



# AFGHANISTAN PROTECTION CLUSTER STRATEGY 2025-2027

Chardara, Kunduz, Afghanistan ©UNHCR/Caroline Gluck

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Surkhrod, Nangarhar © UNHCR/Oxygen Media Empire

## Introduction

The Afghanistan Protection Cluster (APC) Strategy 2025-2027 (hereafter “the strategy”) is a joint strategy for the protection response in Afghanistan coordinated by the Protection Cluster (hereafter the “APC”), which includes its Areas of Responsibility (AoRs) – i.e.: Child Protection (CP), Gender Based Violence (GBV), Housing, Land and Property (HLP), and Mine Action (MA), as well as the Adolescents and Youth Working Group (AYWG). It provides a three-year vision and strategic framework to guide the collective protection response and operational planning for the APC to prevent, mitigate and address protection risks in Afghanistan.

The strategy is aligned with the priorities defined in the Afghanistan HCT Centrality of Protection Strategy 2024-2027<sup>1</sup> and is complemented by the APC annual objectives and priority activities highlighted in the Afghanistan Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan (HNRP) 2025, and in its annual operational action plan.

The strategy is informed by the findings from protection monitoring and needs assessment reports, Protection Analysis Updates (PAU)<sup>2</sup>, and consultations with subnational APC focal points and operational partners, including United Nations agencies, national and international NGOs, and other key stakeholders.

The strategy complements the priorities defined in the Afghanistan HCT Centrality of Protection Strategy 2024-2027 and provides a broader framework and vision for the APC strategic objectives and priority activities highlighted in the Afghanistan Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan (HNRP) 2025.

The Strategic Advisory Group (SAG) of the APC endorsed this strategy in December 2024 and was validated by the APC partners in a plenary meeting in January 2025.

<sup>1</sup> Afghanistan HCT Centrality of Protection Strategy 2024-2027

<sup>2</sup> Afghanistan Protection Analysis Update (July to December 2023); Afghanistan Brief Protection Analysis Update on protection risks in areas of return (January to June 2024)

## I. Context and Protection Environment

Afghanistan continues to face a complex protection crisis, worsened by decades of conflict, political instability, poverty, climate-induced crises, and entrenched discriminatory practices. These challenges disproportionately affect women, girls, boys, persons with disabilities, minorities, older persons, youth, IDPs, returnees, and other groups at risk, limiting their access to essential services, reducing their coping capacities, and increasing their vulnerabilities. The protection environment is shrinking and is characterized by widespread discrimination, human rights violations, pervasive gender-based violence (GBV), with severe curtailment of the rights of women and girls, increased child labour and violence against children and young people. Furthermore, harmful coping mechanisms have become more prevalent, deepening the cycle of suffering and insecurity.

The protracted conflicts in the country have resulted in extensive explosive ordnance contamination. As of December 2024, over 5,200 areas across 1,719 communities and 270 districts in Afghanistan remain contaminated with explosive ordnance, covering a total of 11.97 square kilometres. The explosive ordnance contamination results in approximately 50 civilian casualties each month, with over 80% of the victims being children. Alarming, 14% of these incidents occur during scrap metal collection, a practice closely tied to the country's ongoing economic challenges.

Decades of conflict and natural hazards have led to significant internal displacement, with an estimated 6.3 million people in protracted displacement<sup>3</sup>, with many having been displaced multiple times, and who are exposed to protection risks, including trafficking, family separation, exploitation, discrimination, and abuse. Additionally, the situation is exacerbated by large-scale returns from Pakistan and Iran, including 792,200 returnees from September 2023 to 12th December 2024 from Pakistan, and an estimated 926,600 returned from Iran in 2024.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, some 191,500 people residing in nearly 600 informal settlements (ISETS) are at high risk of eviction due to DfA initiatives to return them to their places of origin and develop state land.<sup>5</sup> Returnees are particularly exposed to the dangers of explosive ordnance due to their unfamiliarity of areas of return. The presence of explosive ordnance exacerbates returnees' vulnerability, including by through risks of physical harm, limited livelihood opportunities and the fewer safe options for settlement.

