



ANNUAL REPORT 2024

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Dotted design of the Afghanistan map. © STFA



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United Nations Entity for
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Programme Title & Project Number		Country, Locality(s), Priority Area(s)/ Strategic Results	
Programme Title: STFA Joint Programme for the Southern Region of Afghanistan: Addressing Basic Human Needs through UNSFA ('JP-Southern') MPTF Office Project Reference Number: 129789-92		Country: Afghanistan Region: Southern 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: 10 PUNOs 1. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) 2. International Organization for Migration (IOM) 3. United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) 4. United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) 5. United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) 6. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) 7. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) 8. United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) 9. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) 10. United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat)		Please refer to PUNO-specific reports	
Programme/Project Cost (US\$)		Programme Duration	
Total approved budget as per project document:	150,906,481	Overall Duration	48 months
MPTF /JP Contribution1:	49,763,763		
Agency Contribution	N/A	Start Date	1 Jan 2022
Government Contribution)	N/A	Original End Date	31 Dec 2023
Other Contributions (donors):	N/A	Current End Date	31 Dec 2025
Total Contributions:	49,763,763		
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	



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List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

CB-DEWS	Community-Based Drought Early Warning Systems
CfW	Cash for Work
CSA	Climate Smart Agriculture
CSO	Civil Society Organization
DaO	Delivering As One
DfA	De Facto Authorities
DIC	Drop-in Centres
DTC	Drug Treatment Centre
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
FHH	Family Health House
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IOM	International Organization for Migration
JP	Joint Programme
MPI	Multi-Dimensional Poverty Index
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
MPTF	Multi-Partner Trust Fund
MSME	Micro, Small and Medium Enterprise
PSS	Psychosocial Support
PUNO(s)	Participating United Nations Organization(s)
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
STFA	Special Trust Fund for Afghanistan
UCT	Unconditional Cash Transfer
UN	United Nations
UNCTAD	United Nations Trade and Development
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
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
WCVs	Women Community Volunteers





The Special Trust Fund for Afghanistan - Southern Report 2024

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Thank you IOM and STFA

Executive Summary

Nergiz, 30, sews traditional Afghan clothes at her small business, supported by STFA in Kandahar Province. © IOM



The Special Trust Fund for Afghanistan - Southern Report 2024

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Executive Summary

Nergiz, 30, sews traditional Afghan clothes at her small business, supported by STFA in Kandahar Province. © IOM

The Special Trust Fund for Afghanistan (STFA) started implementation in the Southern region in 2022. In 2024, STFA Joint Programme activities in the Southern region reached 94,791 people, including 28,325 women (29.9%), through the following interventions:

- 41,161 people (43.7% female) benefited from improved basic community infrastructure, including access to irrigation and healthcare services, as well as evidence-based drug prevention, treatment, harm reduction, and psychosocial support.
- 13,795 people (1,927 female; 14%) received livelihood support through Unconditional Cash Transfers (UCT), Cash for Work (CfW), agricultural support packages, and assistance to micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) in areas such as market access, skills training, and employment retention.
- 37,462 people (6,047 female; 16.1%) engaged in community resilience and disaster risk management activities, including drought early warning systems (CB-DEWS), rainwater harvesting, and training in climate-resilient agriculture. Several infrastructure efforts also contributed to disaster preparedness.
- 2,373 women (100%) participated in social cohesion efforts, including CSO and media capacity building, and data collection and analysis to inform advocacy and programming.

Third-party monitoring (TPM) in the region confirmed strong community alignment, with 85 percent rating STFA interventions as relevant, particularly in essential services (98%) and livelihoods (92%). Effectiveness was rated at 74 percent, and sustainability at 83%, reflecting solid implementation and growing community ownership. Social cohesion efforts, while valued, scored lower (65%), highlighting the need for deeper engagement.

