



Confronting Child Labour in Afghanistan

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About the Author

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Overview

Child labour is an issue of growing concern in Afghanistan. According to recent estimates, one in four Afghan children aged seven to 14 is engaged in some form of work.¹ This briefing paper explores why children in Afghanistan work, focusing specifically on factors that influence decision-making at the household level. Drawing on findings from an in-depth, qualitative study of poor households that use child labour as well as those that do not, this paper looks beyond poverty to explore the range of social and cultural factors in household decision-making about child labour and considers their implications for policy.

The findings in this paper are drawn from interviews with 33 poor households in both urban and rural settings (see map on back page): Kabul province, including Kabul city and a peri-urban community in Paghman; Herat province, including Herat city and a community near the Islam Qala border with Iran; and a rural village in Badakhshan province.² In addition, reseachers consulted stakeholders from the Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs, and Martyrs and Disabled (MoLSAMD), national and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and United Nations agencies in developing policy and programme recommendations. The decision to send children to work is influenced by a combination of factors. Poverty is an obvious contextual factor that dominates the decision-making of all households in the study. In addition, household composition and gender norms affect the availability of labour resources, which can result in the need to send children to work.

Not all poor or labour-constrained households, however, resort to using child labour. One crucial factor in household decision-making about child labour is the way in which households weigh the costs and benefits of work versus school, which leads them to increase or limit their investment in education based on their perceptions of the potential for future returns. Poor households that send their children to school instead of work are able to justify short-term sacrifice with

¹ Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and UNICEF, "Best Estimates of Social Indicators for Children in Afghanistan 1990-2005" (Kabul: UNICEF, 2006).

² For more detailed analysis of methodology and findings from each research site, please refer to the Kabul, Badakhshan and Herat case studies at www.areu.org.af.

Box 1: What is child labour?

The question of how to define child labour is subject to ongoing debate. There are two general approaches to defining child labour, the first guided by the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention on Minimum Age for Admission to Employment (1973) and the second by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990). As the title of the ILO Convention on Minimum Age implies, its definition of child labour is driven exclusively by age, with 18 years set as the legal minimum age for performing hazardous work and 15 for “light work.” The Convention on the Rights of the Child takes a more conditional approach, stating in Article 32 that children should be protected from “performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child’s education, or to be harmful to the child’s health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development.” In Afghanistan, the Labour Code adopts a minimum-age approach, which mandates the minimum working age as 15 for non-hazardous work and 18 for hazardous work. For the purposes of this study, the term “child labour” refers to paid or unpaid work performed by children under the age of 14 as well as hazardous work performed by children aged 15 to 18. The so-called “worst forms of child labour” described in the 1999 ILO Convention, which include armed conflict, prostitution, and drug trafficking, are unequivocally defined as child labour regardless of age.

the prospect of long-term gains, usually in the form of secure or well-paid employment. How households evaluate the tradeoffs between work and school depends on a number of factors, including access to and quality of education, and exposure to successful role models in their social network.

Differing perceptions of risk also distinguish households that use child labour from those that do not, with the latter more attuned to and intolerant of physical and moral hazards associated with work. Study findings also point to the influence of community norms in household decisions to send children to work or school. Households often cite the behaviour of others in their social circles when explaining their decision-making processes, thus suggesting that shifting community norms toward education and away from work may be one of the most powerful ways to reduce the prevalence of child labour in the long run.

An effective response to the issue of child labour in Afghanistan requires a critical analysis of the factors that influence household decision-making and the nature and level of risk to which children are exposed. The target of the intervention—children at risk of work, children already engaged in work or children in the worst forms of child labour—will determine if the approach should be oriented toward prevention, mitigation or elimination.

Increased attention to the issue of child labour in Afghanistan has resulted in many positive policy and programmatic developments. However, there is still no comprehensive strategy that outlines prevention, mitigation and elimination objectives and integrates the various interventions of government and implementing organisations. As child labour is an issue that cuts across policy boundaries, an effective response must be coordinated, multi-sectoral and targeted at all levels, from individual children to households, communities, and the policy environment. The recommendations in the second part of this briefing paper advise the Government of Afghanistan and implementing organisations on methods of:

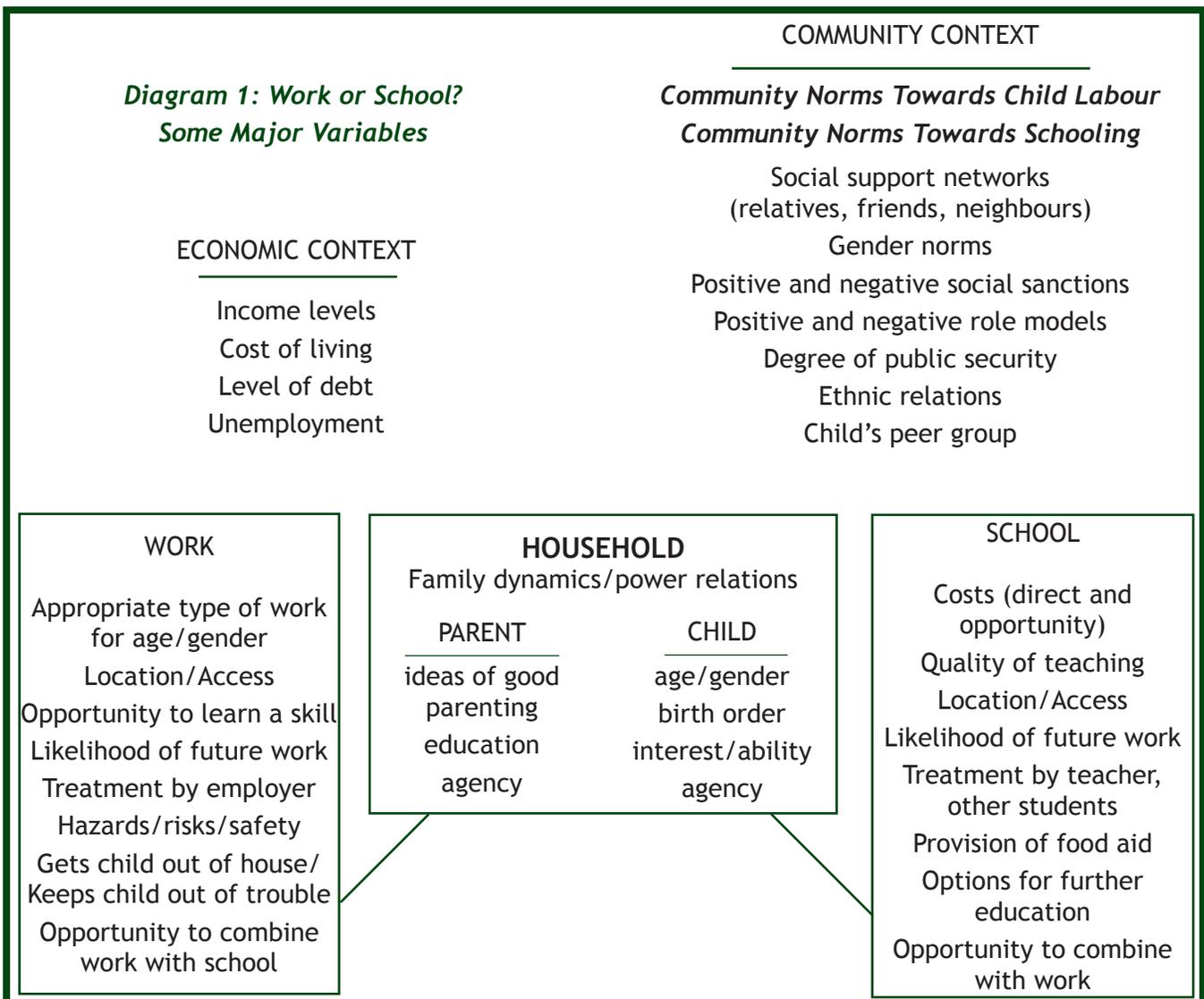
- improving quality of and access to education;
- improving livelihood opportunities and outcomes for poor households;
- engaging communities in changing norms and attitudes toward child labour; and
- strengthening the policy, legal and regulatory environment for reducing child labour.

