

ANNUAL REPORT 2024

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A road and mountain view in Balkh Province. © STFA



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Programme Title & Project Number		Country, Locality(s), Priority Area(s)/ Strategic Results	
Programme Title: STFA Joint Programme for the Northern Region of Afghanistan: Addressing Basic Human Needs through UNSFA ('JP-Northern') MPTF Office Project Reference Number: 00129785-8		Country: Afghanistan Region: Northern Priority areas/Strategic Results: UNSFA Outcomes 1, 2, 3 Outcome 1: Sustained Essential Services Outcome 2: Economic opportunities and resilient livelihoods Outcome 3: Social Cohesion, Inclusion, Gender Equality, Human Rights, and Rule of Law	
Participating Organization(s)		Implementing Partners	
Organizations that have received direct funding from the MPTF Office under this programme: 5 PUNOs 1. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) 2. International Labour Organization (ILO) 3. International Organization for Migration (IOM) 4. United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) 5. United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women)		Please refer to PUNO-specific reports	
Programme/Project Cost (US\$)		Programme Duration	
Total approved budget as per project document:	151,822,852	Overall Duration	48 months
MPTF /JP Contribution1:	49,965,413		
Agency Contribution	N/A	Start Date	1 Jan 2022
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Other Contributions (donors):	N/A	Current End Date	31 Dec 2025
Total Contributions:	49,776,501		
Programme Assessment/Review/Mid-Term Eval.		Report Submitted By	
Assessment/Review - if applicable please attach Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No Mid-Term Evaluation Report – if applicable please attach Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No		o Name: Hiroko Massey o Title: Trust Fund Manager o Participating Organization (Lead)2: N/A Email address: hiroko.massey@undp.org	



Contents

- P.6** Executive Summary
- P.9** Purpose
- P.12** Results
- P.24** Delays in Implementation, Challenges, Lessons Learned & Best Practices
- P.28** Qualitative Assessment
- P.30** Partnerships
- P.31** Annexes

A boy enjoys the splash of clean water flowing from a pipe installed with STFA support in Mazar-e-Sharif Province. © UNDP



List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

CB-DEWS	Community-Based Drought Early Warning Systems
CfW	Cash for Work
DaO	Delivering As One
DfA	De Facto Authorities
EIIP	Employment-Intensive Investment Programme
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
FHH	Family Health House
ILO	International Labour Organization
IOM	International Organization for Migration
JP	Joint Programme
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
MPI	Multi-Dimensional Poverty Index
MPTF	Multi-Partner Trust Fund
MPTFO	Multi-Partner Trust Fund Office
MSME	Micro, Small and Medium Enterprise
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
PUNO(s)	Participating United Nations Organization(s)
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
STFA	Special Trust Fund for Afghanistan
TFMU	Trust Fund Management Unit
UCT	Unconditional Cash Transfer
UN	United Nations
UNCTAD	United Nations Trade and Development
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UN-HABITAT	United Nations Human Settlements Programme
UNHCR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNODC	United Nations Office for Drugs and Crime
UNSFA	United Nations Strategic Framework for Afghanistan
UN Women	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women



Executive Summary

A woman uses a sewing machine provided through STFA's MSME support programme in Balkh Province. © IOM



The Special Trust Fund for Afghanistan (STFA) was established on 20 October 2021 to help address basic human needs as communities across the country faced a deepening socio-economic crisis. It serves as a key instrument for delivering well-coordinated international assistance, particularly for women and children, through joint United Nations (UN) interventions, while maintaining strong linkages with humanitarian efforts on the ground. Interventions are tailored to local contexts and delivered across four main outputs: 1) Provision of essential services; 2) Community livelihoods and local economic activities; 3) Protection of farm-based livelihoods from natural disasters; and 4) Community resilience and social cohesion.

In 2024, the STFA continued to deliver high-impact, integrated support to vulnerable communities through coordinated UN programming. Focusing on essential services, livelihoods, resilience, and social cohesion, the STFA Joint Programme¹ reached 178,778 people (85,901; 48.04% female).

- 119,499 people (61,085; 51.1% female) benefited from essential services enhanced community level service infrastructure, including irrigation systems, roads, and solar-powered health centres.
- 21,249 individuals (6,999; 32.9% female) received livelihood support through Unconditional Cash Transfers (UCT), Cash for Work (CfW), agriculture-based livelihoods and MSME support.
- 38,000 individuals (17,787; 46.8% female) participated in community resilience and disaster risk reduction initiatives such as early warning systems and training on climate-resilient agriculture.
- 30 women were engaged in social cohesion activities focusing on gender equality, disability inclusion, and human rights, strengthening their roles as leaders and change-makers.

Third-party monitoring (TPM) reflected strong community validation with 84 percent of respondents indicating that activities met their most pressing needs, particularly in essential services (99%) and livelihoods (94%). Effectiveness was rated at 71 percent, while 81 percent expressed confidence in the sustainability of results. Social cohesion interventions scored lower (60%), highlighting the need for extensive community engagement.

As with other regions, implementation faced challenges, including restrictions on women's mobility, delayed MoUs, and pressure on recruitment/procurement processes. The STFA Secretariat (TFMU) and Participating UN Organizations (PUNOs) actively worked with partners to adapt and sustain delivery. Many agencies introduced alternative approaches to ensure and where possible, expand women's meaningful participation. Such efforts are expected to continue.

The end of 2024 marked the third year of Joint Programme implementation in the Northern region under the STFA. This annual report presents the consolidated progress and results collectively achieved and reported by the five PUNOs who are still actively implementing STFA interventions.



[1] implemented by FAO, ILO, IOM, UNDP, and UN Women reached



Purpose

A man works in a bakery supported through STFA assistance in Balkh Province, one of many beneficiaries rebuilding their livelihoods. ©UNHCR



The STFA Joint Programme for the Northern region covers five provinces, Balkh, Samangan, Sar-e-Pul, Faryab, and Jawzjan as well as Kunduz Province, bordering Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Implementation began with a six-month Joint Initiation Plan, developed and approved in December 2021, just two months after the Fund's establishment. Originally designed with a total budget of US\$150 million, the JP was scaled based on available resources. By December 2021, an allocation of US\$49.97 million had been approved, in line with the STFA Allocation Strategy, which is guided by the population-adjusted Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI). No new allocations were made in 2024; activities were implemented using a carry-forward balance of US\$6.93 million from 2021–2022 allocations. In the third year of JP implementation, five PUNOs were still actively implementing programme interventions.

The Northern region has a population of 4,356,890, about 11.2 percent of Afghanistan's total population. While relatively stable in recent years, particularly in Balkh Province, economic collapse has severely impacted basic service delivery and infrastructure development. This has had a direct effect on livelihoods, especially those dependent on agriculture and small-scale trade. The region is also prone to natural hazards, including droughts, floods, and temperature extremes, which continue to undermine the resilience of households reliant on crops and livestock.

Below is the 2024 annual report card for the Northern region.

