

Story of impact

Afghanistan: UNICEF is there before, during, and after emergencies



Afghanistan

Mohammad, age 5, holds his brother Sayed, age 2, at a camp for people who have been displaced from their homes by conflict and war. Afghanistan is a country beset by multiple crises, with over 24 million people in need of humanitarian assistance.

In 2021 the word ‘emergency’ took on a whole new meaning in Afghanistan. On top of 40 years of insecurity, the country faced escalating conflict, the COVID-19 pandemic, outbreaks of acute watery diarrhoea and other vaccine preventable diseases, the worst drought in 37 years, and the government takeover by the Taliban. The consequent economic sanctions, rising unemployment, and high food prices plunged most of the population into poverty.

Quite simply, it was – and still is – one of the most dangerous places in the world to be a child, with one child out of every 18 dying before his or her fifth birthday.

UNICEF works to promote and protect the rights and well-being of children and women around the world no matter how challenging the environment, and Afghanistan is no exception. Since 1949 the organization has been bringing basic services – including education, health, nutrition, protection, water, sanitation, and hygiene – to those who are most in need, addressing inequities in each of these areas. So when in August 2021 the Taliban seized power and became the de facto authority, and everything suddenly changed, UNICEF remained. We stayed, and we continued to deliver for children and communities across the country.

It is in these situations – when crises layer on crises – that the ability to respond quickly and flexibly is of paramount importance. That is why Core Resources for Results (RR) are so critical in allowing UNICEF not only to carry out our work but to scale up our response. As many international organizations left the country, UNICEF was one of the few channels through which donors could reach the people of Afghanistan. Organizations such as the World Bank suspended operations, but UNICEF became the conduit for some of their funding. It was a race against time to try to meet the population’s

needs, and we innovated through using RR to pay for the salaries of crucial vaccination staff in some areas.

As weeks turned into months, UNICEF Afghanistan transitioned into a new way of working whereby the office was coordinating the majority of social service delivery across the country. But one area of our long-term work that we simply refused to lose ground on was routine immunization, including polio and COVID-19 vaccinations. In this area, RR was essential to our response. In 2021, \$1.2 million of UNICEF's RR was directed to immunization in Afghanistan, enabling the continuity of this vital health service for children.

Using our unique convening power and leadership to negotiate with the de facto authorities – often with staff funded by RR, from the Country Representative to immunization specialists – we secured an agreement to recommence COVID-19, measles, and polio vaccinations. With RR funding, plus contributions from earmarked funding and the efforts of RR-funded immunization staff at the organization's provincial offices and cold chain facilities, by the end of the year UNICEF had achieved impressive results for children and their families.

But it was no easy task. In fact, given everything that was happening in the country, maintaining anything like 'normal service' was almost impossible. That is why the flexibility of RR is so crucial.



Afghanistan

A young child receives the oral polio vaccine from a UNICEF-supported female vaccinator in the Herat province of Afghanistan.

2021 immunization achievements in Afghanistan

- Assisted in vaccination of over **653,000 children** against measles.
- Worked with partners on a measles outbreak response in six provinces, assisting in the vaccination of **1.5 million children** aged 9–59 months.
- Fully vaccinated more than **3 million targeted people** against COVID.
- Administered routine Expanded Programme on Immunization vaccines to more than **1.4 million children** below the age of 1.
- Vaccinated more than **4 million women** of child-bearing age against tetanus and diphtheria.
- Reached on average **7.4 million children** through each of five nationwide polio campaigns in January, February, June, November, and December, administering some 40 million doses of vaccines. Alongside these polio vaccines, UNICEF also provided vitamin A supplements to help prevent malnutrition.

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Going the distance to reach children and their families with lifesaving vaccines

Afghanistan is over 650,000 square kilometres, and more than 70 per cent of its people live in rural areas, whether among ravines, mountains, or at the end of rough tracks. To reach and immunize every child in these circumstances – even before the political realities are considered – is an enormous challenge, one that begins the moment a consignment of

vaccines arrives in the country. This is because, first, vaccines need to be refrigerated; and, second, they have a limited shelf life.

The first part of the solution is the cold chain. The cold chain ensures that vaccines are kept at the right temperature until they are ready to be administered. We operate and maintain vaccine hubs in all 34 provinces throughout the country, and all running costs are paid for by RR. Powered by generators to circumvent the erratic electricity supply, and with a cold chain staff that includes managers, technicians, and security guards, our carefully run operation has protected millions of dollars of vaccines during a time of emergency and uncertainty for Afghanistan, when other support had halted.