I. Why Children Work

The decision to send children to work is influenced by a complex interaction of economic, social and cultural factors. As illustrated by the diagram below, household decision-making around child labour depends on individual characteristics of the child and caregiver, power dynamics within the household and community and societal norms. The broader socioeconomic context of Afghanistan also affects household decisions on child labour. The following section describes in detail each of these factors and the ways in which they influence household decisions regarding child labour.

1.1 Poverty and livelihood insecurity

Poverty and deprivation dominate the existence of all households in the study. These households face chronic livelihood and economic insecurity and struggle to afford basic necessities due to scarce and irregular employment, low earnings, high living costs and debt. In the absence of an overarching social protection framework, child labour is one of the strategies that some poor households use to diversify and increase income. However, not all poor households in the study responded to livelihood insecurity by sending children to work, which suggests the influence of non-economic factors.



“In my mind, there’s no one poorer than me. If I can send my children to school though I have economic problems, then why can’t others? Everyone can do anything they want... no one can say I was so hopeless that I kept my children from school.”

– Father from a Kabul city household not engaged in child labour

1.2 Household composition and gender norms

Household composition is an important factor that can influence the decision to use child labour. The study found that households in which the adult male is deceased or incapacitated by old age or illness are likely to use child labour. As gender norms prohibit their mothers from working outside the home, male children in female-headed households are particularly likely to work to compensate for the lack of an adult male income-earner. There are notable exceptions, however, of women contravening such gender norms to keep their children in school and out of work. The ability of women to contribute to household income and thereby reduce the need for children to work is highly variable and depends on individual agency, family attitudes and community norms.

1.3 Trade-offs between work and school

All the households in this study face the same challenges of poverty and insufficient labour resources. Yet not all choose to respond by using child labour. Households usually considered the question of how to most effectively allocate the

use of children’s time within the framework of work versus school, or a combination of both. Study findings demonstrate that households engage in a careful analysis of the costs and benefits of work versus school and increase or limit their investment in education based on the potential for returns in the short- and long-term.

Households in the study considered three main factors in evaluating the value of schooling: quality, cost and potential for future employment. The quality of education that children were receiving in school was of grave concern to many families. Children and parents complained about poor school facilities; overcrowded classrooms; and unqualified, unmotivated and even abusive teachers. They also expressed frustration over poor learning outcomes. As one mother in Herat city complained, “My daughter has studied up to fourth grade, but she still can’t read and write, so what was the point of going to school?” In this case the girl herself expressed the desire to drop out of school to weave carpets with her mother. This decision was likely due both to the poor quality of education she was receiving at her school as well as the sense of pride and satisfaction she derived from learning a skill and contributing to the household income.³

One exception was the case-study village in Badakhshan, where respondents reported general satisfaction with the quality of education provided at the school. The perception among households of high-quality education, combined with the strong commitment to education among the community

³ See the case of Shafiq in “Factors Influencing Decisions to Use Child Labour: A Case Study of Poor Households in Herat,” by A. Sim and ML. øilund-Carlsen (AREU, 2008).

Box 2: Challenging gender norms

Saleem’s mother has been the sole income-earner for her six-person household since the death of her husband one year ago. In order to keep her children in school, she works as a domestic servant in a neighbour’s house but is fearful of the backlash that may result from violating community norms around female seclusion:

“I do not want them to tell my children that I am working in other people’s houses in the future. If people say such things to them, then they will be ashamed, and I do not want that. Their father was a big man, he was a mullah and people will not accept that his wife will make the family ashamed.”

The case of Saleem’s mother illustrates that women can and do challenge gender norms in order to give their children an education. However, they do so at great risk to their personal and family reputations.

leadership, had a dramatic effect: almost all the children in the village were attending school on a regular basis. This example demonstrates the importance of educational quality in household decision-making about work and school.

In addition to issues of school quality, the hidden costs of education were of concern to these poor households. While primary and secondary education are ostensibly free to all school-aged children in Afghanistan, in reality households often incur school-related expenses such as uniforms, stationery and even gifts for teachers in exchange for passing grades. These costs, while minimal, can be a huge burden to households already struggling to afford basic needs. Poor households can and do, however, find creative ways to bear the cost of school materials if they determine that the investment in education is worthwhile. Some households in the study, for instance, turned rice sacks into school bags and recycled scrap paper for school notebooks in order to ensure their children could continue their education.