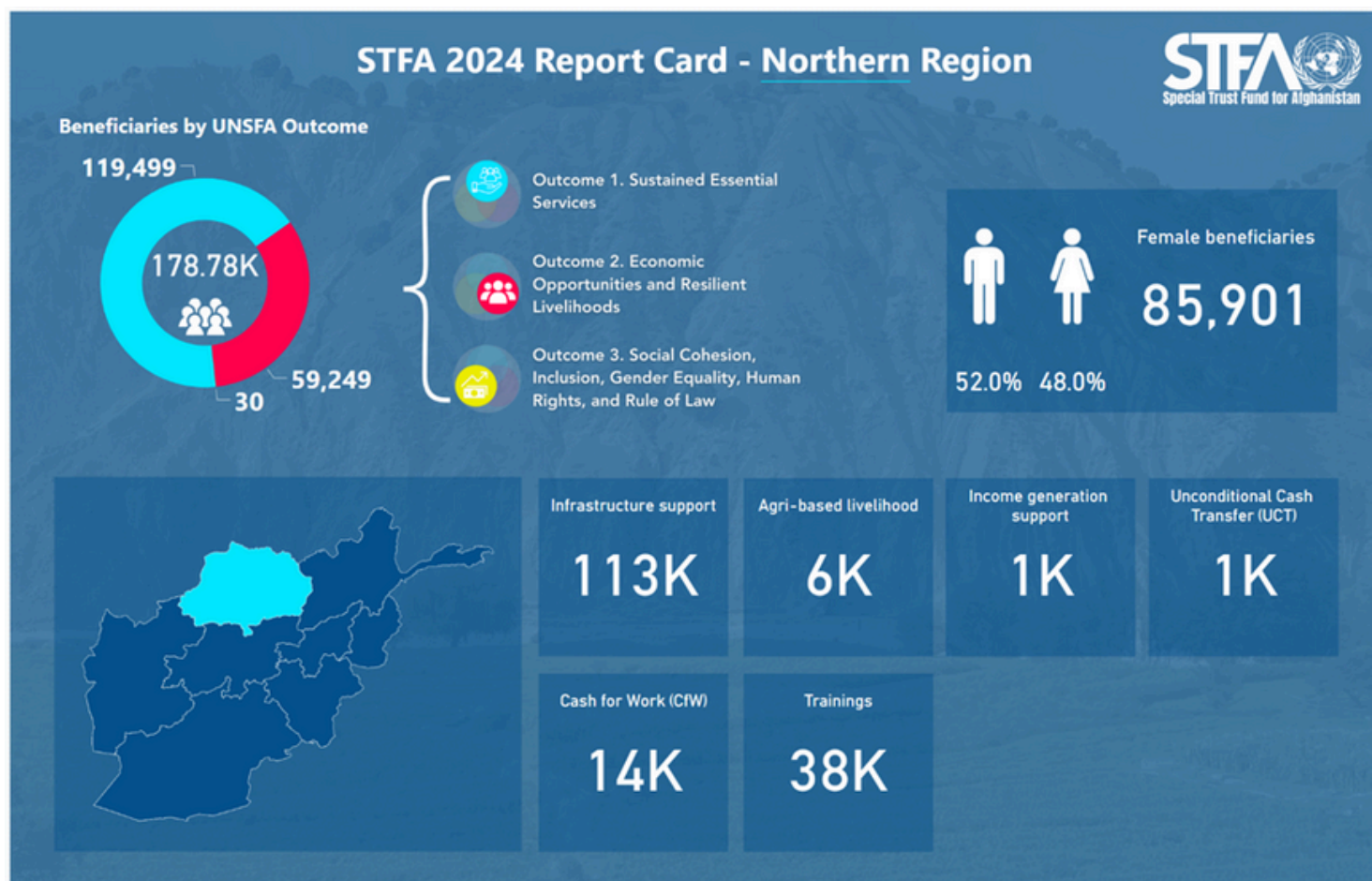


Figure 1: Northern Region STFA Report Card – 2024.

Results

Female beneficiaries in a tailoring center in Mazar-e-Sharif Province. © STFA

III. Outcomes

In 2024, approximately 178,778 people, (85,901; 48% female) benefited from the joint programme. The analysis of available data the Third-Party Monitoring (TPM) finding indicates that the programme has contributed to generating significant and tangible impacts on the lives and livelihoods of targeted beneficiaries in multiple dimensions. Since inception in 2022 through December 2024, approximately 2.9 million people, (1.59 million; 53.4% female) have benefited from STFA-funded regional programme activities aligned with the three priority areas of the UNSFA.

The JP contributed to improved access to essential services and strengthened community resilience. By expanding and sustaining infrastructure for health, water, energy, and agriculture, the programme enabled communities to improve livelihoods, and access basic services. Health outcomes improved through enhanced functionality of rural health facilities, while investments in climate-resilient infrastructure supported increased agricultural productivity and safe mobility. The combined effect of these interventions reduced community vulnerability, supported equitable service delivery for both women and men, and reinforced local capacities to sustain essential services over time.

Livelihoods support strengthened household economic security, improved opportunities, and enhanced resilience of local economies. Through targeted support, including cash-based assistance, agricultural inputs, and business development to vulnerable populations, including women, returnees and displaced persons, communities were better able to meet immediate needs, recover from economic shocks, and invest in income-generating activities. Both short-term relief and longer-term economic recovery was supported by combining cash transfers with livelihood inputs and technical training. Employment-intensive public works also created temporary jobs and built community assets. Although female participation in CfW remained constrained due to contextual limitations, the programme fostered inclusive economic participation where possible, notably by supporting Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), especially women-owned businesses and facilitating access to markets through tailored asset support and training. This support helped restore productive capacities and expand access to markets. These efforts collectively contributed to more diversified, sustainable, and resilient local economies.

Community capacities to anticipate, respond to, and recover from climate-related and environmental shocks were also strengthened, thereby safeguarding farm-based livelihoods and improving resilience. By enhancing local preparedness, promoting early warning systems, and disseminating climate-smart practices, the programme enabled communities to better manage risks associated with droughts, floods, and other natural hazards. Participatory risk assessments and planning processes fostered greater local ownership and helped integrate anticipatory action into agricultural and livelihood practices. While cultural and operational constraints limited direct engagement with women in some areas, knowledge sharing within households contributed to improved preparedness across genders. Climate-smart agricultural and livestock management training promoted sustainable resource use, enhanced food security, and supported adaptive practices to cope with environmental stressors. Collectively, these interventions reduced vulnerability, strengthened the sustainability of farm-based livelihoods, and improved community readiness to face future climate and disaster risks.

The JP also strengthened social cohesion, increased awareness of human rights and enhanced community engagement, particularly in support of women and girls. Through inclusive consultations, community training, and targeted advocacy, the programme supported more resilient, participatory, and rights-aware local environments.



Community-based initiatives promoted women's leadership, enhanced their participation in local decision-making, and encouraged grassroots efforts to foster cohesion and address shared challenges. Efforts to raise awareness on the rights of women, including those with disabilities, enhanced knowledge and built capacity among community leaders, civil society actors, and service providers, contributing to more inclusive and responsive local systems. Media capacity building further supported women's engagement in public discourse, helping mitigate risks and amplify marginalized voices. Safeguard mechanisms were also institutionalized to promote transparency, accountability, and conflict-sensitive programming.