Economic hardships and the denial of opportunities, including employment and education, have contributed to a rise in child labour and early/forced marriage. Meanwhile, adolescents and youth face severe limitations to access education and empowerment opportunities, increasing their vulnerability to risks such as drug addiction and violent extremism as well as family separation which in turn has led to increased cases of unaccompanied and separated children. Displaced groups often lack adequate housing, civil documentation, employment opportunities, and social support. High numbers of returns further burden overstretched basic services and local resources in host communities, underlining the need for durable solutions. The need for mental health and psychosocial support remains high in the context of widespread poverty and increasing restrictions on rights and freedoms, exacerbating the overall situation.

Over the next three years, Afghanistan is anticipated to persist in grappling with this complex and multifaceted protection crisis. Women and girls as well as religious/ethnic minorities will continue to face increased restrictions and discrimination laws imposed by the de facto Ministry of Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (MPVPV)<sup>6</sup>. The new PVPV law<sup>7</sup> will further constrain the ability of women and girls to exercise their rights to work and access livelihood opportunities, limit girls' access to education, and ultimately, worsen their mental wellbeing. In addition, the laws will severely limit women and girls' participation in, social, civic, and public life, besides many women being trapped/confined at home in abusive environments, leading to higher rates of GBV and psychological distress. The delivery of humanitarian assistance by female staff is expected to remain challenging due to the continued imposition of restrictions by the de facto authorities (DfA). Girls, banned from attending school beyond

<sup>3</sup> Informal Settlement Monitoring, October 2024.

<sup>4</sup> [Situation Afghanistan situation \(unhcr.org\)](https://situation.afghanistan.unhcr.org), accessed on (05/12/2024); OCHA (2024) Population Movement Snapshot Dashboard (accessed November 2024), available at <https://response.reliefweb.int/afghanistan/population-movement-snapshot>

<sup>5</sup> Informal Settlement Monitoring, October 2024.

<sup>6</sup> The de facto MPVPV, together with its provincial de facto Departments for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (DPVPVs), engage in policy setting, advice, monitoring, complaint resolution and enforcement. Its mandate and vision are to reform society so that the public adheres to a set of normative values compatible with the Taliban's vision of the "Islamic Emirate" – to propagate virtue and prevent vice based on the de facto authorities' interpretation of Islamic law. See: [UNAMA, De Facto Authorities' Moral Oversight in Afghanistan: Impacts on Human Rights July 2024](#)

<sup>7</sup> "On 21 August 2024, the de facto Ministry of Justice published the Law on Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice3 ("the Law"), conferring responsibility for its implementation to the de facto Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice. The Law codifies a number of restrictions that had already been issued as decrees, edicts and instructions by the de facto authorities, such as: requirements for women to wear a hijab and cover their faces outside of the home; and for men to grow beards and attend congregational prayers at the mosque; bans on certain holidays such as Nowruz and Yalda (winter solstice), on playing music inside a vehicle and on depictions of images of living beings. The Law also appears to broaden some preexisting restrictions and adds new ones." See: [UNAMA, Human Rights Situation in Afghanistan: July – October 2024](#)

6th grade, will continue to suffer from increased exposure to early and forced marriages. Adolescents and youth will likely continue to face restrictions towards meaningful engagement and leadership opportunities, and persons with disabilities will continue to face multiple barriers to accessing services and assistance, alongside ongoing stigmatization, worsening their protection situation and highlighting the intersectoral discrimination they endure.

Key drivers of this fragile environment include deeply rooted negative socio-cultural norms, restrictive laws and policies, ongoing political and economic instability, and an ambiguous and restricted legal environment. This is further compounded by entrenched gender inequality and persistent climatic shocks such as droughts, floods, and earthquakes. These environmental crises severely impact rural livelihoods, pushing more families into poverty and displacement. As a result, an increasing number of people will likely move from rural areas to urban centres in search of safety and opportunities. Climate-induced displacement has also heightened risks of gender-based violence such as increasing domestic violence and child abuse<sup>8</sup>. Women and children often bear the brunt of economic and social hardships. The lack of safe shelter makes them more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, while the breakdown of social networks removes crucial protection. Instability and constant movement also expose women and children to trafficking and forced labour. These challenges will likely continue to deplete the population's ability to cope, diminishing its capacity for self-protection and pushing many to resort to harmful coping mechanisms. Addressing these issues will require sustained international support, robust and inclusive humanitarian interventions, and concerted efforts to advocate for the rights and protection of vulnerable populations. The next three years will be critical in determining the trajectory of Afghanistan's protection environment, and proactive measures will be essential to mitigate, prevent and reduce protection risks and support affected communities.