As in other regions, STFA activities in 2024 were challenged by restrictions imposed by de facto authorities (DfA), including limitations on women's mobility and access to public spaces, delays in MoU approvals, and interference in recruitment and procurement. These factors sometimes delayed implementation and reduced women's participation. The STFA Secretariat (TFMU) continued to engage with PUNOs, donors, and other stakeholders to assess the evolving situation and adopt principled, adaptive approaches. Many PUNOs introduced proactive measures to maintain—and where possible, expand women's meaningful engagement, an effort that remains central to future programming.

The end of 2024 marked the third year of STFA Joint Programme implementation in the Southern region. This annual report presents the consolidated results achieved by the eight Participating UN Organizations active in the region from January to December 2024.



Purpose

A water reservoir in Kandahar Province. © STFA



The STFA Regional Joint Programme for Southern region covers five provinces: Kandahar, Helmand, Zabul, Uruzgan, and Nimroz. Since its launch in 2022, the region has received a total funding allocation of US\$49.76 million, calculated based on the STFA Regional Allocation Strategy, which is guided by the population-adjusted Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI). The end of 2024 marked the third year of Joint Programme implementation. This annual report presents the consolidated progress and results achieved and reported by the eight active PUNOs during the period January to December 2024.

Below is the 2024 report card for the region.

