



Summary of Workshop

on

Advancing UN Millennium Development Goals

1 December 2004
Kabul, Afghanistan



Hosted by:
Afghan Women's Resource Center (AWRC)

In collaboration with:
Afghan Women Network (AWN) &
Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children (WCRWC)

Introduction

At the United Nations Millennium Summit in September 2000, 189 countries adopted the Millennium Declaration, which places development at the center of the global agenda and includes a set of interconnected and mutually reinforcing goals. The eight Millennium Development Goals set clear targets for reducing poverty, hunger, disease, illiteracy, environmental degradation and discrimination against women. Targets and indicators have been defined to track the progress in meeting the goals by 2015.¹

Objectives

The main objectives of the one-day workshop were to:

- raise awareness among Afghans about the UN Millennium Development Goals;
- encourage dialogue among Afghans, especially returnees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), United Nations Development Program (UNDP), United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Government of Afghanistan's Ministry of Return and Repatriation to clarify mandates, responsibilities, expectations and capacities of actors;
- identify applicability of the MDGs process as contributing to durable solutions for internally displaced and returnee populations;
- develop a set of recommendations drawn from the perspective of returnee and IDP women on how to enhance the implementation of MDGs considering their needs;
- explore how participants can collaborate in the future to advance the recommendations and monitor their implementation.

Process

Twenty-five people participated in the workshop, including representatives from the government of Afghanistan, local Afghan nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs), UN staff and schools teachers and, in some stages, the media. The UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) contributed substantially to the workshop's preparations. *See Annex 1: List of Participants.*

Key points raised by UNHCR and UNDP

Mr. Shafiq Qarizada, Assistant Country Representative of UNDP, gave a brief introduction on the history of the MDGs and discussed the status, trends and existing challenges and constraints relevant to each goal in Afghanistan. Current status and trends are included as "Facts" in the following sections of this report. Mr. Qarizada stated that it is difficult to measure Afghanistan's achievements towards each goal due to weak data gathering, statistical tracking and analysis capacities and planning and resource allocation mechanisms. Weak monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are an additional challenge in this process.

Ms. Zahida Shahidy, Assistant Protection Officer of UNHCR, discussed UNHCR's policy and services relevant to the MDGs. She said that most of UNHCR services in Afghanistan contribute towards achieving the following MDGs: goal 1 (Extreme Poverty and Hunger), goal 3 (Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women) and goal 7 (Environmental Sustainability). She gave details of UNHCR

¹ For more information on the MDGs visit <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals>. For further information on gender and the MDGs visit the Women's Environment and Development Organization at www.wedo.org or UNIFEM at www.unifem.org.

services in the context of the mentioned goals, such the establishment of gender working groups in different regions and English language and computer training courses for female returnees in Kabul. She also shared that while UNHCR attempts to ensure the protection of IDPs and returnees, it can be difficult. For example, UNHCR found through its returnees' monitoring that practices of child marriage, illegal divorce, denial of inheritance, restrictions on women's movement and access to basic services in most rural areas throughout the country are still challenges to assure protection.

General findings and recommendations

Participants met in smaller, mixed groups to discuss one or more goal and develop related recommendations. All four groups acknowledged that:

1. Post-war recovery in Afghanistan has witnessed several remarkable achievements in the 2002-04 period. Most prominent among these were the presidential election, drafting of the new constitution and ratification of it by Loya Jirga, and the rapid reactivation of the national primary education system.
2. As Afghanistan enters its fourth year of recovery, serious challenges still remain that are obstacles to restoring security and accelerating reconstruction, particularly in the provinces. In addition to the return of security and sustaining of peace, the following factors are also critical challenges for achieving the MDGs.
 - slow process of demobilization, disarmament and reintegration (DDR);
 - presence of warlords;
 - inadequate action taken towards implementation of law and order;
 - high rates of illiteracy;
 - extreme degree of poverty;
 - cultural barriers and culture of violence against women;
 - poor infrastructure;
 - lack/poor quality of social services.
3. The scale of these challenges requires concerted investment and reform measures in the coming years by the government of Afghanistan in partnership with civil society and the international community. A robust and sustained commitment by the international community is critical.