Khami Kalak village, Bamyan, Afghanistan. © UNHCR/Oxygen Media Empire

<sup>8</sup> IOM and Samuel Hall (2022), Research Brief: Displacement Trends and Challenges in Afghanistan since 2021- Climate Change; IOM (2023), Afghanistan: Climate change as a driver of migration and internal displacement and climate change mitigation as a driver of economic growth and community development.

## II. Strategic Priorities

The APC will focus on three strategic priorities guiding the collective efforts of protection actors to (1) ensure delivery life-saving protection services, (2) strengthen the protection environment, and (3) promote the centrality of protection in humanitarian action in Afghanistan:

### 1. Ensure the delivery of life-saving protection response and services

through individual and community-based approaches, informed by protection needs assessment, monitoring and analysis, and tailored to specific needs, considering age, gender, and diversity.

### 2. Strengthen the protection environment through engagement

of duty bearers and targeted advocacy, strengthening the capacities of key actors and raising awareness and

### 3. Promote and facilitate the centrality of protection in humanitarian action

and with human rights, and basic needs actors, to ensure protection informs the humanitarian response and durable solutions for displaced and returnee populations, promote protection mainstreaming and people-centred approaches, and foster integrated protection action and collective protection outcomes, including through enhanced preparedness and contingency planning.

The strategic priorities will be addressed through key response modalities, contributions to the HCT Centrality of Protection Strategy, and engagement with key duty-bearers and stakeholders. They will be supported by coordination enablers and collective action on cross-cutting themes.

The operational framework details the specific priority objectives and activities tailored for protection and AoR partners, highlighting their respective contributions to the collective strategic priorities (See annex 1).



Kandahar Encashment Centre. © UNHCR/Oxygen Media Empire

### III. Response Modalities

#### 1. Identification, monitoring and analysis of protection risks and needs.

The APC will support the protection response guided by data from protection monitoring and protection needs analysis. Protection monitoring is essential for understanding the risks and situations affecting populations in Afghanistan and will also inform the wider humanitarian response. From January 2025, the APC will roll out the revised protection monitoring tools using key informant interviews, household interviews, and focus group discussions. Similarly, from 2025, the Child Protection AoR will also roll out child protection situation monitoring across the regions in Afghanistan using child protection situation monitoring tools which will be conducted on a quarterly basis. The data from these protection monitoring initiatives, reflecting the protection risks and needs across the country, will be complemented by the results of protection-related needs assessments conducted within the APC. This comprehensive approach will involve continuous observation and reporting on the protection environment, ensuring that the strategy is informed by accurate, up-to-date information. By systematically identifying and analysing protection risks through comprehensive protection assessments and consultations, the strategy aims to enhance the safety and well-being of at-risk groups. This will allow for timely and effective responses to emerging protection risks, ensuring that the needs of vulnerable populations are met through targeted interventions and support.

#### 2. Provision of targeted essential services and individual assistance.

The APC will focus on the provision of targeted essential services and individual assistance to address the specific protection needs of vulnerable populations (such as women, girls, boys, persons with disabilities, minorities, older persons, youth, IDPs, returnees, and other vulnerable groups). Tailored interventions should be developed to address the unique challenges faced by these groups, this includes ensuring physical safe spaces and environments through dedicated assistance and support. Individual protection assistance will be provided by cluster members, encompassing protection and specialized case management, mediation, mental health, and psychosocial support (MHPSS), cash support, as well as information, counselling, and legal assistance.