“It’s good to learn different kinds of skills. It is good to even learn how to repair shoes because then you can sit in the street and do that work and earn 20 or 30 Afs to buy food. Sometimes having skills is more important than having an education, because with education you cannot find a job as quickly as when you have a skill. When you have a skill you can start working any time you want. For example, if a person can sit in the street and repair shoes, he is not educated but he can support his family.”

– Grandfather from a Herat-city household engaged in child labour

Households also consider the potential for future returns on education when evaluating the choice between work and school. Families expressed greater willingness to invest in their children’s education if the investment would result in increased potential for stable, high-paid employment in the future, which would in turn benefit the rest of the household. For some households, however, the capacity to consider long-term gains was constrained by their focus on subsistence.

Given the high unemployment rates in Afghanistan, many respondents were doubtful that formal

education would result in greater job prospects for their children. This scepticism was further compounded by the poor quality of teaching and learning in schools and the limited access to secondary and higher education.

1.4 Combining work and school

Confronted with the choice between work and school, poor households weigh the costs and benefits of each in the short- and long-term and make strategic choices to maximise returns within the context of extremely limited options. Some households attempt to mitigate their risk by having some children attend school and others work, or by having their children combine work and school. By utilising the latter strategy, children can continue to invest in their education while simultaneously learning a skill to fall back on should their education not result in secure employment.

I: So what are the disadvantages of your work?

R: I left my school. That was the biggest difficulty for me.

I: How were you with your studies?

R: I was not good, my teacher was always beating me.

I: Why were you not so good?

R: Because I never did my homework. And I couldn’t study.

I: Why?

R: Because I was working until late at night, how could I find time to study?

– Interview with 13-year-old boy working as a mechanic’s apprentice in Herat city

Children who attempt to combine work and school, however, face many challenges in attendance and performance. Respondents in Herat and Kabul reported that employers did not allow children to attend school or spend time on homework, while teachers punished children who missed school or failed to complete homework due to their workload. Child respondents also reported feeling exhausted by the demands of work and school and shamed by teasing from their non-working classmates. Unable to cope with

competing demands on their time and energy and discouraged by the insensitivity of the school system to their needs, several working children in the study felt compelled to drop out of school to work full-time.

1.5 Learning as motivation for work

Faced with the apparent lack of concrete benefits to education in the short- or long-term, poor households may decide that their children's time is more effectively used for income generation. The opportunity cost of spending time in school is often too high to bear given poor educational quality and outcomes and the pressing need for household survival. Child labour, then, is not only a means of ensuring short-term benefit to the household in terms of increased income in the present; it is also a way for children to learn marketable skills that can support them in an uncertain future.

Respondents reported *learning* as an important non-economic motivation for child labour and generally preferred work activities that would impart skills—such as apprenticeships—over those that provided little opportunity for learning, such as street vending. Child labour was also described by some respondents as a means of transition from childhood to adulthood, whereby children would learn vital life skills necessary for being a successful spouse or parent. Parents and children themselves viewed learning a sense of responsibility as a key positive outcome of children's work.

"I know how to plow the land, sow the seeds, harvest...when my father is not at home, I am the one responsible for my household. And when there is something happening in the village, I'm invited to the meeting where the elders make the decisions."

— 14-year-old boy who gathers and sells firewood in Badakhshan

1.6 Keeping children safe and out of trouble

The study reveals an interesting relationship between child labour and parental fears for children's safety and morals. Many respondents

expressed deep suspicion of free time and leisure and cited the desire to keep their children off the streets and out of trouble as one of the main reasons for sending them to work. Parents were particularly fearful of their children being exposed to negative influences and behaviours such as smoking and drugs, or being the victim of kidnapping and other violent crime given the rising insecurity in the country.

Such fears were most pronounced in the urban study sites of Kabul and Herat city, whereas children were more free to enjoy recreational activities with their peers in the rural village in Badakhshan. This difference is most likely due to the close-knit nature of the rural community, where households demonstrated much greater levels of social cohesion and trust than their urban counterparts. While some households that were engaged in child labour pointed to work as a means of keeping children safe, households that chose not to use child labour emphasised the physical and moral dangers of sending children to work. For these households, school was the safe place for children to learn and play. The following quotations from two households in Kabul illustrate this difference in perceptions of risk:

"Waheed was very naughty when he was a child. He was flying kites, climbing on walls and getting on the roof all the time. So later we decided to send him to work somewhere so he would not hurt himself."

— Mother from a Kabul-city household engaged in child labour

"I think people who send their children out to work are crazy, because their children learn bad things from outside. They find bad friends who will take them the wrong way. These things have bad impact."

— Father from a Kabul-city household not engaged in child labour

1.7 Girls

Decision-making around the allocation of children's time is highly gendered in the Afghan context. For many households, the harm to family reputation and honour caused by girls' presence

in the public sphere is a more vital consideration than the income girls could generate by working outside the home. Similarly, girls who have reached puberty are often discouraged from continuing their education due to the norm of female seclusion. Some study respondents reported that they saw little benefit to educating their daughters since they will marry and move out of their natal homes.

“Girls have to go to their husband’s house one day, if we spend money on their studies, what will we gain from it? Nothing. So it’s better to keep them at home to do the house chores.”

– Father from a Herat-city household engaged in child labour

Although girls may not be as likely as boys to work outside the home, they are at high risk of being deprived their right to education and of being required to work for long hours on domestic chores in their natal or marital homes. In all research sites, girls were found to perform both paid and unpaid home-based work such as carpet-weaving and pistachio-shelling. In some cases in Kabul and Badakhshan, girls were found working outside the home scavenging or tending livestock, although the backlash from their presence in the public sphere increased as they reached puberty.

1.8 Influence of community norms

As households do not live in isolation, decision-making about child labour is greatly influenced by the attitudes and behaviour of other members in the community. The power of community norms regarding work and school can be seen in the comparison between the case-study village in rural Badakhshan and the community near the Islam Qala border with Iran. In the former, school attendance is the norm for almost all village children: community leaders demonstrate commitment to education, parents report satisfaction with school quality, and as a result the majority of children are regularly attending classes. By contrast, work is the norm in the border community of Islam Qala: children and parents alike see little value in attending the poor-quality classes at the local school and choose instead to earn income at the nearby border crossing that offers significant work opportunities.