STFA Third Party Monitoring insights (2024): While final evaluations of the Joint Programmes are scheduled for a later phase, findings from the 2024 Third-Party Monitoring Agent (TPMA) offer a comprehensive snapshot of programme performance and community-level results across the STFA portfolio and serve as a credible proxy for gauging progress toward intended results. The TPMA conducted field monitoring at 2,919 activity sites under 513 projects, engaging nearly 5,500 beneficiaries from 2,572 communities across 210 districts in four regions. In the Northern region, where relevance ratings reached 84%, beneficiaries affirmed that interventions, particularly those targeting essential services (99%), and livelihoods (94%) aligned strongly with community needs. While social cohesion efforts were acknowledged, they scored lower (60%) on perceived relevance, signaling an opportunity for more community engagement. Effectiveness ratings stood at 71 percent, with delivery of services and livelihood support cited as high-performing areas. Encouragingly, 81 percent of respondents expressed confidence in the sustainability of interventions, reflecting both robust design and increasing local ownership, an essential indicator of lasting impact amid operational uncertainties. In a fragile context, these outcomes collectively reflect meaningful progress towards equitable, and resilient development outcomes rooted in local capacities and aligned with UN values.



Irrigation canals built through STFA support to sustain agricultural lands, nourish crops and boost livelihoods in Balkh Province. © FAO



III. Outputs

In 2024, approximately 178,778 people² (85,901 females; 48%), benefited from the STFA-funded JP in the Northern region. The majority benefited from the provision of essential services, most significantly access to improved community-based infrastructure under Output 1 and livelihood support under Output 2. However, the four output areas have important cross-cutting impacts: 'cross-fertilisation' is common and indeed an objective across programmatic interventions. For instance, irrigation works implemented under Output 1 also contribute to the protection of people from flood hazards under Output 3. Likewise, CfW initiatives implemented under Output 2 support infrastructure enhancements under Output 1 and community outreach and engagement programmes implemented under Output 4 may benefit all output areas. The following section provides a more detailed breakdown of all four STFA JP output areas for the Northern region.



An owner of a small business supported by a STFA intervention in an exhibition in Balkh Province. © STFA

[2] Progress figures reflect the number of unique beneficiaries reached. In instances where individuals received multiple types of support from different Participating UN Organizations (PUNOs), each beneficiary was counted only once to avoid duplication. Further verification of beneficiaries count will be conducted through monitoring visits, including Third-Party Monitoring (TPM) and regular field monitoring by UN agencies.



UNSFA Priority Area 1: Sustained Essential Services



OUTPUT 1: Essential services and community infrastructure – including for health, agriculture, education, and energy supply - are functional, sustained and expanded to meet different needs of women and men.

In 2024, approximately 119,499 people (61,085; 51.1% female) in the Northern region benefited from the provision of essential services under Output 1. As summarized below, initiatives addressed infrastructure and essential health services.

Infrastructure & Essential Health Services

Over 113,325 people (58,297; 51.4% female) benefited from improved community-based infrastructure that reduced risks of natural hazards, particularly flooding, and improved access to water supply and improved access to essential health services. Highlights include the following:

113,325

people (58,297 females) benefited from eight infrastructure projects. These included (1) Rehabilitation of 3.6km Shortepa District Road in Balkh Province (which was divided into three projects to facilitate implementation); (2) Routine maintenance and spot improvement of 8km of Shortepa District Road; (3) Rehabilitation of 3.3km Bazar-E-Jangal Ariq Road in Mardyan district of Jawzjan province (which was divided into three projects to facilitate implementation); and (4) Routine maintenance and spot improvement of 13.7 km of Mangajik District Road in Jawzjan province. In total, 28.6km of rural roads were rehabilitated and maintained resulting in improved market access, reduced travel times, and enhanced climate-resilient infrastructure. Members of the local community were involved through temporary employment as skilled and unskilled workers (cross linkages with Output 2 below). The rehabilitated infrastructure is serving 113,325 people (58,297 females), providing improved market access, reduced travel times, and enhanced climate-resilient infrastructure.

To support Family Health Houses (FHHs)³, the Joint Programme introduced innovative, locally adapted solutions to improve access to water and energy. In eight FHH locations, kanda water-harvesting systems, underground tanks carved from limestone designed to capture rain and snowmelt runoff were implemented. Additionally, 5 kW solar power systems were installed in 10 FHHs (4 in Faryab and 6 in Balkh), enhancing energy access and operational reliability.

20,000

individuals (9,300 female) accessed improved health care services at the Abu Ali Sina Balkhi Regional Hospital, refurbished in 2023 with STFA support. The number of individuals increased from 8,500 (5,202 female) served and reported in 2023.

[3] Initially, the JP was tasked with solarizing 29 Family Health Houses (FHHs). However, implementation challenges—including delays in site selection and external interference by the de facto authorities (DfA)—impacted progress. By December 2024, the JP had successfully constructed 22 FHHs in the North, with the remaining seven pending construction. These seven are intended to be co-funded by STFA, pending confirmation of complementary funding sources. For these facilities, the water supply solution is based on the nature-based 'kanda' system, as water wells or boreholes were not feasible. By the end of 2024, 10 FHHs had been solarized, with installation of solar systems for the remaining 12 planned for 2025.



Women receive care at the Drug Prevention and Treatment Center in Balkh Province. © UNODC

UNSFA Priority Area 2: Economic Opportunities and Resilient Livelihoods



OUTPUT 2: Livelihoods, businesses and the local economy can recover, more sustainable and more resilient to instability.

In 2024, over 21,249 people, including 6,999 (32.9%) females, benefited from livelihood support. Key outputs included UCT and CfW schemes, agricultural support packages and agricultural technical training, MSME support, including business training, income generation and asset support schemes. Highlights include the following:

1,000

people (676 females and 834 people with disabilities) across Balkh, Faryab, Jawzjan, Samangan and Sar e Pul provinces received unconditional cash transfers to cover their most immediate needs. According to beneficiary feedback, 61.9 percent reported that the cash covered their needs for one month, 26.7 percent for two months, 8.6 percent for three months, and 2.9 percent for four months. Households utilized UCT funds primarily for food, followed by health and medicine, agricultural inputs and tools, and livestock inputs and tools.

13,613

people (29 female) out of a total target of 10,000 households benefited from 100 critical community infrastructures, repaired through cash for work (CfW) in Balkh, Faryab, Jawzjan, Samangan and Sar e Pul provinces. The remaining 133 households were permanent absentees and could not be reached. Female participation was low due to the physically demanding nature of the interventions and cultural norms that did not support female engagement in such work.



5,775

people (5,195 female) benefited from technical training and agricultural support packages in the form of poultry packages to 1,250 people (1,235 female), beekeeping packages to 250 people (167 female), micro green/polyhouse kits to 150 people (83 female), mushroom cultivation packages to 250 people (249 female), micro solar dryer packages to 375 people, (263 female) and home gardening packages to 3,500 people (3,198 female).