Additionally, to further reduce protection risks for people with specific needs, the strategy will strengthen protection and specialized case management interventions and referral mechanisms (including child protection). This will involve the provision of inclusive and adapted specialized services, such as multi-sectoral services provision, psychosocial support, and legal documentation, including identity cards, birth registration, and documents related to Housing, Land, and Property (HLP) rights. Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) services, multi-sectoral GBV services (including psychosocial support, wellbeing support, dignity kit distribution and strengthening safe referrals) child protection packages, service packages for young people, and support for persons with disabilities will also be provided. The scope and type of services will be guided by approved standards. Access to life-saving protection services will rely on robust referral mechanisms at both provincial and national levels, along with effective protection monitoring, and awareness-raising efforts. Modalities for supporting individuals will include individual protection assistance through integrated case management, cash-based interventions<sup>9</sup>, and in-kind assistance. Those requiring longer-term economic empowerment will be referred to available actors, including basic human needs partners. Humanitarian personnel working with individuals requiring specialized care, such as persons with disabilities or chronic medical conditions, will receive specialized training, support, and supervision to handle these sensitive cases, including safe identification and referral. Referral pathways will be strengthened within and across clusters, to respond to protection risks and resulting needs. This comprehensive approach aims to deliver timely and effective support to individuals, enhancing their safety, dignity, and well-being. The provision of urgent mine action services, including explosive ordnance risk education (EORE), the removal of spot explosive remnants of war (ERW), the clearance of high-priority contaminated areas, and victim assistance services, will also be prioritized.

#### 3. Community-based/led protection and support to social cohesion.

The APC will promote community-based protection and support social cohesion. The APC recognizes the importance of engaging local communities, enhancing the sustainability and ownership of protection initiatives and ensuring that interventions are culturally relevant and context specific. A community-based approach will support security, rights, and empower individuals to have greater control over their lives, actively engaging communities at every programming stage. This approach will be anchored in identifying, working with, and strengthening existing community-based structures to address key protection issues. Community protection committees will be established/ strengthened by protection cluster members to enhance service delivery and allow communities to

<sup>9</sup> Afghanistan Protection Cluster- Cash for Protection: Guidelines for protection partners in Afghanistan

effectively participate, and champion locally led initiatives to mitigate and prevent risk they might be exposed to within the communities. These community members would serve as a sustainable group within the community to support protection (including child protection) work in the long run.

#### 4. Communication and provision of information to reinforce people's capacities and strategies.

The APC will prioritize risk communication and community engagement, ensuring effective rights awareness raising, empowering communities, and strengthening communities' and individuals' self-protection capacities. This modality will include comprehensive awareness, information, communication, and education campaigns designed to help communities and individuals access their rights and entitlements. Protection risk awareness and reduction/mitigation initiatives will be implemented with communities to identify priority protection risks and strategies to mitigate them. Additionally, rights awareness programmes will be conducted to ensure that all individuals are knowledgeable about their legal rights and how to assert them. By enhancing the flow of information and strengthening the knowledge of affected populations, the strategy aims to empower individuals and communities, enabling them to better protect themselves and advocate for their rights. This approach will strengthen the overall resilience and self-sufficiency of the Afghan population, contributing to a more secure and informed society. Communities will be mobilized and engaged through delivery of messaging on protection issues/concerns using community-based structures and volunteers including dialogues and use of mass media (TV, radios, social media).

#### 5. Capacity strengthening and sharing to reinforce protection environment.

The APC will focus on strengthening the capacity of humanitarian workers as well as other actors responsible for providing protection services. In 2025, the cluster will use different modalities including online training, short-topical learning series, developing/sharing online resources, as well as organising thematic discussions during cluster meetings. Additionally, training will be provided to other humanitarian actors, social workforce, community-based structures/volunteers, and non-protection service providers to integrate protection principles into their work such as the IASC Youth Guidelines, CP minimum standards, multisectoral integration, PSEA, AAP, gender, and disability inclusion for improved quality of services delivery. Furthermore, given the rising needs for MHPSS, specific training on MHPSS will be supported, to enhance effectiveness in service provision. By facilitating knowledge-sharing and building the capacities of these key stakeholders, the strategy aims to create a more robust and responsive protection environment, ensuring that all actors can deliver effective protection services and upholding the rights and safety of vulnerable populations.