Furthermore, the striking absence of community cohesion and organisation in the Islam Qala village means that there is no community mobilisation around the issue of child labour, and working children enjoy little community support or protection. Households in the Badakhshan village, on the other hand, cooperated to ensure that female students were accompanied by trusted male community members on the way to school, thereby allowing access despite concerns over distance and security.

The influence of strong community ties in the Badakhshan village could also have negative effects on children, however, as evidenced by the decision of the local *shura* to send two of the children in the study to work in order to repay their families’ debts.⁴ In these cases, community priorities outweighed the children’s interests.

The study also found that peers and role models play a significant role in decision-making about work and school. Children are extremely influenced by the actions of their peer groups and are less motivated to pursue an education if most of their friends and relatives are working. Similarly, households referenced role models in their social networks who influenced decisions to either send children to work or to school. Knowledge of positive role models who achieved professional success through education was for some households one of the main factors in their decision to educate their children. Notably, some households that refrain from child labour see themselves as positive role models for others in their community. As one respondent stated, even the emergence of a single role model from the community could create a ripple effect, changing people’s perceptions of the possibility of success through education.

“If one or two people from the Turkmen community became something like a doctor or engineer, then other Turkmen people would be inspired to go to school and become something too.”

– Mother from Herat household engaged in child labour

“What people say” had a tremendous effect on

⁴ See Nabi and Abdul in “Factors Influencing Decisions to Use Child Labour: A Case Study of Poor Households in Rural Badakhshan,” by P. Hunte and A. Hozyainova (AREU, 2008).

all households in the study regarding decisions on children's activities. Fear of gossip, for instance, could make a family decide to take its daughter out of school. Conversely, the enhanced status and reputation derived from being the family of an educated professional could encourage a household to invest in education. The importance of reputation and status in many Afghan communities suggests that shifting community values and norms toward education and away from work could be a key strategy to reduce child labour.

The decisions made by households to keep their children in school, put them to work or combine the two are influenced by a complex interplay of factors, including economic necessity, household composition, quality and potential outcomes of education, and community values and norms. Strategies to reduce incidence of child labour must therefore be multi-faceted, ranging from macro-level action to targeted interventions with children, households and communities.

II. Children at Risk and How to Respond

Working children are exposed to a range of physical and psychosocial hazards as a result of their work. Some children in the study worked as much as twice the legally mandated hours for adults—often performing physically injurious activities—and many were subject to harassment and abuse from employers or even the police, as in the case of street-working children.

While all forms of child labor entail some degree of risk, the nature and severity of risk depend on the type of work. Street-working children in urban or border areas may be at greater risk of harassment and abuse compared to children performing agricultural work in rural communities. Furthermore, the extent to which child labour results in severe and long-term harm to the child depends on the kind of work performed, hazards present in the workplace, and the nature of the work and home environments. For instance, an apprentice at a mechanic shop is exposed to dangerous machinery and falling objects, but may be at lower risk of long-term physical or psychosocial harm if there is proper supervision from a caring employer.

School attendance is an important factor that can mitigate the risks associated with child labour. Children who are able to combine work and school have the opportunity to attain literacy and numeracy skills, as well as gain self-esteem and life skills through peer interaction. The ability of working children to access and perform in school is therefore one of the main factors that determines their risk of long-term harm.⁵

The following diagram, adapted from a model by Furio Rosati and Scott Lyon,⁶ provides a useful conceptual framework with which to assess the risk level of working children and the corresponding action necessary. At the top of the pyramid are children engaged in the worst forms of child labour, which are defined in the International Labour Organization (ILO) *Convention on the Worst Forms of Child Labour* as involving children in activities such as sex work, drug trafficking or participation in armed conflict.⁷ Due to their hidden and taboo nature, little is known about the incidence or nature of children's involvement in these forms of work in the Afghan context.⁸ The activities considered to be the worst forms of child labour violate the fundamental rights of children and must be targeted for immediate elimination. International law mandates that children identified as being involved in such forms of work be immediately removed and provided the social services necessary to facilitate their recovery and reintegration.⁹

Work" (Rome: Understanding Children's Work, 2006).

⁶ Rosati and Lyon, "Tackling Child Labour," 2006.

⁷ International Labour Organization, *Concerning the Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour*, Convention Number 182 (1999).

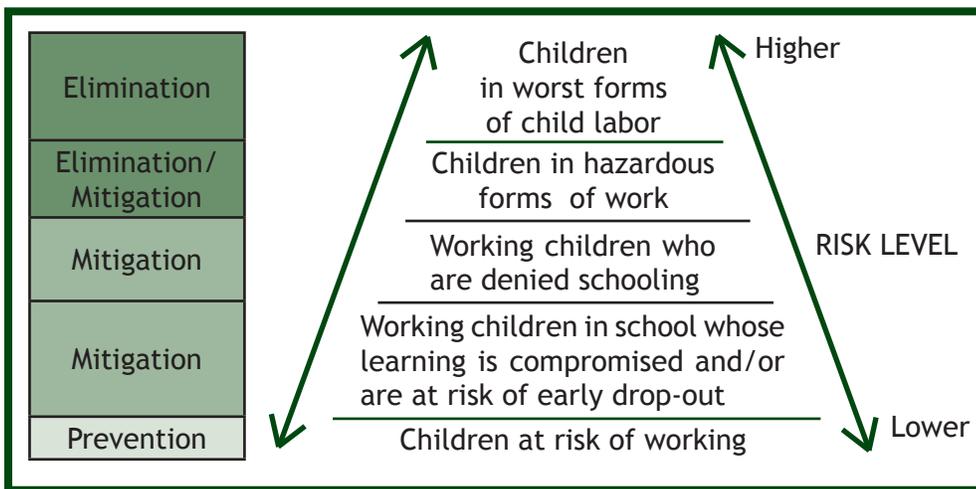
⁸ Forthcoming studies by ActionAid Afghanistan on child labour in the border areas of Islam Qala in Herat province and Torkham in Nangahar province, as well as in Kandahar, met similar challenges in uncovering incidence of high-risk work and hazards such as sexual abuse.

⁹ According to an interview with the ILO Afghanistan Programme conducted by the author in August 2008, Afghanistan would be ratifying both the ILO Convention on Minimum Age of Employment and the ILO Convention on Worst Forms of Child Labour imminently.