800

women were trained on the nutritional value of soya beans, cooking, preparation and storage in Balkh, Faryab, Jawzjan, Samangan and Sar e Pul provinces. As a result, 79.6 percent of beneficiaries reported consuming soya beans at home, reflecting its adoption as a nutritional food source.

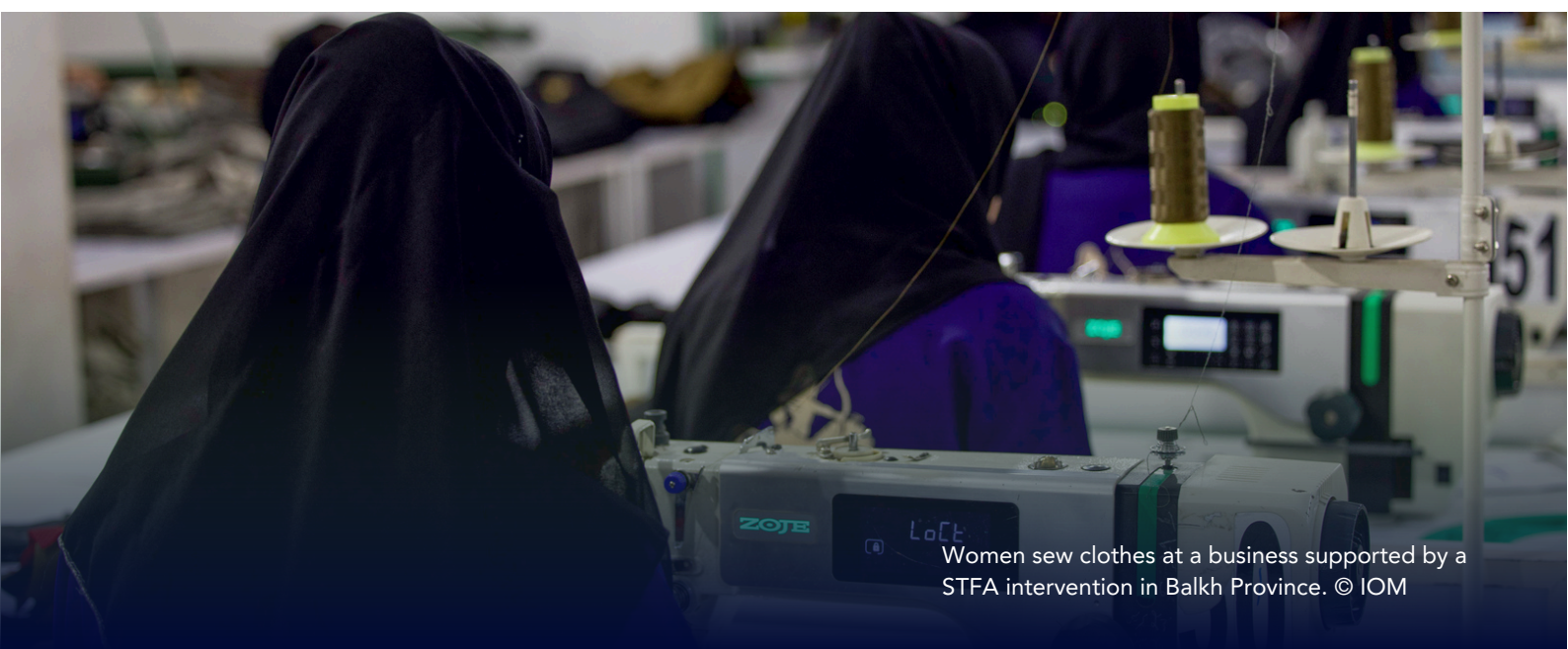
3,746

beneficiaries (238 female) benefited from temporary employment during rehabilitation of the eight road infrastructure projects (reported under Output 1), realizing 43,375 worker days (including 2,181 female worker days).

As part of collaborative activities with other United Nations Agencies, Funds and Programmes (UNAFPs), the JP supported the development of a Guidance Note on Employment and Decent Work Social Safeguards. It supported staff, consultants and partners and enhanced capacity to identify, deliver and monitor employment-based and CfW-Plus approaches to create more and better decent work across the HDP Nexus.

160

women entrepreneurs across 85 MSMEs received asset support ranging from \$800 to \$1,000 per business, including machinery, raw materials and shop refurbishments, alongside marketing and branding strategies, signboards and promotional materials. Within the first month, business owners reported a 25 percent increase in sales. The women entrepreneurs also participated in 255 coaching sessions on social media, bookkeeping and marketing, with two sales points established to support online marketing.





OUTPUT 3: Communities have improved infrastructure, access to water and preparedness mechanisms to protect farm-based livelihoods and cope with climate and environment shocks and natural disasters.

In 2024, climate change adaptation, disaster preparedness and early warning support activities benefited over 38,000 people (17,787; 46.8% female) in improving their capacity and resilience. Highlights include the following:

6

Community-Based Drought Early Warning Systems (CB-DEWS) established in six districts across Balkh, Faryab, Jawzjan, Sar-e-Pul and Samangan provinces strengthened local drought preparedness and response capacity, benefiting 7,064 individuals. Due to cultural sensitivities and restrictions on female staff, direct engagement with women was limited, and the systems primarily targeted male-headed households. However, as critical early warning information is shared within households, women receive updates through family members. This indirect engagement contributed to improved preparedness, food security and resilience to drought and floods. Although the extent of women's involvement varied by household composition, their participation in decision-making and response planning was significant, albeit not measured through outcome monitoring indicators. Additionally, CB-DEWS sub-committees were formed in coordination with relevant provincial authorities to support information exchange and disaster forecasting. Regular dissemination of early warning messages and locally relevant drought mitigation measures has enhanced community preparedness, improved response strategies, and ensured timely access to information.

25,000

smallholder farmers and herders (12,250 female) were trained in CB-DEWS, anticipatory mitigation actions, and preparedness mechanisms across Balkh, Faryab, Jawzjan, Samangan and Sar-e-Pul provinces. With 16 CB-DEWS now fully operational and actively used by target communities, the training supported efforts to sustain these systems beyond the project's duration. Training activities provided comprehensive information on drought risks and their impacts on agriculture, livestock, pasture conditions, water resources and community livelihoods. Focus group discussions and participatory assessments contributed to the development of community drought risk profiles. Monthly monitoring and analysis were conducted to assess the current drought situation in relation to previous years. Locally relevant anticipatory actions and drought mitigation measures, informed by ground observations and remote sensing data, were also disseminated through training sessions and public awareness campaigns to strengthen community resilience and preparedness.

100

community-level irrigation infrastructures have been rehabilitated in Balkh, Faryab, Jawzjan, Samangan and Sar e Pul provinces. Focusing on soil and water conservation, interventions included construction of micro dry-stone masonry and gabion check dams (less than three meters high) in the upper catchment of Karezes (local traditional water management structures) resulting in supporting groundwater recharge and increase in Kareze discharge. Minor repairs were also carried out on Kareze tunnels, wells, outlets, regulating ponds and associated community structures, and flood protection walls were constructed to safeguard community agricultural assets. The improved irrigation of approximately 17,175 hectares of land will enhance agricultural productivity and sustainably support livelihoods of approximately 25,000 people (12,250 female).