Challenges for returnees and IDPs

Displaced populations are disproportionately affected by poverty and related conditions. Returning refugees often lack access to property and housing. Moreover, displaced women often face increased obstacles to education, health care and employment opportunities. Therefore, in order to achieve progress in each of the eight goals, the needs and requirements of returnees and internally displaced women and children must be considered in MDG programs, policies and strategies. The workshop focused on the MDGs as an important mechanism to hold both governments and donors accountable to their commitments.

All the groups were asked to give special focus to the obstacles and needs of returnees and IDP and develop recommendations. As almost all the NGO participants are returnees, they acknowledged that the inability of many refugees and IDPs to sustain their return to their places of origin or preferred destination is leading to destitution and renewed cycles of displacement or migration. Many instances of return, of

both IDPs and refugees, are taking place in less than voluntary circumstances. The sustainability of return is further hindered due to the following challenges and obstacles:

- Continued insecurity and lack of effective rule of law and order;
- Problems related to recovery of assets and properties;
- Threats of inter-factional conflict and rights abuses by local authorities on the way to return and at the places of return;
- Lack of housing;
- Insufficient aid and reconstruction assistance;
- Unemployment or limited employment;
- Lack of/limited access to health and education services and poor quality of these services;
- Creation of problems by the Ministry of Education in acceptance of educational documents/certificates provided by some returnees to get admission in schools/colleges inside Afghanistan.

The groups also mentioned that the high **concentration of returnees in urban areas** has significantly raised pressures on already over-stretched services and utilities, housing and the urban labor market.

Participants raised the issue of forced return of female family members as well. Almost all returns are decided by male family members and female members have no other option(s) except to accept the males' decisions, which results in high rate of frustration and stress amongst returnee women. According to culture, women are responsible for all domestic chores and other related issues. After return, limited or poor access to facilities such as proper housing, electricity, health care and quality education, forced some women either to attempt suicide or demand divorce from their husbands in order to return to their parental families in the countries of asylum.

Recommendations to overcome these challenges

The government of Afghanistan, in collaboration with donors, United Nations, international agencies and nongovernmental organizations should:

- Prioritize needs of returnees and IDPs in MDG policies and programs. There should be closer alignment between the government's policies and assistance programs, particularly with the Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation, the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development and the Ministry of Urban Development and Housing in order to address the crucial needs of the majority of returnees and IDPs, such as housing and sustained employment.
- Adopt a regional approach to address poverty and promote sustainable development and consider cross-border concerns from the perspective of the protection needs of women. Tripartite agreements negotiated between countries and UNHCR should be reviewed in terms of impact on women. International support to Afghan refugees in neighboring countries should continue.
- Foster community spaces for IDPs, especially female-headed families, to help them integrate and forge new social and economic partnerships with the host community.
- Guarantee all IDP children, including those living in camps and urban areas, access to education, including through the government's acceptance of previous educational accreditations.
- Provide mobile counselling teams for returnees, given their psycho-social and other needs upon return.
- Improve monitoring of the conditions of return and address abuses by local authorities to ensure returnees and IDPs are treated as equal citizens.
- Accelerate the process of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration among Afghans.

Goal 1: Eradicate Extreme Poverty and Hunger

1. Facts:

Afghanistan is the second poorest country in the world.² Almost 48 percent of the population is malnourished.³ The staple diet of a significant portion of the population consists of wheat.⁴ Forty-five to fifty-five percent of the population is malnourished.⁵ Protracted conflict and war in Afghanistan is the principal cause of poverty, which has been exacerbated due to continued drought.

2. Existing Challenges and Constraints:

- Slow actions taken by the government towards implementing development programs;
- Unemployment and no consideration for job creation;
- Employment of Pakistani labor in construction business;
- Food deficiencies and communities relying on food assistance from UN and INGOs;
- High rate of population growth (4.2 percent / year); **footnote**
- Poor infrastructure;
- Poor and insufficient public services;
- High rate of illiteracy.

