest.

*War.* According to UNICEF reports, the accessibility of vulnerable children makes them one of the most highly targeted groups recruited into war as suicide or roadside bombers. Children are attracted to groups for comfort, solidarity, identity, and financial stability. In a society where they are otherwise rendered invisible, these tactics prove incredibly persuasive. Taliban-run madrassas littered across Afghanistan indoctrinate vulnerable recruits into the extremist ideology and teaches them military skills, like how to use firearms and produce/deploy improvised explosive devices (IEDs).

Taking especially vulnerable groups off the streets where they're currently being recruited and placing them in formal education or care can reduce the size and scope of these extremist groups. In fact, the Afghan government believes state-run centres targeted at vulnerable children can reduce the number of Taliban recruits by 50 percent and suicide bombings by 95 percent.

*Health/Safety.* The demanding nature of street life exposes children to injury, long-term developmental harm, and psychosocial strain. Living in urban and rural slums—which are prone to overcrowding and bring with them an increased risk of disease transmission, violence, and negative social behaviors—are especially toxic to the health and wellbeing of children.

Beyond living conditions, grueling work environments expose children to their own set of health risks. The most extreme case being the forced coercion of children into human trafficking—a major industry in Afghanistan that simultaneously relies on children while threatening their health and safety by exposing them to various sexually transmitted diseases and infections, like HIV.

Children rarely have an escape. In Afghanistan, over 100,000 street children seek refuge from life's harsh realities in substance abuse, accounting for nearly 10 percent of Afghanistan's reported drug addicts. For some, substance abuse remains recreational; for others, drugs provide a source of income as children become drug mules for local gangs. In both cases, street children directly support the industry that gradually kills them.

*Economic.* The prevalence of street children poses a significant threat to the long-term economic vitality of Afghanistan. High mortality rates caused by children being compelled into dangerous and unsanitary work environments, in addition to low literacy and academic attendance rates, significantly limit the economic security of future generations.

Furthermore, widespread access to cheap labour reinforces black market industries at the expense of legitimate business. Not only does this disrupt prices and transparency, it also reduces the government's ability to collect money that could, in turn, go back into the hands of the Afghan people.

## **Problem Addressed**

In Afghanistan, there is a significant lack of welfare programs available to vulnerable populations, especially street children. According to War Child, for this reason, children “remain on the periphery of development programming.” They are not “priority” groups, and as such, social programs that could alleviate these children from poverty make up a meager 1 percent of the national budget.

In light of this, the government has instated a number of initiatives aimed at restricting the presence of street children. These include the National Plan of Action to Combat Child Trafficking in 2015, the Commission on Banning Beggary in 2008, and the National Strategy on the Protection of Children at Risk in 2006, a venture between the *Ministry of Justice* and *Ministry of Interior* in conjunction with *Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, Martyrs, and Disabled*. Furthermore, the government has sponsored the creation of a number of vocational training centres throughout the country that helped over 12,000 youths build relevant skills. Over time, as funding runs dry and the government can no longer enforce these initiatives, their efforts are all but useless.

In an effort to make up where the government falls short, NGOs and international bodies have become crucial for the support and welfare of street children. NGOs, like War Child and the Bureau of Rights-Based Development (BRD), have a host of on-the-ground initiatives that provide children with educational and training opportunities, while other NGOs, like World Vision Afghanistan Street Children and Save the Children, provide children with access to medical, nutritional, and psychological support. Afghanistan’s street children have also received a great deal of support from international organizations like UNICEF, USAID, the European Union, and the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA)—all of whom have helped fund various initiatives that range from reducing exploitative child labour and trafficking to mobilizing social workers to street children who live outside the State’s infrastructures.

## **Conclusion/Recommendations**

Widespread poverty and political unrest have forced an increasing number of children onto the streets. With nearly half of the Afghan population younger than 15 years old, the government cannot afford to ignore its children in need. By neglecting its youth, immediate consequences—for example, decreased school attendance and literacy rates, the expansion of extremist insurgencies, and increased risk of injury and disease—will inevitably compound into long-term, intergenerational damage—especially economically.

As it stands, the Afghan government doesn’t have the necessary resources to adequately support social welfare programs that could otherwise reintegrate street children back into society and secure long-term growth. It is important for independent actors, like NGOs and international bodies, to take onus of this crisis, with the following recommendations...

1. *Education/training*

Programs should provide children with transferable skills that would endow them with more professional opportunities into adulthood. Professional training could be complimentary to the children’s academic schedules, that way, children don’t have to choose between going to school or helping to support their family.

2. *Outreach to underserved communities*

Programs should extend services to areas with high prevalence of street children, such as rural areas and provincial centres. Targeting affected communities that don’t receive the bulk of state-sponsored initiatives would strengthen Afghanistan beyond the State’s current, more limited, capacity.

3. *Involve local community*

To ensure the sustainability of external aid, initiatives should involve the community to ensure they accurately address the needs of that community. Funding should not only go towards raw materials and supplies, rather, funding should also go towards training local medical, educational, and law enforcement professionals, and supporting their current efforts to rehabilitate and reintegrate youths.

4. *Compel government to collect data on street children*

Children should no longer be treated as invisible. Initiatives should pressure the Afghan government to collect more accurate nationwide data on street children. That way, aid can better target vulnerable areas and improve the overall understanding of the crisis.