13,000

small holder farmers and herders (5,537 female) received technical training in climate smart agriculture (CSA) and climate smart livestock management (CSL) technique across Balkh, Faryab, Jawzjan, Sar e Pul and Samangan provinces. These interventions improved resource utilization while promoting water conservation, pest control, and storage practices. The trainees pledged to share their newly acquired technical knowledge within their communities.



A child carries chicken provided through STFA-supported poultry farming, helping his family earn a living in Balkh Province. © UNDP



UNSFA Priority Area 3: Social Cohesion, Inclusion, Gender Equality, Human Rights, and Rule of Law



OUTPUT 4: Social cohesion, respect for human rights – including, in particular, the rights of women and girls and access to justice are progressively strengthened at the local level – contributing to greater community resilience.

In 2024, 30 people (all female) participated in community outreach and engagement programmes focusing on participatory engagement, women's empowerment, capacity building on community resilience and social cohesion, and media training. Highlights include the following:

30

women (10 from Jawzjan, 10 from Sar e Pul, 5 from Balkh, and 5 from Samangan provinces) received social cohesion building training to equip them with theoretical knowledge and practical skills to foster social cohesion within their communities. The curriculum was carefully designed to address the unique challenges faced by women in the region, with a particular focus on building their capacity to act as leaders and change-makers within their communities. The women also received grants to enable them to initiate small-scale events to promote social cohesion, 980 people participated in these events.

6,000+

individuals primarily women and girls, across five Northern provinces participated in consultations, telesurveys, trainings, and awareness sessions to document lived experiences, promote the rights of women with disabilities, and inform evidence-based advocacy. These efforts generated critical data on the gendered impacts of restrictive policies, informed three widely disseminated policy publications, and strengthened local capacities through targeted trainings, resulting in increased community-level commitments to support women's rights and inclusion.

15

women media workers from six radio stations (based in Jawzjan, Faryab, Balkh, Samangan and Sar-e-Pol provinces) received digital security training on cyber threats and secure communication, addressing online risks faced by women leaders. This is part of broader efforts to strengthen the resilience of women leaders and rights defenders amid increasing restrictions against women's rights.



Delays in Implementation, Challenges, Lessons Learned & Best Practices

Female beneficiaries in a sewing center funded through a STFA intervention in Balkh Province. © UNDP



IV. Challenges

In 2024, implementation of activities faced multiple challenges, including conditions imposed by the DfA, lack of access, exchange rate fluctuations, and harsh weather conditions. The following are the most significant challenges reported by PUNOs in 2024.

Challenging operating environment: The DfA decree issued on 24 December 2022 and its subsequent extension in April 2023 remained a key operational constraint. The decree hindered women's employment with UN agencies and NGOs, and limited women's participation in field-based activities. Although coordination efforts resulted in exemptions that enabled most female personnel to resume their roles, the environment remains volatile, with ongoing risks of further restrictions. These challenges also extended to bureaucratic delays in project registration and MoU finalization, along with mandated design changes that increased operational complexity and costs.

Barriers to Female Participation: Restrictions on female beneficiary participation, though less intense than in other regions, continued to shape programme design and outreach in the North. This limited the scale and depth of gender-responsive interventions, particularly in sectors requiring sustained community engagement and capacity development.

Operational Challenges and Cost Volatility: Inflation, fluctuating exchange rates, and market price surges for construction materials increased delivery costs and strained budget projections. Also, shortage of skilled labour in remote areas delayed infrastructure works and raised concerns about construction quality and technical oversight. These intersecting pressures required constant adjustments to workplans and added layers of complexity to maintaining operational standards.

Coordination Challenges: Some delays in implementation resulted from coordination issues under the JP. In one case, delays in infrastructure works by one UN agency due to DfA disputes over site selection and changes to technical designs directly stalled the work of two agencies dependent on those facilities. These interdependencies exposed the programme to reputational and audit risks, emphasizing the need for improved joint planning and contingency alignment.

V. Lessons Learned

The following are key lessons learned during 2024:

Challenging operating environment: Continuous monitoring was required to ensure timely and context-appropriate mitigation strategies to DfA restrictions. The JP maintained its commitment to gender representation across its own and implementing partners' workforces as well as beneficiary targeting and selection, guided by a principled approach and localized operational adaptations, exemptions and solutions. These measures allowed the JP and its partners to continue delivering in line with the UN's Principled Approach. To mitigate risks for female beneficiaries and staff, the Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA) Network in Afghanistan introduced the Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Risk Overview (SEARO) tool, which identifies SEA risks across Afghanistan, guiding targeted and evidence-based interventions.



The PSEA Network also ensured that aid workers operate in a safe and supportive environment with Zero Tolerance for Sexual Harassment (SH), emphasizing the dual responsibility of protecting communities and safeguarding the humanitarian and Basic Human Needs workforce. Regional sub-working groups established in the North, South, Central, and West regions provided direct community engagement and localized responses⁴.

Female beneficiary participation: To address DfA restrictions on women's participation in field-based activities such as CfW, proactive, context-specific strategies to foster women's inclusion were required. These included alternative approaches such as prioritizing vulnerable female-headed households, developing home-based enterprises (such as basket weaving) and providing women-friendly workspaces. Localized solutions including recruiting female staff from implementing partners and permitting the presence of Mahrams (male guardians) during training enabled the participation of women in poultry, livestock and home gardening initiatives. Despite these efforts, restrictive directives and prevailing social norms continued to limit women's full engagement. This underscores the importance of proactively creating opportunities for women, even amid the prevailing operational challenges. In this context, a key success was the provision of disability-accessible information on women's rights, including sign language training that reached 30 women and girls with hearing and speech disabilities, advancing inclusion. It also became apparent that women-owned MSMEs require more comprehensive support than short-term training and cash or asset assistance.

DfA involvement: Project specification, monitoring and handover coordination with the DfA ensured compliance with approved designs. Flexibility in timelines and budgets, stakeholder engagement, risk assessments, community training and innovative construction methods proved essential. Land allocation issues were resolved by relocating sites. Additionally, to minimize risks and implementation delays, it is vital to assess partner acceptability and evaluate their efficiency through small-scale projects before committing to long-term contracts.

Limited skilled labour: In some cases, the initial CfW approach had to be replaced by contractors due to a lack of skilled labour, but contractor shortcomings in safety compliance and quality control still had to be addressed via site visits, training and feedback. A Contractor Excellence Scheme proved successful in facilitating compliance with contractual obligations, including employment creation targets, decent work principles, and environmental and social safeguards. The model recognizes contractors' performance, facilitates continuous growth, and promotes good practices, including employment creation.

Adverse weather conditions: Some construction work had to be expedited in advance of winter or paused requiring additional time and related contract extensions. To the extent possible, the seasonal cycle needs to be taken into consideration in project planning as well as project type, duration and contract signing date to assure reliable delivery. Additionally, all constructed infrastructures included Build Back Better (BBB) approaches such as the use of reinforced concrete and environmentally friendly heating systems to take account of the climate and the geotectonic risks. Environmental and social assessments also ensured that all project activities were safe and socially accepted within the target communities.