#### 6. Advocacy and engagement efforts to reinforce protection environment.

The APC will continue its engagement efforts to prevent, mitigate, and address protection risks, and to strengthen the protection environment, including by influencing policies and practices aimed at enhancing the protection of vulnerable populations. These initiatives are crucial for raising awareness, mobilizing resources, and driving systemic changes to improve the overall protection landscape in Afghanistan. The APC will work to ensure that protection issues remain a priority on the national and international agenda through private and public advocacy actions, strategies, and campaigns. By engaging key stakeholders and building coalitions, the APC will seek support from government authorities, donors, international organisations, local communities, and youth-led platforms. Advocacy efforts will target humanitarian leadership, other clusters, donors, and de facto authorities (DFA) aiming to drive meaningful change and sustained attention on protection priorities. Specific elements and details of the APC's advocacy work will be comprehensively outlined in a dedicated APC advocacy strategy. This strategy will provide a clear framework for the APC advocacy efforts, ensuring that all actions are well-coordinated and effectively targeted to address the protection needs.



## IV. Engagement of Key Duty Bearers and Stakeholders

### 1. HCT/ICCT

The APC will continue to engage with the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) and the Inter-Cluster Coordination Team (ICCT) to ensure that protection remains a central focus in the humanitarian response. This engagement ensures that protection principles are integrated across all sectors, addressing the complex and interconnected nature of protection risks. The APC provides critical data and analysis on protection risks and needs, informing decision-making processes for more effective and targeted interventions. Regular protection briefings within the ICCT and HCT will ensure that protection is kept at the forefront of the humanitarian agenda. By maintaining a strong focus on protection, the APC collaborates closely with humanitarian leadership to address the needs and rights of vulnerable populations, promoting a coordinated and comprehensive effort to safeguard those at risk.

### 2. Donors

The APC will strengthen its engagement with donors through APC SAG-donors, including by maintaining quarterly briefings to keep donors updated on the progress, successes, and challenges of the protection response. These regular meetings will foster a collaborative environment that enhances the effectiveness of protection activities for vulnerable populations and create a platform for open discussions on protection risks and priorities, showcase good/promising practices and impact stories, and jointly identify possible solutions to operational challenges and critical response gaps allowing donors to share their insights and feedback. This interactive approach ensures that the strategy and the protection response briefings continue to inform donors' own prioritisation, rationalize response planning based on foreseeable funding, and ensure appropriate alignment on protection advocacy and public diplomacy with DFA, the HCT, and other key stakeholders. These quarterly meetings will be complemented by bilateral meetings with specific donors on specific issues of interest and ahead of the donor's own annual prioritisation and planning.

### 3. DfA, local leaders and communities

The APC at all levels will continue to actively engage and maintain efforts to influence authorities to prevent harm and protect the most vulnerable, aiming to achieve long-term, cumulative, and incremental impact. Despite the progress made through recent engagements at national and provincial levels, resulting from ongoing dialogue with both national and sub-national authorities to improve their understanding of protection principles and practices, the APC will continue its efforts to build trust and facilitate the approval of Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) for protection partners.

The APC will also strengthen its advocacy and engagement efforts with local leaders and communities to prevent, mitigate, and address protection risks, as well as to enhance the protection environment (including specific actions for raising awareness among affected communities regarding their rights and available services). By promoting localized approaches, the APC aims to empower local stakeholders to take an active role in protection initiatives. This engagement will foster stronger community resilience, ensure that protection strategies are culturally appropriate, and facilitate more sustainable and effective protection outcomes.

### 4. Human Rights/ Basic human needs actors' engagement

The human rights situation in Afghanistan requires a strong mechanism of advocacy and commitment at the high level (global level, donors, member states, and neighbouring countries), national and local authorities, human rights defenders, civil society as well as communities and humanitarian. In this regard, UNAMA Human Rights Services is mandated to monitor, report, advocate and engage in the protection and promotion of the human rights of all Afghans and plays an important role in promoting and supporting the rights of the affected population. The APC will seek to ensure that human rights are mainstreamed in its analysis as well as informing the APC's engagement with human rights mechanisms.