Our facility managers carry out the coordination and planning of immunization programmes among partners, ensuring a regular supply of vaccines to health facilities, and they supervise the storing and checking of all vaccines and non-vaccine supplies in optimal temperatures. Without this system, and the RR funding that supports it, our immunization programmes would simply not be able to function. This same RR support also enabled UNICEF to introduce COVID-19 vaccinations in 2021, resulting in more than 3 million of the target population being fully vaccinated despite the very challenging context, including conflict.

With RR covering these essentials, we have been able to deploy other types of funding in a targeted and efficient way. For example, earmarked funding used for the national polio campaign led to success because of the foundation laid by RR. And emergency funding helps us reach the most vulnerable populations in the rural provinces. All of this enables us to reach the scale for which UNICEF is world renowned.

In addition to laying the foundation on which activities funded by other sources can operate, RR also helps us lead and pioneer by piloting new ideas that can unlock new donors. For example, UNICEF Afghanistan had begun converting our cold chain facilities to solar power with RR funding – a simple but cost-effective and hugely important sustainability measure. However, there was insufficient RR to cover all 34 facilities in 2021. With increased donations to RR, we would be able to convert all our cold chain facilities, make the ‘proof of concept’ even more compelling to potential donors, while also thus making our stores even more cost effective and reducing our emissions.

Our experts ensure effective delivery

The next step on the route to immunization is distribution. RR pays for all stages of a delivery journey that sees vehicles loaded with precious vaccines traversing perilous routes. It also pays for the colleagues who ensure that vaccines are administered safely and with essential supplies, such as masks, gloves, sterile wipes, leaflets, and other support materials.

The last step in the journey is for the vaccines to be administered to the children and women who need them, all around the country. To this end, RR complements other funding sources and plays a crucial role in funding vital members of the UNICEF team. In the busy provincial centre of Herat in western Afghanistan, UNICEF vaccinators work at Herat Maternity Hospital. When the Taliban took power there was uncertainty regarding women working in communities despite the need for their skills and expertise.



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A UNICEF-supported female vaccinator addresses mothers and fathers during her daily awareness-raising sessions on the importance of polio vaccination. “The best thing about my job is raising awareness about children’s health and the importance of vaccines,” she says.



When children are vaccinated, they face lower risks from disease, which protects them from malnutrition. This is what UNICEF does. We are here for children. We stay and deliver. In Afghanistan that means we are there before, during, and after emergencies, for as long as it takes.

Fortunately, and thanks to the advocacy of UNICEF and other partners, female vaccinators were reinstated. However, funding for their salaries was needed and, once again, RR was used to address the need.

Nor was this limited to Herat Maternity Hospital. RR funding supports female vaccination teams in other parts of the country as well. So now, thanks to RR, Jamila Rahmani works in shifts vaccinating newborn children and women. It is challenging, but Jamila says she is glad to be able to perform her duties at a time when women have been deprived of working in many other sectors.

Herat is just one of more than 2,400 Expanded Programme on Immunization vaccination centres across the country. Between mid-August and the end of 2021, in this centre alone 8,411 newborn children were vaccinated against tuberculosis, poliomyelitis, and hepatitis. In addition, Jamila and her UNICEF colleagues vaccinated 1,086 women to protect them from tetanus-diphtheria.

These are exceptional results, especially given the challenging circumstances. And they have had a positive ripple effect. When children receive vitamin supplements, they become better nourished, and their bodies are better able to protect themselves from disease. Likewise, when children are vaccinated, they face lower risks from disease, which protects them from malnutrition. This is what UNICEF does. We are here for children. We stay and deliver. In Afghanistan that means we are there before, during, and after emergencies, for as long as it takes. RR is vital in allowing this to happen, and every donor who supports RR is supporting a brighter future for the children of Afghanistan.

“UNICEF has been in Afghanistan for more than 70 years – and we’re staying,” declares Dr. Mohamed Ayoya, UNICEF Representative in Afghanistan. “RR ensures that we can be here day in, day out, saving lives and giving the most vulnerable children the chance of a safer, brighter future. My thanks to the donors who have supported RR to date. Please continue to help us lift the lives of children in Afghanistan.”



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Dr. Mohamed Ayoya, one of UNICEF's expert senior staff who is funded by RR and serves as Representative in Afghanistan.