DaO collaboration, coordination and innovation: In many cases PUNO working groups successfully collaborated to share experiences and knowledge and organize joint visits and activities. A CfW-Plus working group successfully identified and addressed common problems, for example. However, implementation timelines need to be aligned across agencies to prevent cascading delays that impact project delivery and reporting. Early coordination on milestones and site selection is essential to minimize external interference that could hinder implementation.

[4] STFA is implementing in North, South, and West regions where Regional PSEA sub-working groups are active.

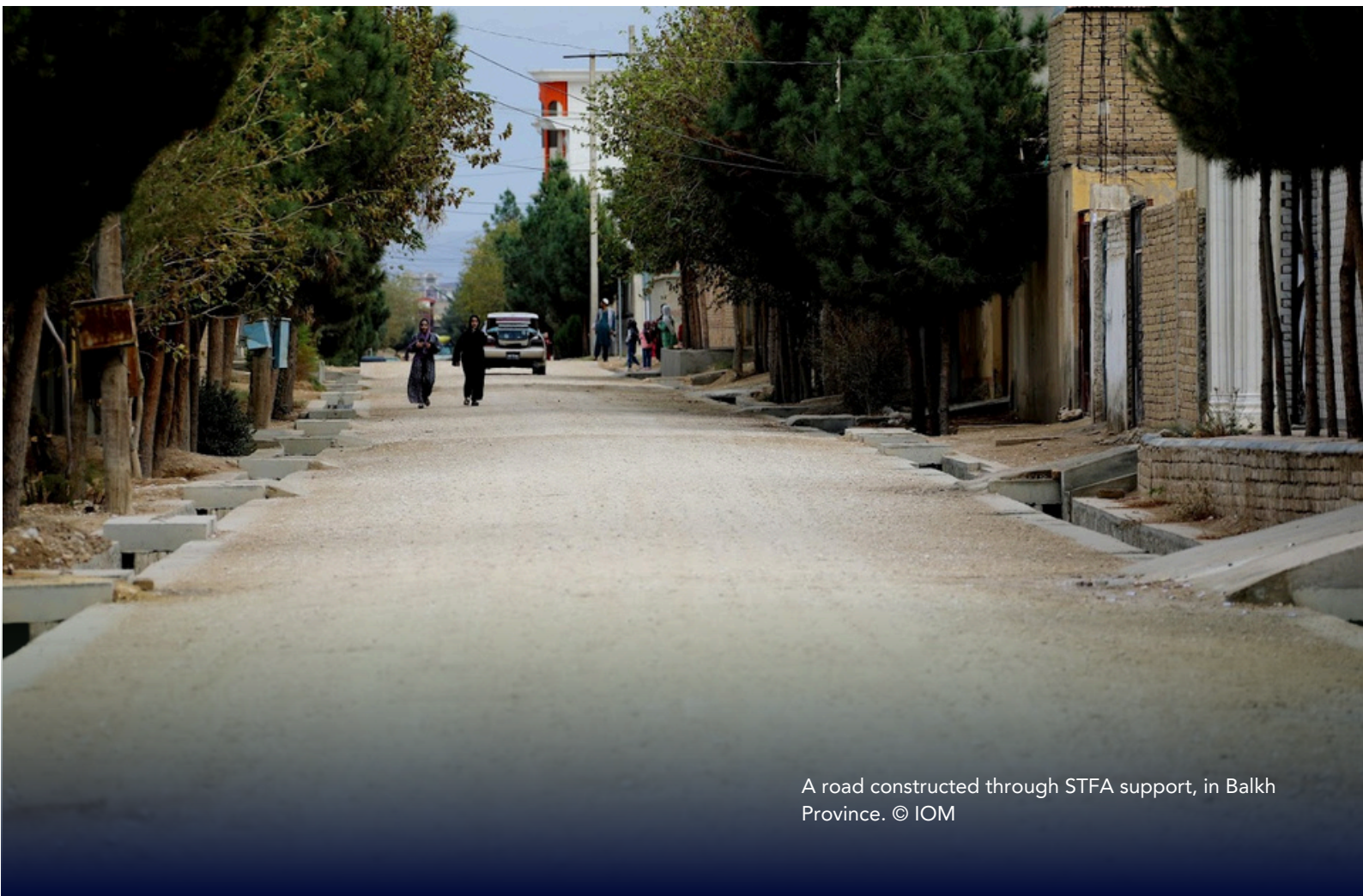


A phased approach allows agencies to proceed with their respective components independently, thereby reducing risks associated with interdependencies. Additionally, clear accountability and monitoring mechanisms need to be established to mitigate financial and operational risks arising from delays, ensuring more efficient, transparent and effective project execution.

Community engagement: Community engagement was often critical in achieving project acceptance and sustainability, and helped shift restrictive norms in some instances. The involvement of formal and informal community groups and influential community members was instrumental in ensuring community buy-in. This approach not only strengthened relevance but also fostered a sense of ownership among community members which is key to sustainability. Strengthening local ownership through capacity building initiatives, cooperative models and community-driven solutions proved essential in fostering self-reliant systems and ensuring that interventions remained locally owned, adaptable to evolving challenges, and capable of sustaining impact.

Sustaining project interventions: Linking Employment-Intensive Investment Programme (EIIP) activities to longer-term employment and enterprise development opportunities beyond the project's specific lifetime is necessary, even though the EIIP model – an integrated approach for sustainable development – provides a good approach towards more sustained livelihoods for beneficiaries.

Continuous Innovation: Flexibility and innovation in developing pragmatic solutions are crucial, especially in the current fragility context. Participation enhances buy-in, transparency, local ownership and sustainability.



A road constructed through STFA support, in Balkh Province. © IOM



VI. Risk Analysis

During the planning and development of the JP, a risk management framework was developed to categorize risks into contextual (political, security), programmatic, operations/financial, and organisational types. In 2024, although there were no new reported risks, several previously identified risks from 2023 persist, and appropriate responses are being enacted, as outlined in the Table below.