The APC will also strengthen its engagement with basic human needs actors by establishing collaborative frameworks that integrate protection principles into basic human needs programming. This includes regular coordination meetings, joint planning sessions, and shared assessments to address protection concerns alongside essential services like food, water, shelter, and healthcare. The APC will also facilitate capacity-building workshops and training for basic human needs actors to integrate protection into their interventions. The APC partners will ensure effective communication through established channels and feedback mechanisms, facilitating continuous dialogue and improvement. Through these efforts, the APC and basic human needs actors can create a holistic response that addresses the needs while promoting the safety, dignity, and rights of affected communities.

## V. Contributions to the Implementation of HCT Centrality of Protection Strategy and Collective Protection Outcomes

- In collaboration with the ProCap, the PC will provide regular protection briefings to the ICCT and HCT to ensure that protection risks and needs of affected populations inform the humanitarian response and support the implementation of the HCT Centrality of Protection Strategy.
- Foster greater strategic coherence and collective action from the cluster and AoR lead agencies on promoting the centrality of protection in the humanitarian response through quarterly strategic coordination meetings between cluster and AoR (co)coordinators and CLA
- Intersectoral engagement will be crucial for a holistic approach to protection, strengthening the integration of protection across clusters' strategies and services, and fostering collective protection outcomes in line with the HCT Centrality of Protection Strategy. Additionally, the A&YWG will conduct a cross-cluster needs assessment of adolescents and youth, emphasizing protection risks and proposing actionable recommendations to address their needs.
  - \* PC team will continue to engage with the Food Security and Agriculture Cluster.
  - \* PC team to lead engagement with Health Cluster
  - \* CP AoR to lead engagement with Education cluster (in coordination with GBV and MA AoR)
  - \* GBV AoR to lead engagement with WASH Cluster
  - \* HLP AoR to lead engagement with Shelter Cluster
  - \* MA AoR to lead engagement with the UNAMA Human Rights Services on civilian casualties' data and the Health and Education Clusters.
- Promote psychological first aid (PFA) and safe reporting of persons at risk and survivors by non-protection actors to protection actors for appropriate and specialised case management in line with APC and AoRs standards.
- Explore opportunities for streamlining protection mainstreaming and “people-centered approaches”, and leverage PC and AoR collective resources.
- Returns and the need for durable solutions: The continuous return of Afghan returnees from Pakistan and Iran highlights the urgent need for assistance at border points and in areas of return. These returnees face significant challenges, including scarce resources and a lack of information on available services and humanitarian assistance. Returnees struggle to meet their basic human needs and access essential services such as healthcare, mental health, and psychosocial support (MHPSS), water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH), and legal aid. Additionally, some face housing, land, and property (HLP) issues and threats of forced eviction. This situation is worse for returnees lacking civil documentation. Social cohesion issues may also arise as returnees reintegrate into communities already struggling with poverty and limited resources. To support sustainable reintegration, returnees need durable solutions and protection assistance, particularly for those with heightened protection risks. This includes, for instance, legal assistance to secure civil documentation as well as land and property rights. Infrastructure development and improved access to public services are also critical for establishing stable livelihoods. The APC will continue to collaborate with local communities and authorities, and with other clusters and stakeholders to foster social cohesion and strengthen capacities for both returnees and host communities.

## VI. Coordination Enablers

The APC strategy will be supported by several key enablers:

- The APC will renew its Strategic Advisory Group (SAG) fostering greater participation, inclusion and accountability in cluster coordination and collective decision-making on strategic issues, and with a view to leveraging collective expertise and capacity to fulfil its core functions and deliver a stronger protection response.
- Create an Analysis Working Group that will support the Protection Analysis Updates (PAU) and other protection-related analyses, ensuring data-driven decision-making.
- Create an Advocacy Working Group to lead the implementation of the cluster advocacy strategy and priorities.
- Promote the localisation in the APC and the protection response in Afghanistan through better participation and leadership roles for local actors in the cluster and fostering better partnerships between local and international actors to ensure that the response is as local as possible, and as international as necessary.
- Learning and capacity strengthening of the national and sub-national coordination teams, and of the protection partners to enhance their capacity and effectiveness.
- To enhance learning in the protection response in Afghanistan, all partners involved in each of the key categories of activities from the GPC response framework will meet on a regular basis as technical working groups or “communities of practice” to harmonize practices and tools, to monitor the quality of the service delivery, and to identify best practices, lessons learned, challenges and need for further capacity strengthening. These “communities of practice” will be chaired by one international and one national operational partner, who will be automatically included in the SAG of the APC.
- Enhance collective engagement with donors on quarterly basis with the SAG of the APC, complemented by bilateral engagement on tailored specific priorities, and at strategic moments (e.g. ahead of donor’s own strategic prioritization).