⁵ Furio Rosati and Scott Lyon, "Tackling Child Labour: Policy Options for Achieving Sustainable Reductions in Children at

There is currently no reliable information on the extent or nature of children’s involvement in these forms of child labour in Afghanistan, nor is there sufficient awareness of how to identify and respond to such cases at the local or national level. Efforts to eliminate children’s involvement in the worst forms of child labour must therefore begin with awareness-raising and information-gathering by local and national state and non-state actors. It is likely that community-based, grassroots-level monitoring would be the most effective means of identifying cases. However, given the stigma associated with such activities, great care and sensitivity must be taken in order to ensure that the children’s privacy and physical and psychological well-being are protected.

Diagram 2: Major categories of children at risk and overlap with prevention, mitigation and elimination



All of the child-labour cases in this study fall into the middle categories of children at risk, including children in hazardous forms of work, working children who are denied schooling and working children in school whose learning is compromised or are at risk of early drop out.

While the ideal would be to achieve complete elimination of all child labour, the economic and social reality in Afghanistan necessitates a more gradual approach of risk mitigation. Acknowledging that some children will continue to have to work in the short- to medium-term, interventions must seek to reduce risk and increase protection for working children. Such remedial action includes improving work conditions, ensuring access to education and supporting children in achieving learning objectives. Some forms of work may be so

hazardous to children’s physical and psychosocial well-being, however, that they necessitate elimination.

Whether or not the response should be elimination or mitigation therefore depends on the specific context of the child and household. Remedial interventions must not result in legitimising work that is harmful to the child’s development. On the other hand, immediate action to remove a child from work must avoid putting the child at further risk by plunging the household into a state of extreme deprivation. All interventions to remove or mitigate harm to the child must therefore also include intensive engagement with the household—primarily parents and caregivers—in order to ensure sustainable improvement in the child’s well-being.

Effective preventive measures targeting children and households at risk of engaging in child labour are necessary to reduce the incidence of child labour in Afghanistan in the long-term. The households in this study that do not use child labour demonstrate unique characteristics that have enabled them to survive without sending their children to work. However, these households remain extremely vulnerable and are at high risk of engaging in child labour in the event of an unforeseen shock.

A key prevention strategy is therefore to improve the resilience of these at-risk households by increasing their financial, physical and human capital. Strengthening the livelihoods of poor and vulnerable households would help make them less likely to use child labour as a coping mechanism.

Improving access to and quality of education is another essential preventive measure. As the study findings demonstrate, children who learn from knowledgeable teachers in a participatory and learner-centred environment are more likely to stay in school instead of turning to work. Parents are also more likely to support school attendance

when they can observe tangible returns on investment in education. Finally, communities play an essential role in preventing child labour. As household decision-making is influenced to a large extent by prevailing community norms around work and education, community-level interventions to shift attitudes and values can have a tremendous effect on reducing child labour.

The response to child labour in Afghanistan must therefore incorporate multiple levels of intervention targeted at prevention, mitigation and elimination objectives. Using a conceptual framework that outlines appropriate action for various levels of risk enables actors to prioritise, coordinate and sequence interventions. The recent emergence of child labour issues onto the national agenda—as signalled by references in the Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS) and the forthcoming National Employment Policy and Strategy—signifies promising political awareness and commitment. However, the response to child labour remains fractured, with little effective coordination among government, donors and NGOs.

There is a need for a comprehensive strategy that outlines prevention, mitigation and elimination goals and integrates the various interventions of government and implementing organisations at the national, community and household levels. Examples of coordination mechanisms such as the Child Protection Action Network (CPAN)¹⁰ are positive steps forward. However, they must be strengthened and expanded to include actors from other related sectors in order to create the multi-sectoral response necessary for tackling child labour.

The following section includes specific recommendations for the Government of Afghanistan and implementing organisations regarding the prevention, mitigation and elimination of child labour. These recommendations are necessarily multi-sectoral and targeted toward children, households, communities and the policy environment. An *effective* response to child labour in Afghanistan must be a *coordinated* response.

III. Conclusions and Recommendations

3.1 Improve quality of and access to education

Findings from this study clearly demonstrate the influence of educational quality and access on household decisions about child labour. Improving the quality of education is crucial to preventing child labour, as households are more likely to keep their children in school and out of work if they perceive positive learning outcomes. For children who are already working, increasing access to education is an important remedial action that can protect children from full-time work, mitigate harmful effects of work and ensure continued learning. This study suggests that girls and children from ethnic minorities face particular challenges in accessing education and require targeted support to stay in school and out of work.

Issues of educational quality and access are discussed in Afghanistan's National Education Strategic Plan (NESP). The plan specifically

mentions girls, nomadic children, children with learning disabilities, pre-school children and children who have missed the first years of basic education. However, it does *not* discuss how to meet the particular needs of working children.¹¹

Targeted interventions to provide educational services to working children have been undertaken only by a small number of NGOs—mostly in Kabul and other major cities—that offer centre-based, non-formal education or accelerated learning. The establishment of such centres is an important first step toward ensuring some form of continued learning for working children.

¹⁰ The CPAN is a network of child protection organisations facilitated by UNICEF and the MoLSAMD. There are currently CPANs in 28 provinces and a national-level CPAN in Kabul. There are plans to establish 43 district-level CPANs in 2009.

¹¹ The NESP is currently under review to mainstream the principle of inclusion, which emphasises the need for educational systems to meet the varied needs of *all* children, particularly marginalised or excluded groups, including working children.

However, they reach only a small number of children and are often highly dependent on donor funding, which can be unpredictable. Sustainability is also of concern: not all centres have the specific aim of preparing working children for eventual integration into the mainstream educational system and in some cases may even have the opposite effect.¹² Of course, not all working children may be able or willing to re-enter the formal education system. Discussions among implementing organisations and the Government of Afghanistan—particularly the Ministry of Education (MoE) and Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs, Martyred and Disabled (MoLSAMD)—are necessary to determine a coordinated yet flexible strategy for intervention that serves the best interests of children at risk of or already engaged in child labour.