3. Steps Taken:

- Provision of food assistance to the most vulnerable families and communities by UN and INGOs;
- Initiation of some income generation and micro credit programs for a limited number of families in a few communities by UN, INGOs and local NGOs;
- Some degree of infrastructure development by international community and NGOs;
- Launching some training programs for gender equality, human and women's rights by some governmental departments, UN, INGOs and local NGOs (especially women organizations);
- Development of Common Country Assessment (CCA) by involvement of some governmental departments, UN, international organizations with the support of the World Bank.

4. Recommendations:

In order to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger in Afghanistan, the group recommended that the government of Afghanistan, with support from donors and other actors, should:

- Increase self-sufficiency programs, such as income generating activities, vocational training and micro credit schemes in the country;
- Increase opportunities for men and women to have access to education through establishment of home-based literacy programs and vocational training schools;
- Create employment opportunities by encouraging foreign and Afghan businesses to invest inside Afghanistan and establish/rehabilitate factories;
- Increase women's participation in all development activities.

² United Nations Development Programme, *Opening Doors to Opportunity: Afghanistan's Millennium Development Goals*. (Kathmandu: 2004). <http://www.undp.org/mdg/afghanistan/Chapter2.pdf>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

Goal 2: Achieve Universal Primary Education for All Girls and Boys

1. Facts:

Despite an increase in school enrollment, more than half of children in Afghanistan don't attend primary school. Meanwhile, girls comprise less than 34% of those enrolled.⁶ Only 52 percent of men and 22 percent of women over 15 years old are able to read and write.⁷

Gains in primary education have been more visible, with over 4 million children now enrolled in the primary school system.⁸ However, overall education standards remain variable, and in many areas, serious challenges to girls' education persist.

2. Steps Taken:

- “Back to School” scheme/slogan announced by the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) in 2002 made it possible for 4 million Afghan children, residing in Afghanistan, to return to their schools;
- Re-opening and rebuilding of schools in most parts of Afghanistan mostly by the assistance of the UN, International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and INGOs;
- Arranging refresher training workshops for school teachers in some parts of Afghanistan, primarily by UNICEF, international and local organizations.

3. Existing Challenges and Constraints:

- Extreme poverty that forces children to work or participate in household chores;
- Lack of unified and standard education curriculum;
- Poor quality of education and poor condition of most of the schools;
- Overloaded classes – enrollment in some classes up to 60 – 70 children, even in most of Kabul’s schools;
- Lack of qualified and trained teachers.

4. Recommendations:

- The government of Afghanistan, in cooperation and coordination with UN, international and national agencies, should take practical steps towards achieving international commitments to primary education for all.
- Develop a standardized curriculum for use by all actors in the education sector whether they are government, UN, international agencies or local organizations.
- Establish new schools while keeping in mind the needs of girls, such as avoiding long walking distance.
- Ensure that the media, especially the radio, plays a vital role in promoting literacy and enrollment of children in schools.

⁶ Oxfam America. *Afghanistan Education Report Card*. March 2004.

http://www.oxfamamerica.org/newsandpublications/publications/research_reports/art7058.html

⁷ United Nations Development Programme, *Opening Doors to Opportunity: Afghanistan's Millennium Development Goals*. (Kathmandu: 2004). <http://www.undp.org/mdg/afghanistan/Chapter3.pdf>

⁸ Ibid.

- Ensure quality of education through regular teachers' appraisals, provision of required trainings, hiring of qualified teachers and regular monitoring of schools by qualified personnel from the Ministry of Education.
- Ensure the full cooperation of the Ministry of Education with other actors, including civil society, in achieving this goal.

Goal 3: Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women

1. Facts:

Goal three is critical for achieving all other MDGs in Afghanistan. The ratio between girls to boys in primary education is 0.52.⁹ According Afghanistan's national MDG report, "Wide gender disparities are prevalent nationally but are particularly acute in southern provinces... where girls represent less than 15 percent of total [primary] enrollment."¹⁰ Much work needs to be done in order to eliminate the deeply manifested gender bias in Afghanistan.