Risk Description (as per JP document)	Type	Rating	Owner	Response
Risk#7. Abuses of human rights or unlawful behaviour is committed by de facto authorities and/or local authorities.	Programmatic	Likelihood: Likely Consequence: Major Risk Rating: High	Programme Management, PUNOs	[Risk status: Materialized and Open] In 2024, PUNOs have continued to engage with CDCs, shuras, village literacy committees, religious leaders, and community elders, to assess and monitor the human rights situation, at local level, and continue advocacy for a principled approach to delivery – including by ensuring the meaningful participation of women and girls in planned activities.
Risk#18: Further restrictions on women and girls' participation in social and economic life. DfA announced restrictions on Afghan women workers in I/NGOs and the UN.	Contextual	Likelihood: Very Likely Consequence: Major Rating: Very High	PUNOs/TFM U	[Risk status: Materialized and Open] PUNOs to remain apprised of higher-level dialogues and engagements on the human rights situation in Afghanistan (UN SG; UN Human Rights Council; UN Security Council, UNAMA; international community/ACG), and of measures or recommendations issued through such platforms. Regular coordination meetings between UN/international community leadership and DFA aiming to advocate to reverse restrictions placed on Afghan women workers in I/NGOs and the UN. PUNOs assessing the situation on the ground and seeking alternative work modalities/approaches for female staff to work and also reach out to female beneficiaries that are in need. Continued advocacy has been a key measure UNOs have taken to lessen the impact of this materialized risk. Space for localized arrangements (ensuring non-discrimination alongside the safety and security of personnel) are continuously explored. In some cases, alternative modalities of implementation have been effectively implemented– e.g. changes in venues for training targeting women entrepreneurs. Commitment requested by IPs not to replace female personnel with male personnel.
Risk#17: Programme unable to mobilize required financial resources. (the Joint Programmes for Northern, region remain significantly underfunded vis-à-vis initially plans, i.e., \$150 million)	Programmatic	Likelihood: Possible Consequence: Moderate Rating: High	Programme Management & PUNOs	[Risk status: Materialized and Open] TFMU together with PUNOs have allocated available resources based on critical needs and identified priorities in the region; some PUNOs have been able to leverage additional, non-STFA resources; TFMU is engaging with STFA leadership to seek to mobilize more resources to be able to reduce the funding gap in the existing STFA portfolio in line with the priorities set as per the STFA Strategic Note through focused geographic targeting.

Risks that materialized and responses implemented

VII. Qualitative Assessment

In 2024, the STFA Joint Programme in the Northern region of Afghanistan continued to make progress, demonstrating strong alignment with local priorities and effective coordination among PUNOs. Notably, the programme maintained strong alignment with the UN's principled approach, upholding neutrality, impartiality and independence while embedding rights-based and conflict-sensitive programming throughout its activities. Equitable access to essential services was expanded through needs-based, non-discriminatory interventions in health, water and education. Community engagement emerged as a critical enabler of sustainability, with local structures active in planning, implementation and maintenance, especially in infrastructure and service delivery. Similarly, efforts to empower women – through tailored skills training, business support and community engagement, for example – represented an important step toward inclusive development, despite the challenging context.

Infrastructure investments played an important dual role, expanding access to essential services and providing temporary employment and incomes, particularly for displaced populations. Support to climate-resilient infrastructure, including improved irrigation, increased agricultural productivity and rehabilitation of roads improved mobility. Community consultations were instrumental in securing local buy-in, which facilitated implementation and strengthened accountability. Access to essential services contributed to better human development outcomes and strengthened community resilience.

Livelihoods interventions reached a wide range of vulnerable groups, enhancing household stability and food security. CfW and UCT helped meet immediate financial needs while supporting infrastructure rehabilitation and reducing negative coping strategies. Diverse forms of livelihood support – including training, asset transfers and business inputs – enabled individuals, families and communities to build economic self-reliance. Other initiatives – such as agricultural support packages and cookery training – improved household nutrition, safeguarded productive assets, and laid the foundation for more resilient and sustainable rural economies.

Support to women-owned MSMEs was a core element of the private sector engagement strategy. Tailored training and access to tools and equipment enabled female entrepreneurs to improve operations and expand market access. With interventions emphasizing environmentally responsible business practices, wage standards and workplace safety, a focus on marginalized groups fostered more inclusive economic participation and strengthened labour market integration. Social cohesion and community outreach and engagement programming complemented these efforts by fostering inclusive attitudes and advancing gender equality, as well as generating data to inform evidence-based programming.

With target locations selected in line with STFA priorities, which identify areas where community members have limited access to basic services and livelihood opportunities, and with activities prioritized according to needs of most vulnerable and underserved community members, the JP ensured that the needs of the most vulnerable were incorporated and prioritized in the multisectoral response. Despite some limitations resulting from the working environment, in 2024 the JP achieved its intended objectives.

However, the programme also faced constraints. Cultural and institutional limitations on female participation continued to restrict direct outreach to women in certain areas. Short project cycles and the predominantly short-term nature of some interventions, such as CfW and vocational training, risked limiting the durability of outcomes without adequate follow-up or integration into broader development frameworks. While collaboration across agencies was a strength, coordination in implementation varied, occasionally leading to fragmented delivery or missed opportunities for cross-sectoral synergies.



Despite these challenges, the programme demonstrated that inclusive, community-driven and conflict-sensitive approaches can yield tangible results, even in constrained contexts. Strong local partnerships, demand-driven skills development, and flexible implementation modalities were key enablers. Lessons learned point to the importance of participatory design, long-term systems thinking, and sustained investment in women's economic empowerment and alternative livelihoods. As such, the STFA JP has laid the groundwork for durable, principled and locally owned development, contributing to community resilience and the progressive realization of rights. The programme is well positioned to deepen its contribution to the humanitarian-development-peace nexus by aligning livelihood recovery with governance, social cohesion and environmental resilience.

Climate adaptation and disaster preparedness activities helped safeguard lives and livelihoods, strengthened local risk management, and supported environmentally sustainable practices through community-led solutions. Human rights and social cohesion programming further reinforced inclusive, peaceful engagement and increased awareness of protection issues, including gender-based violence. Through these efforts, the programme operationalized principled engagement across all sectors, contributing to resilience, social inclusion, and community trust in a complex and evolving context.

Overall, the STFA JP delivered important outcomes across multiple dimensions of resilience, inclusion and rights-based development. Continued attention to locally led solutions, adaptive programming and principled engagement will be essential to sustaining and expanding these gains in Afghanistan's challenging context.



A boy carrying a goat that his family received through STFA's farming livelihood support in Balkh Province. © FAO



VIII. Partnerships

Strategic positioning and coordination: STFA's strategic positioning within the UN's coordination framework has been a cornerstone of its effectiveness in Afghanistan. STFA has ensured seamless engagement in key UN coordination bodies and clusters, enabling optimal programmatic impact through identification of synergies and complementarities across funding streams and agencies. Under the strategic leadership of the UN Resident Coordinator (RC/HC), STFA is positioned to still be responsive to the evolving context in Afghanistan. STFA is actively involved in critical coordination platforms, including the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT), the Risk Management Team (RMT), the National Durable Solutions Secretariat, the Programme Management Team (PMT), and the RCO-led Monitoring and Evaluation Working Group. This collaboration allows STFA to align with broader UN strategies, fostering coordinated actions with humanitarian and development partners to deliver durable solutions for vulnerable communities. Furthermore, STFA's engagement with these coordination mechanisms ensures its interventions are prompt, effective, and aligned with UN-wide risk management measures. These platforms strengthened STFA ability to adapt to dynamic needs, supporting long-term stability and resilience through integrated, complementary programming.

Inter-fund coordination and joint efforts: In 2024, STFA continued to coordinate with other key funding streams, such as the Afghanistan Resilience Trust Fund (ARTF) and humanitarian funding mechanisms. Notable initiatives included the joint ARTF/STFA briefings held in Istanbul and Dubai, where the funding streams shared updates and proved how the combined resources of different funding streams were effectively used to support programme activities. These joint briefings reinforced the importance of coordinated action, highlighting the alignment and complementarity of various funding sources to maximize their collective impact on Afghanistan's recovery and development.