Eastern Region, Afghanistan © UNHCR/Faramarz Barzin

## VII. Cross-cutting Themes

### 1. Localisation

The APC will continue its efforts to enhance localisation by empowering local organisations and communities to take a leading role in protection efforts through a gradual approach. This involves building the capacity of local NGOs through training and resource provision, ensuring they have the skills and tools necessary to effectively address protection issues. The APC will aim to strengthen effective participation and inclusion of national NGOs in the cluster's work. Additionally, to ensure inclusion of national voices in the cluster, the child protection AOR established the localisation task force in collaboration with the Education cluster to enhance consultations with local organisations, women and youth-led organisations and Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) with a view of facilitating their active participation in cluster activities. The APC will continue to foster inclusion in this regard also. The APC will continue to strengthen collaboration and participation with local actors at various levels to enhance their involvement in programmatic discussions. Furthermore, the APC will advocate for flexible funding to support local partners. Finally, the APC will support the creation of a localisation strategy at national level.

### 2. Accountability to Affected People (AAP)- People-Centred Approach

The APC will continue to utilize results from the Accountability to Affected Persons Index (AAI) to strengthen Accountability to Affected People (AAP) efforts. Moreover, as a cross-cutting area, focus will not only be on mainstreaming but also on advancing a more people-centred humanitarian response. The role of AAP will be promoted beyond providing lifesaving information as AAP's mandate is also to safeguard basic rights, support meaningful participation, amplify the voice of the people including the most vulnerable groups, and empower the people to provide feedback and hold protection service providers accountable.

In 2025, the APC will also conduct an AAP mapping and assessment among protection partners to understand the current practices with a view to enhancing and developing corrective actions that will be implemented in collaboration with all partners. The cluster will collaborate with the AAP working group to conduct capacity building of partners. The protection cluster also continues to coordinate with AWAAZ to gather input from affected populations and vulnerable groups, ensuring that their voices are heard and integrated into decision-making processes.

### 3. Gender, Age, and Diversity

The APC will emphasize age, gender, disability, and other diversities in mainstreaming and integrating protection into the humanitarian response, while addressing the specific needs of all groups, considering their unique challenges and compounded protection risks.

In alignment with the IASC Gender Policy and the Afghanistan Gender Strategy, it will prioritize gender-inclusive and gender-responsive humanitarian action, ensuring safe and equitable access to basic services and human rights for all vulnerable groups, especially women and girls.

Collaboration with the Disability and Inclusion Working Group (DIWG) will focus on capacity building and reviewing assessment tools to ensure the inclusion and meaningful participation of persons with disabilities. The cluster will advance the adoption of the ADG approach in all projects, with a particular focus on the risks faced by women and girls. Protection monitoring processes will identify and respond to the needs of women and girls.

In alignment with the IASC Guidelines on Working with and for Young People in Humanitarian and Protracted Crises, the strategy will strengthen the meaningful engagement of adolescents and youth recognizing their significant presence and potential for positive change. The Adolescents and Youth Working Group will provide technical expertise and capacity development support in this endeavour.

### 4. Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA):

The APC will continue coordinating with the PSEA Working Group and ensure that survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse can access the required services. In doing so, the cluster will seek to expand knowledge on prevention and response, in partnership with the PSEA Network. The PSEA coordinator will continue to provide periodic updates and orientation to protection partners during the monthly cluster meetings.