2. Steps Taken:

- Establishment of Ministry of Women's Affairs;
- Ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) by the government;
- Elimination of discriminatory laws against women in new constitution and other laws giving equal rights to women;
- Establishment of legal associations/groups for defending women rights;
- Participation of women in political and social sectors;
- Organizing awareness raising workshops for women, and to some extent for men, to promote gender equality by Ministry of Women's Affairs, UN and international and local organizations.

3. Existing Challenges and Constraints:

- Inadequate knowledge, among male and female family and community members, of women's rights in the context of Islam, particularly regarding female education;
- Early-aged and forced marriages;
- Selling and exchanging of daughters;
- Violation of customs and culture against women's rights such as Jirgas (councils of male elders);
- Cultural barriers towards girls education, especially in Pashtoon areas;¹¹
- Lack of trained and qualified female teachers; most girls' schools in villages are taught by male teachers, in some places by Mullahs;¹²
- Lack of access to girls' schools in most villages;
- Cultural barriers that prohibit girls from traveling long distances or mixing with boys.

⁹ United Nations Development Programme, *Opening Doors to Opportunity: Afghanistan's Millennium Development Goals*. (Kathmandu: 2004). <http://www.undp.org/mdg/afghanistan/Chapter4.pdf>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Pashtoons are the predominant ethnic group in Afghanistan, who live primarily in the eastern region of the country.

¹² Mullahs are male leaders who teach religious lessons.

4. Recommendations:

As each group was requested to work on this goal, they proposed the following recommendations for the government of Afghanistan, in collaboration with donors, United Nations, international agencies and nongovernmental organizations.

- **Adopt a long-term vision and commitment:** In order for women and men to enjoy equal rights, gradual cultural changes are required. Gender disparities are deeply rooted in people's lives and have become social norms that communities have lived with for centuries. Attempting to change this way of life is not a matter of launching a short-term project. It requires the government, in collaboration with all actors, to develop a long-term vision and sustained efforts to create a healthier, safer and more just environment for all.

Efforts must be taken on two primary levels to achieve this goal. First of all, the government, which is responsible for providing basic social services and security, should take the lead role in a campaign against gender inequality. Secondly, all organizations should increase their efforts to provide assistance to women, with the aim of increasing their quality of life.

- **Continue to improve law and order:** In addition to building infrastructure, the government should work towards improving law and order. Special mechanisms for conflict resolution need to be developed by the government along with other organizations working in the field. The government should make separate provisions to provide security to more vulnerable groups, including widows, displaced women and young girls. Mechanisms should be put in place to ensure that women can approach authorities without fear and be assured that their problems will be handled with confidentiality. This will require the government to:
 - Establish a special women's task force of female law enforcers, who can register violations against women and provide counseling and conflict resolution. The task force should coordinate closely with security staff to guarantee the women's safety.
 - Consider ways to better motivate people responsible for security to register and monitor cases of gender-based violence through providing regular appropriate trainings.
 - Overcome impunity and bring perpetrators to justice, which will discourage future violations. Punishing perpetrators will encourage more women to come forward and demand justice. It will also help people realize that such acts are wrong regardless of motivation or severity.
- **Provide quality and access to education:** Education is key in striving for gender equality. In addition to providing opportunities for girls to access education, boys should be taught from early childhood the importance of showing respect for women and girls. Hence the government, in collaboration with all actors, should:
 - Include women's rights issues in education curriculum, beginning at the primary level.
 - Increase female Islamic mentors and disseminate "positive" messages to the community about educating girls in the context of Islam and international laws and conventions.
 - Explore ways to increase girls' enrolment. For example, provide transportation or funds for transport; increase number of female teachers; establish new schools, including within IDP and returnees' communities.
- **Provide income generation programs and employment opportunities for women:** The root cause of most of women's suffering is their total absence in the decision-making process in matters related to their lives. This low participation is a direct result of their economic and social

dependence on male family members. By facilitating opportunities for women to have and generate their own income, it allows them to have a voice to be heard. Hence, the government, in collaboration with all actors, should:

- Increase employment opportunities for women in all sectors.
- Consider women's special needs, such as daycare and transportation, to increase women's participation in the workforce.
- **Register all marriages:** Make marriage registration compulsory and examine data to monitor issues such as early marriage. Information gathered can be used to counter these practices.
- **Encourage positive behavioral changes in community leaders:** Community leaders, who are role models and enjoy considerable influence, must be educated on gender-based issues and encouraged to support gender equality; leading through example and encouraging positive attitudes to safeguard women's rights. Community members should be educated to understand the importance given to women's rights in their religion. Women should also be involved in this campaign – side by side with their husbands – to raise awareness of rights and work towards gender equality.
- **Involve educated Islamic scholars:** As religion is of central importance in people's lives, it can be used to influence them positively. Educated scholars belonging to the same ethnicity should be asked to address gatherings on topics promoting respect for women and their rights. This will promote positive attitudinal changes in communities towards gender equality, which are acceptable within their own religious boundaries.
- **Sensitize men and boys:** Encourage women participating in trainings/workshop on gender equality, human rights and gender gaps to be accompanied by their husbands or other male guardians, who can also be involved in the trainings. By inviting men to participate in identifying solutions to problems due to gender inequality, they should realize the effects of discrimination on women who are also their mothers, wives, daughters, sisters, etc. During trainings, the role of women as mothers should be a focus as they are critical to the process of changing children's attitudes.
- **Avoid hiring and promoting men and women in government posts who are not demonstrably promoting women's rights.**

***Goal 4: Reduce Child Mortality; Goal 5: Improve Maternal Health;
Goal 6: Combat HIV/AIDS, Malaria and Other Diseases***

1. Facts:

Despite advances in basic healthcare delivery since early 2002, Afghanistan continues to suffer among the worst indicators in the world in terms of infant and maternal mortality.

The under-five mortality in Afghanistan is 257 per 1,000 live births, while the infant mortality is 162 per 1,000.¹³ Afghanistan's indicators for Goal 4 of the MDGs are half a century behind the average

¹³ United Nations Development Programme, *Opening Doors to Opportunity: Afghanistan's Millennium Development Goals*. (Kathmandu: 2004). <http://www.undp.org/mdg/afghanistan/Chapter5.pdf>.

for Asia.¹⁴ With life expectancy just over 40 years, life in Afghanistan is often difficult and painfully short.¹⁵

According to Afghanistan's national MDG report, "The maternal mortality rate in parts of Afghanistan is the highest ever reported globally."¹⁶ Average maternal mortality ratio is 1,600 per 100,000 live births.¹⁷

Malaria and tuberculosis are serious health hazards in Afghanistan. Curiously, 70 percent of those with tuberculosis are women.¹⁸ These high rates of tuberculosis increase the risk of infecting children.

2. Challenges:

- Lack of awareness of child and maternal health among men and women;
- Inadequate and insufficient health services and facilities;
- Lack of access or no access to basic health services in remote areas, especially for women;
- Inadequate medication;
- Lack of female doctors and female health workers, especially in remote areas, makes the situation worse for women to receive health care;
- Lack of trained traditional birth attendants (TBAs), especially in remote areas;
- Most baby deliveries take place at homes by untrained women;
- Poor knowledge about reproductive health-related issues.

3. Steps Taken:

The government of Afghanistan, in cooperation with specialized UN agencies and NGOs, has undertaken the following steps:

- Development of a common national health strategy by the Ministry of Health;
- Remarkable improvement in reduction of confirmed polio cases and measles mortality in 2003;
- Development and implementation of a "Basic Package of Health Services for Afghanistan" (BPHS) – priorities established by the Ministry of Health related to reducing mortality and morbidity;
- Rehabilitation of hospitals and clinics, and construction of some new hospitals and clinics;
- Conducting of health related seminars, workshops and trainings;
- Establishment of refresher trainings for some health professionals and staff.