Recommendations for the Government of Afghanistan:

- Improve quality of and access to primary education, as outlined in the NESP. Invest in enhancing teachers' knowledge of subject content and teaching methodology and emphasise the importance of a participatory, inclusive and learner-centred environment in teacher-education programmes. Focus on inclusion of girls and children from ethnic and language minority groups given their many barriers to school access and retention.
- Lead the development of a strategy to improve working children's access to education and ensure that working children are a specific group targeted by the revised NESP. Use the pilot inclusive education schools in Kabul to develop strategies for inclusion of working children.¹³ For example, design flexible classroom schedules to accommodate the time

¹² Sadiq, a mechanic's apprentice from the Herat case study, for instance, dropped out of government school to attend an NGO-established accelerated learning course, having been promised free clothing and educational materials. Upon realising that the course was only for a two month period, Sadiq had to wait for the next academic year to re-enroll in school.

¹³ Terje Watterdal, *Needs and Rights Assessment: Inclusive Education in Afghanistan*, (UNESCO forthcoming). Inclusive education refers to an approach that ensures all children, in particular those who are vulnerable to marginalisation and exclusion, have access to quality education that meets children's diverse needs.

constraints of children who work and offer in-classroom remedial support for children who have fallen behind due to work obligations.¹⁴

- Consider increasing school enrollment from once to twice a year to allow for more frequent integration of working children into the formal education system.¹⁵
- Increase skill-development opportunities for working children above the age of 15 who are unable or unwilling to pursue formal education. Include working children above 15 as a specific target group for technical and vocational education and training, as well as literacy and non-formal education, in the revised NESP. Coordinate with the Joint National Youth Programme—in particular the Youth Information and Counselling Centres established by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)—and the National Skills Development Programme (NSDP) to ensure working children above 15 can also access opportunities for life-skills development, particularly literacy.

Recommendations for Implementing Organisations:

- Ensure that all interventions with working children are age-specific and appropriate. Prioritise integrating children who are eligible to enter primary classes into mainstream government or community-based schools. For over-age children, provide accelerated learning or "catch-up" classes with the view toward integration into the formal education system. For example, conduct classes for working children within government or community-based school facilities instead of specialised centres.
- Ensure that all community-based education activities prioritise the inclusion and special needs of working children. Engage children, parents and community leaders in setting

¹⁴ Students in upper grades could be engaged as teaching assistants given that many teachers are already overstretched by classroom demands. The Joint National Youth Programme, which advocates youth participation and volunteerism, could be a vibrant source of in-classroom support.

¹⁵ Aschiana, an Afghan NGO and member of the Child Rights Consortium, has led advocacy efforts to facilitate enrollment of working children in government schools.

academic calendars and daily school hours that reflect the local context and accommodate the needs of children who work. In community-mobilisation and teacher-training activities, emphasise the importance of identifying the needs of working children and encourage flexibility and commitment in meeting those needs.¹⁶

- Provide learning materials such as notebooks and stationery to working children and children at risk of being sent to work to reduce costs associated with education.¹⁷
- Provide skills development opportunities, along with non-formal education, for working children above the age of 15 who are either unwilling or unable to enter the formal school system. Coordinate with MoE, MoLSAMD and the NSDP in designing curricula for skills development and non-formal education to ensure consistency and quality control. Conduct a localised labour market analysis to determine appropriate and productive skills development opportunities for both male and female youth. Where appropriate, link youth with local entrepreneurs to create apprenticeship and “on the job” learning opportunities.

3.2 Improve livelihood opportunities and outcomes for poor households

Poverty caused by scarce, low-paid employment and high living costs is a crucial driver of child labour. This study found that the economic contribution of working children is in some cases essential to household survival, which means that those children are unable to stop working in order to continue (or begin) their educations. Furthermore, households that do not engage in child labour are at high risk of sending their children to work in the event of an unexpected shock such as an illness or death among the adult income-earners.

Strengthening the livelihoods of poor households

¹⁶ In community-based classes supported by the Aga Khan Foundation in Badakhshan, for instance, community members have negotiated with school leaders to reduce school hours during labour-intensive agricultural seasons and make up for school time during less busy periods.

¹⁷ Most community-based education providers are already providing learning materials to all students in order to reduce barriers to school.

would therefore serve both a remedial as well as a preventive function: working children would be able to return to school or even stop work entirely in some cases, while non-working children would be at less risk of starting work. In particular, providing adult women access to culturally appropriate employment opportunities may reduce the need for children to work, although care must be taken to ensure that the burden of household work is not displaced onto girls.

The ANDS emphasises the importance of a “pro-poor” economic development strategy. Yet households lacking physical, human, social and financial capital—exactly the households using and at risk of using child labour—continue to lack opportunities for skills and business development. Most microfinance, vocational training and business-development opportunities have criteria that exclude the most vulnerable households due to concerns with investment returns. In order to reach such households, donors must be prepared for a higher level of risk and investment in time and resources. Additionally, child protection objectives such as child labour prevention and reduction have not been sufficiently mainstreamed into economic and community development activities in Afghanistan. Given the strong link between livelihood and child protection outcomes, the government, donors and NGOs are missing important opportunities to increase child well-being through household-level economic strengthening interventions.

Recommendations for the Government of Afghanistan:

- Ensure that livelihood and economic-development strategies and interventions target vulnerable households that have few skills or resources and are using or at risk of using child labour.
- Advocate with donors to secure increased funding for investment in the human and financial capital of vulnerable households.

Recommendations for Implementing Organisations:

- Design and implement multi-sectoral projects that include complementary livelihood and child-protection components. Use economic

strengthening interventions as entry points for addressing child protection issues, including child labour and school attendance. Coordinate with other organisations to jointly implement projects and take advantage of different organisational expertise.

- Target poor and vulnerable households using or at risk of using child labour for skills and business development programmes. Conduct localised labour market surveys to determine marketable skills, paying particular attention to appropriate income generation opportunities for women, in order to diversify income sources. Link households to savings and credit by establishing self-help groups for those unable to meet the criteria for accessing microfinance.
- Complement skills and business development interventions with literacy courses for household members to increase parental engagement with and commitment to education.
- Use livelihood interventions as an entry point to engage households on decision-making around the allocation of labour resources, particularly that of children and youth. Help households re-enroll children in school and identify other income streams—particularly through employment opportunities for women—to compensate for the loss of income from child labour.