## VIII. Challenges and Mitigation Measures

### Restriction by the DfA on women and girls:

In August 2024, the DfA introduced the PVPV law, codifying existing restrictions such as the requirement for women to wear a hijab and cover their faces outside the home. It also expanded these restrictions, including the need for women to be accompanied by a mahram when traveling and to conceal their voice, face, and body. This law further limits women's and girls' rights to freedom of movement, expression, and participation in daily and public life, significantly impacting their involvement in humanitarian efforts and access to services. Additionally, the enactment of the PVPV law has increased scrutiny on NGOs and female staff, with frequent visits by de facto PVPV officials to offices and project sites. For instance, as a result of restrictions on women humanitarian staff, 69 percent indicated that only men are permitted to continue working in their offices, and 27 percent reported that women have left their organisations due to DfA decrees. This combination of regulatory interference and gender-based restrictions threatens to undermine equitable humanitarian support and jeopardize essential assistance for affected populations<sup>10</sup>. The restrictions are also contributing to increased costs to enable female staff to continue working, some costs include, hiring extra office space, transport and, mahram. Furthermore, the decree prohibiting girls' education beyond the 6th grade remains in place, impacting at least 1.5 million girls.

### DfA restrictions on protection activities:

On 30 December 2023, the Ministry of Economy issued a letter discouraging public awareness, peacebuilding, conflict resolution, advocacy activities and other activities categorised as "soft activities". As a result, 51 percent of organisations have reported difficulties in implementing awareness-raising projects<sup>11</sup>. In addition, approval of MoUs has significantly been delayed by the DfA consequently impacting implementation of programmes.

### Limited presence of Basic Human Needs (BHN) partners:

with the end to active conflict there is a significant increase in demand for basic protection services which humanitarian partners are unable to provide. Unfortunately, there are few BHN partners to deliver the services.

Despite these challenges, the APC will continue to engage with authorities at national and sub-national level to improve understanding of protection. In addition, partners will continue local negotiations and devising adaptive measures, such as financial incentives for the mahram requirement, separate workspaces, and designated distribution times for women and men which help maintain operational space, albeit at an extra cost.

## IX. Monitoring and Evaluation of the Strategy.

The strategy includes a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation framework to assess the effectiveness of its interventions. The APC will lead the implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of the strategy, ensuring that correction actions are taken based on findings. The APC Strategic Advisory Group will support the APC to monitor the strategy's implementation.

Key responsibilities:

- Every month, the protection cluster will provide a monthly update/progress on the implementation of the strategy.
- Quarterly updates on the implementation of the strategy and the yearly response framework, including any critical protection risks, will be compiled, and submitted for review. Based on real-time feedback and data, these updates will enhance the overall impact of the APC's efforts. If necessary, corrective actions will be taken in the form of recommendations / messages to be included in the APC agenda, in particular with regard to:
  - \* Protection response priorities
  - \* Other actions required to ensure the implementation of the strategy.
- Field monitoring visits: The APC will conduct monitoring visits including to provide technical oversight and feedback and assessing the quality of the PC activities.
- Cluster Coordination Performance Monitoring (CCPM): Annually, the APC will conduct a CCPM and, in consultation with partners, develop corrective actions that will be included in the subsequent annual action plans for implementation.
- At the end of each implementation year, a performance review against key actions and indicators will be conducted and an action plan developed for the following year.

<sup>10</sup> Humanitarian Access Working Group (HAWG)–GiHA survey Round 9 (2024).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

## X. Response Framework

A log frame for the response framework will be developed on an annual basis by the APC and its SAG members. A clear allocation of resources will be outlined for each priority area to ensure that all interventions are adequately funded and supported.

### *Key milestones year 2025*

1. Rekindle active SAG for more inclusive, participatory, and accountable governance of the APC.
2. Roll out of the new revised Protection Monitoring Tool: to support the APC protection monitoring and protection data collection.
3. Roll out of inter-cluster services mapping and referral pathway for individual case management for children and adults.
4. Roll out of the APC advocacy strategy.
5. Community based approach: the cluster will organise discussions and capacity building to reinforce local protection actors and community-based protection practices.

### *Key milestones year 2026 (to be developed yearly - Q2 of 2025)*

- Strengthening protection, mainstreaming and integration into priority cluster programmes and services.
- Foster greater localisation, particularly through community-led protection.
- Strengthening nexus and engagement/handover to BHN actors.
- Enhancing disaster preparedness and contingency planning at sub national and national levels.
- Engagement with DFA: The APC will sustain engagement with the DFA at all levels.

### *Key milestones year 2027 (to be developed yearly - Q2 of 2026)*

- Prepare transition and phase out of cluster to BHN.



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