4. Recommendations:

The groups recommended that the government of Afghanistan, UN agencies and NGOs should enhance and expand steps already undertaken. They also recommended that all actors should:

- Increase and expand the Mother and Child Health (MCHs) services to address maternal and child-related issues across the country;

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ United Nations Development Programme, *Opening Doors to Opportunity: Afghanistan's Millennium Development Goals*. (Kathmandu: 2004). <http://www.undp.org/mdg/afghanistan/Chapter6.pdf>.

- Provide ongoing monitoring and evaluation of health services to identify gaps and propose recommendations to improve services;
- Develop standards and uniform policies on maternal and child health for NGOs;
- Establish HIV/AIDS awareness campaigns and extend them across the country. This could include raising awareness in hospitals, clinics, schools, women's and community centers, basic health units and among TBAs;
- Conduct regular needs assessments on disease prevalence and issues of concerns among women.

Goal 7: Ensure Environmental Sustainability

1. Facts:

According to Afghanistan's national MDG report, "At the current rate of deforestation, no forest will be left in Afghanistan in 25 years time."¹⁹ While the majority of people in Afghanistan are dependent on agriculture, only 12 percent of the country's land is arable.²⁰ Only 13 percent of the population has access to safe drinking water, with poor sanitary conditions threatening overall health.²¹

2. Challenges:

- Lack/shortage of potable drinking water;
- Polluted living environment;
- Consumption of inappropriate material as firewood;
- Loss of forests;
- Lack of proper drainage systems;
- Overpopulated cities – such as Kabul;
- Continued drought.

3. Steps Taken:

- Digging of wells by UN and NGOs;
- Some degree of controlling by the government of smuggling of forest wood;
- Rehabilitation of some parks.

4. Recommendations:

Much is required to achieve this goal as the longstanding war, ongoing conflict and continued drought in Afghanistan have almost completely destroyed the living environment. Short-term and long-term programs are required. The group recommended that the government, in collaboration with civil society and international actors, should:

- Dig additional wells;
- Keep all water storages clean;
- Create and construct more parks;
- Take steps towards decreasing the population in cities.

¹⁹ United Nations Development Programme, *Opening Doors to Opportunity: Afghanistan's Millennium Development Goals*. (Kathmandu: 2004). <http://www.undp.org/mdg/afghanistan/Chapter7.pdf>.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

Participants' commitments, workshop evaluation and next steps

The workshop was an important opportunity for Afghans to come together to increase their own capacity and understanding of the MDGs, to identify existing obstacles and challenges towards reaching these goals and to discuss issues related to returnees and IDPs. Only seven out of 25 participants, including the organizers and UN representatives, had heard of the MDGs prior to this workshop.

All the participants committed to play an active role in sharing this information. They committed to also monitor and advocate for increased gender equality. This workshop also provided an opportunity for women to initiate linkages with UN agencies and government ministries in promoting gender equality. As an immediate outcome, the UNDP representative promised the inclusion of a woman from civil society on the soon-to-be established MDG Task Force.

All the participants found the workshop to be a good forum to discuss different issues. A follow-up session with the involvement of the same participants was requested. It was also requested to organize a similar workshop in the provinces or to bring women from different provinces to Kabul. The participation of government officers in higher posts was considered very important in future workshops.

Findings and recommendations from the workshop will be shared with various stakeholders, including Afghan women's groups, the government of Afghanistan, the UN, international agencies and donors.

Information gathered in the workshop will also contribute to the Women's Commission advocacy on advancing returnees and IDPs issues under the UN's MDG process as leading up to the five-year review in September 2005. In addition, lessons learned from this workshop will be applied in organizing future workshops in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

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For further information about the workshop, please contact Partawmina Hashemee at AWRC, awrc@brain.net.pk.

For further information on the Afghan Women's Network, please visit www.afghanwomensnetwork.org.

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