Private sector partnerships: A significant milestone in 2024 was the launch of the STFA crowdfunding campaign. A dedicated campaign page (<https://bethehope4afg.org>) was developed, and a donation platform was established in partnership with the UN Foundation through an administrative arrangement. The campaign was officially launched during the STFA Steering Committee meeting on 1 October 2024. In 2024, TFMU also started outreach efforts to the private sector to raise awareness and foster partnerships. As part of these efforts, the STFA Steering Committee Chair delivered a keynote speech at the Afghan American Chamber of Commerce (AACC) Afghanistan Private Sector Programme held in Dubai on 28 September 2024. TFMU also engaged with prominent Afghan business leaders, including representatives from banks⁵, among others, to underscore the importance and critical role of the Afghan private sector in the country's economic future. These efforts laid the groundwork for expanded networking and partnership opportunities. As a result of TFMU's efforts in engaging with the Ghazanfar Bank Group for financial access to women entrepreneurs beyond the support provided by STFA. Since December 2024, close to 40 enterprises have benefited from loans ranging from AFN 120,000 – AFN 4.5 million (\$1706 - \$63,984)⁶.

Collaborative initiatives: Under the strategic leadership of the UN Resident Coordinator, STFA continued to apply the delivering as one (DaO) modality remained central to its operations, fostering synergies across UN agencies and enhancing programme quality, cost-effectiveness, and socio-economic impact. Through these partnerships, STFA co-created four thematic initiatives which the STFA Steering Committee approved for allocation and implementation. These collaborative efforts exemplify how the DaO approach uses the comparative advantages of each agency to maximize impact and ensure sustainable, coordinated solutions for vulnerable communities.

[5] Ghazanfar Bank and Afghanistan International Bank (AIB)

[6] Converted at 70.33 - UN Operational Rate of Exchange for 31 December 2024



Annexes

A beneficiary of the soybean farming in Balkh Province. © UNDP



Annex I. Indicator-Based Performance Assessment

**Numbers in parentheses are female figures.*

JP output indicator	Unit	Baseline	2024 Target	2024 Progress	Reasons for Variance with Planned Target	Source of Verification
Output 1. Essential services and community infrastructure - including for health, agriculture and energy supply - are functional, sustained and expanded to meet different needs of women and men.						
1a. Number of people that have benefited from UN-supported essential services and/or new/rehabilitated infrastructure, disaggregated by type of service and sex.	People	0	0 (0)	119,499 (61,085)		PUNO reports
	Households	0	0 (0)	25,000 (12,250)		
1d. Number of functional, UN-supported, facilities providing basic health assistance (including basic health assistance services for women and girls)	Facilities/Infrastructure	64	22 (0)	22 (0)		PUNO reports
1g. Hectares of rehabilitated and/or newly irrigated land for agricultural activities	Facilities/Infrastructure	0	0 (0)	17,276 ()		PUNO reports
Output 2. Livelihoods, businesses and local economy are able to recover and are more resilient to instability						
2a. Number of people who benefited from UCT (at least 80% women)	People	0	0 (0)	1,000 (676)		PUNO reports
2b. Number of people who have benefited from newly-created income-generation opportunities, disaggregated by sex, age and province	People	0	0 (0)	6,636 (6,056)		PUNO reports
2b.1. Number of people who have benefited from productive employment through CfW schemes (at least 30% women; 50% youth)	People	0	0 (0)	13,613 (267)		PUNO reports
2c. No. of worker-days generated with UN-support	Work days	0	0 (0)	43,375 (2,181)		PUNO reports
2f. Number of MSMEs that benefit through financial capital support, training and/or other forms of asset support, disaggregated by women-led and men-led MSMEs	MSMEs	0	0 (0)	92 (85)		PUNO reports

JP output indicator	Unit	Baseline	2024 Target	2024 Progress	Reasons for Variance with Planned Target	Source of Verification
Output 3. Communities have improved infrastructure, access to water and preparedness mechanisms to protect farm-based livelihoods and cope with climate shocks and natural disasters						
3a. Number of districts with functional early warning systems and other preparedness mechanisms for climate shocks and natural disasters	Districts	0	0 (0)	6 (0)		PUNO reports
3b. Number of people who acquired knowledge and skills on disaster preparedness (including explosive hazard awareness) and climate-resilient livelihoods (at least 30% women)	People	0	0 (0)	25,000 (12,250)		PUNO reports
3c. Number of farmers who benefited from training and assets for improved, climate-smart, agriculture (at least 30% women)	People	0	0 (0)	13,000 (5,537)		PUNO reports
3d. Number of people that benefit from rehabilitated and/or newly constructed disaster-resilient community infrastructure and nature-based solutions	Other	0	0 (0)	2 (0)		PUNO reports
	Hectares	0	0 (0)	17,176 (0)		
Output 4. Social cohesion, human rights, access to justice are strengthened at local level.						
4a. Number of CBOs/CSOs with improved capacity for participatory and inclusive community planning (at least 20% women-led)	CSOs	0	2 (0)	8 (8)		PUNO reports
4b. Number of people with better awareness about human rights , social cohesion and conflict prevention (at least 50% women)	People	0	16 (8)	30 (30)		PUNO reports



Annex II: Real-Life Stories: From the Field

Poultry Farming is a Source of Nutrition and Income



Ay Gol collecting eggs to sell in the market, Jawzjan Province. © FAO

“
**We eat more
eggs, and I no
longer worry
about how to
feed my
children.**
”

In Afghanistan’s northern Jawzjan Province, backyard poultry farming is helping families secure a steady source of food and income. For Ay Gol, a mother of eight in Khamab district, daily life was a struggle. With limited job opportunities and rising food prices, she often found it difficult to provide for her family. Many in her community faced similar hardships, sometimes selling their land or household items just to afford basic necessities.

Harsh conditions, worsened by drought and climate change, have forced many to migrate to urban areas or neighbouring countries in search of work. However, a poultry farming package provided by the STFA is helping vulnerable families like Ay Gol’s become more self-reliant. Through a community-based selection process, she received 30 chickens, 150 kg of feed, feeders and drinkers, coop materials, vaccine and practical training in poultry care. Initially unsure, Ay Gol quickly saw the benefits, and with technical support and access to veterinary service, she was able to increase egg production. “Now, my family has access to nutritious food, and I can sell the extra eggs to buy essential household items,” she says.

Implemented in Aqcha, Qarqin and Khamyab districts, the programme has so far reached 300 households, most of them women-headed. Beyond individual households, local markets are also benefiting. With more families producing eggs and poultry, communities have greater access to locally-sourced food, strengthening rural economies.

Backyard poultry farming is helping women like Ay Gol feed their families and earn a stable income. Continued investment in this simple yet effective solution can transform more rural women’s lives across Afghanistan.



DELIVERING AS ONE

Cover Photo:

Ay Gol, a mother of eight in her poultry farm in Jawjzan Province. © FAO



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