3.3 Engage communities in changing norms and attitudes toward child labour

Comparative findings from the case studies—rural Badakhshan and the Islam Qala border community in Herat, in particular—demonstrate the importance of a cohesive, aware and mobilised community for reducing and regulating child labour. Investing in strong community networks of community leaders, elders, teachers, employers and household members is crucial to understanding and responding to child labour, especially as most child labour is “hidden” in the home or the informal economy.

Community members—with their intimate knowledge of local norms, resources and needs—are best placed to identify hazardous forms of child labour, particularly the worst forms that are

too taboo for outsiders to uncover. Community members can also play an important role in monitoring school attendance and engaging households whose children are excluded or marginalised because of their work.¹⁸

Communities can provide social safety nets for vulnerable households in the absence of effective social protection by the state. Poor households with strong social networks may therefore be able to cope with unforeseen shocks without turning to child labour. By contrast, in communities where there is little social cohesion and the norm for children is work rather than school (as in the case of the Islam Qala border community) households are more likely to engage in child labour.

The power of community norms suggests that shifting community values from work to school would significantly reduce child labour and increase school attendance. Positive role models, particularly from poor households that have found ways to keep their children out of work, have an important role to play in achieving such transformations.

Recommendations for the Government of Afghanistan:

- Establish mechanisms that link communities to district and provincial-level bodies responsible for responding to child labour and other child-protection issues. CPAN, and MoLSAMD as its chair, if strengthened and established at the district and provincial levels, may play useful roles in coordinating government and NGO responses to child labour.¹⁹
- Launch an awareness-raising campaign around hazardous and worst forms of child labour. Use media, including TV, radio, newspapers and magazines, to build local awareness of how to identify the harmful effects of child labour, as well as to provide information on available

¹⁸ One of the roles of School Management Committees established by community-based education providers, for instance, is monitoring and following up on student absenteeism.

¹⁹ A CPAN workshop conducted in Kabul in January 2009 acknowledged the need to consolidate and strengthen district and provincial-level CPANs, in particular the need to establish a strong reporting mechanism from the communities to the national-level CPAN.

services. Engage prominent and influential figures in the Afghan Government and civil society in conveying such messages.

- Invest in building community mobilisation expertise and capacity at key ministries such as the MoE and MoLSAMD. Ensure that community mobilisation is a key component of all policies and interventions.
- Identify and invest in specific areas that demonstrate a confluence of poor social cohesion, few livelihood options, high criminality, low school attendance and high incidence of hazardous child labour. The President's Office's interest in community development in the border areas is a positive step in this regard and should be supported by the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD) and the National Solidarity Programme (NSP) through intensive engagement with local Community Development Councils (CDC).²⁰

Recommendations for Implementing Organisations:

- Adopt a community-based approach to all child-labour interventions. Conduct a capacities and vulnerabilities analysis prior to engaging in the community to capitalise on the community's strengths and target its weaknesses.
- Mainstream child protection issues, including child labour, into community development initiatives and in coordination with other implementing organisations. Ensure that interventions with CDCs include awareness-raising campaigns on child labour, and that reduction and regulation of child labour are specific objectives of community development plans.
- Establish networks of community members, including CDC members, religious leaders, elders, teachers, health workers and employers to form broad-based child labour monitoring mechanisms at the community level. Include participation of former and current working children in these networks in order to learn from their experiences and design relevant, effective interventions. Support community

networks to monitor children in workplaces, engage with employers to improve working conditions and gain permission for children to attend school, and follow up on children who are out of school. Work with communities to identify hazardous or worst forms of child labour, and to create mechanisms for reporting, response and referral that will protect children's privacy and well-being.

- Identify and engage positive role models from the community who can raise awareness around the value of education and the short- and long-term harmful effects of child labour. In particular, use households that do not engage in child labour as role models and support them in sharing their experiences and strategies to keep children in school and out of work.
- Create safe spaces in the community for children to learn and play to ease parental fears about security and crime.²¹ Use such spaces, which can be in schools, community centres or homes, as nexuses for community awareness raising and mobilisation around child labour and other child protection issues.

3.3 Strengthen the policy, legal and regulatory environment for reducing child labour

A supportive political, institutional, legal and regulatory environment is necessary for achieving sustainable reductions in child labour. There are positive signs of increased political commitment and momentum around the issue, as demonstrated by its inclusion in the ANDS, National Employment Policy and Strategy, and National Strategy for Children at Risk. The planned ratification of the ILO Convention on Worst Forms of Child Labour and the ILO Convention on Minimum Age of Employment is also an important legal development that will signal Afghanistan's commitment to addressing child labour.²²

The policy, legal and regulatory frameworks governing child labour, however, remain flawed,

²⁰ Interview with Carol le Duc, August 2008.

²¹ A UNICEF initiative to establish safe play areas throughout Afghanistan acknowledges the need for children and youth to have safe spaces for learning and recreation.

²² Interview with ILO Afghanistan Programme, August 2008.

as they do not adequately address the informal sector, where the majority of children in Afghanistan work. The Afghan Labour Code sets a minimum age for employment and establishes a maximum number of working hours for workers under 18, but does not define the terms “light” and “hazardous” work.

Furthermore, there is no mention of the mechanisms through which these provisions will be monitored or how workplaces will be regulated. Given the prevalence of child labour in the informal sector, community-based mechanisms as described above are likely to be the most effective means of monitoring and protection. There are still, however, little to no linkages between communities and the CPANs, which exists primarily at the national and provincial levels.²³ The Government of Afghanistan, with MoLSAMD taking the lead in close collaboration with MoE, must demonstrate more effective leadership in policy setting and stakeholder coordination around child labour and develop a strategy for intervention at the national, provincial, district and community levels.

Recommendations for the Government of Afghanistan:

- Immediately ratify the ILO Convention on Worst Forms of Child Labour and the ILO Convention on Minimum Age of Employment. Adopt time-bound programmes with clear goals, specific targets and a defined timeframe for reducing the risks, and gradually the incidence, of child labour. Incorporate provisions of the ILO Conventions into national legislation to ensure consistency among Afghan labour laws and international child labour norms.
- Conduct a comprehensive review of the child labour provisions in the Afghan Labour Code with technical input from ILO and the International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC).²⁴ Ensure that provisions pertain to monitoring and regulatory mechanisms applicable to the Afghan context, in particular the informal economy.

²³ District-level CPANs currently exist in some areas, and there are plans to establish CPANs in 43 districts in 2009.

²⁴ Also recommended in the National Employment Policy and Strategy.

- Ensure that all district, provincial and national-level CPANs have established thematic working groups on child labour with clear action plans indicating targets, timelines and responsible actors. Ensure participation of MoE, community leadership such as CDCs, and organisations implementing education, livelihoods, child-protection and community-development activities that have potential synergies with child labour issues.
- Create and strengthen mechanisms to ensure that children in conflict with the law as a result of their work are protected and afforded their rights while in police custody. Develop and implement guidelines for the police and justice sectors for responding to situations involving minors.²⁵

Recommendations for Implementing Organisations:

- Provide feedback and input, based on experiences from the field, to the development of policy and best practices for responding to child labour.
- Facilitate information flow from beneficiary communities to district, provincial and national structures—particularly CPAN—in order to improve the knowledge base regarding the incidence and types of child labour in Afghanistan.

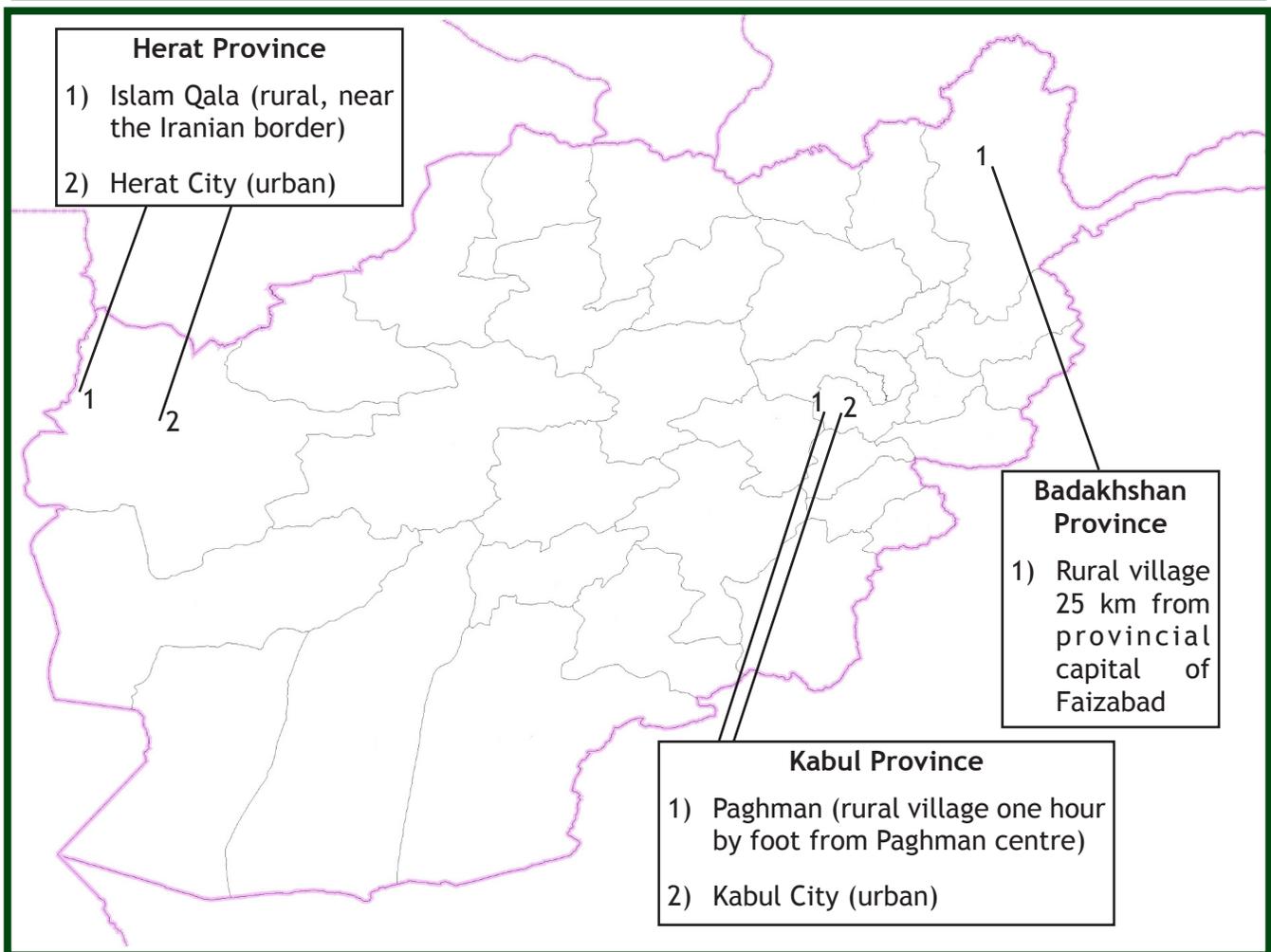
An effective response to child labour must address the complex interaction of economic and social factors that influence household decision-making. Interventions must be multi-sectoral and coordinated to achieve prevention, mitigation and elimination objectives in the short-, medium- and long-terms. They must also build upon and reinforce positive community values and role models that promote the physical, emotional and intellectual well-being of children. Given that household and community vulnerability to the use of child labour varies according to local context, interventions must be tailored to the specific dynamics of each economic, socio-cultural and educational environment to achieve the greatest impact.

²⁵ The recent agreement between CPAN, MoLSAMD, Ministry of Interior, and Afghanistan’s Attorney General, which mandates cooperation between social workers, police officers and prosecutors in cases involving children, is a positive step in improving protection of children in conflict with the law.

Efforts to reduce child labour cannot be isolated from the broader context of chronic poverty and insecurity in Afghanistan. As demonstrated by this study, the interaction among poverty, conflict, crime and weak rule of law has a tangible impact

on children's ability to learn, play and grow into healthy and productive adults. Only within a peaceful and thriving Afghanistan can children and families fulfill their hopes for a brighter future.

Annex: Location of Child Labour Fieldsites



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The Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) is an independent research organisation headquartered in Kabul. AREU's mission is to conduct high-quality research that informs and influences policy and practice. AREU also actively promotes a culture of research and learning by strengthening analytical capacity in Afghanistan and facilitating reflection and debate. Fundamental to AREU's vision is that its work should improve Afghan lives.

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