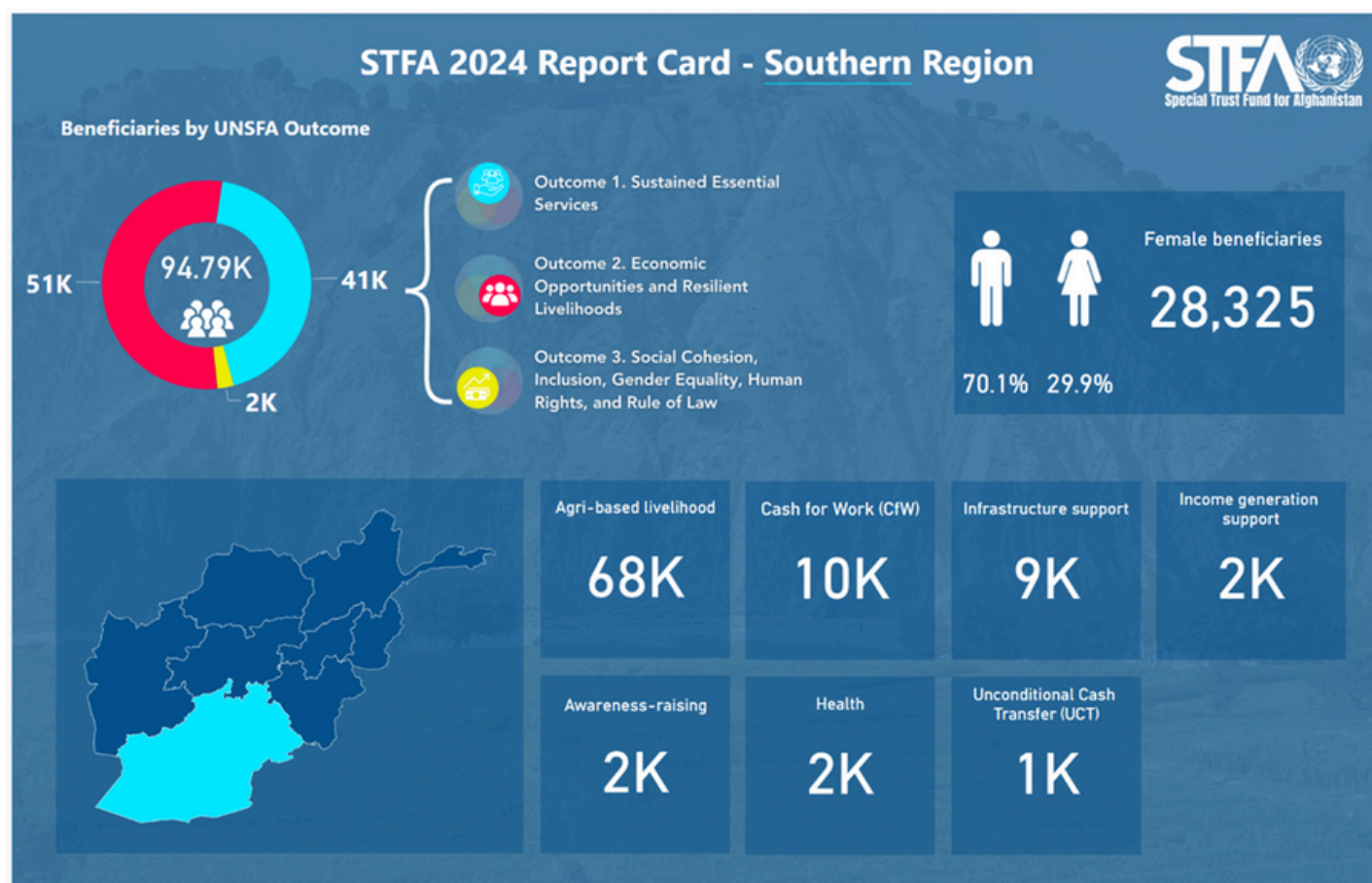


Figure 2: Southern Region STFA Report Card – 2024.

Results

A man harvesting onions in his field in Arghandab, Kandahar Province. © UNDP

III. Outcomes

In 2024, approximately 94,791 people (29.9% women and girls) benefited from the JP. The analysis of available data 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, approximately 2.1 million people (787,000; 36.9% female) have benefited from STFA-funded regional programme activities aligned with the three priority areas of the UNSFA.

Collectively, the JP demonstrated a principled, inclusive and adaptive approach to building resilience in Southern Afghanistan. By prioritizing needs-based service delivery, supporting the self-reliance of vulnerable populations, and promoting gender-responsive and locally owned solutions, the programme strengthened access to essential services, enabled livelihood recovery, and improved climate resilience, while maintaining a conflict-sensitive and community-driven approaches.

The JP contributed to expanded access to essential services and improved infrastructure, particularly in underserved areas, enhancing health care delivery, water access, and agricultural systems. Upgraded health facilities, renewable energy installations, and rehabilitated irrigation infrastructure strengthened service functionality, improved well-being, and increased resilience to environmental shocks, particularly for women and vulnerable groups. Support for farm-based livelihoods – through early warning systems, climate-smart agriculture and water management enhanced agricultural productivity, reduced exposure to drought and flooding, and promoted sustainable resource use.

In the health sector, newly constructed Family Health Houses are anticipated to expand access to maternal and reproductive health services in underserved areas. The deployment of trained midwives and the continuing functionality of temporary family health houses ensured continuity of care. Additional services integrated into the health system, including psychosocial support, provided critical support for women and girls, while capacity building for health personnel further strengthened local service delivery systems. Complementary harm reduction and substance use treatment services offered by dedicated treatment centres contributed to improved health outcomes and social reintegration for individuals affected by drug use. Likewise, the provision of mental health support, outreach, and awareness-raising helped address stigma and promoted healthier coping strategies for vulnerable groups.

Concurrently, livelihoods assistance and MSME development addressed immediate financial needs while fostering long-term income generation. CfW and UCT schemes provided critical short-term relief, enabling vulnerable households to meet urgent needs while contributing to the restoration of local infrastructure and community assets. Cash-based support, vocational training, and business development strengthened household livelihoods, enhanced business development, and built the resilience of local economies and inclusive economic participation, particularly for women, returnees, and former poppy farmers. By combining short-term financial assistance with longer-term support for sustainable income generation, the programme addressed both immediate economic vulnerability and structural barriers to inclusive economic recovery.

Although female participation remained constrained due to contextual limitations, the programme fostered inclusive economic participation where possible, notably by supporting female-owned businesses and facilitating access to markets through tailored asset support and training. These efforts collectively contributed to more diversified, sustainable and resilient local economies. Agriculture-based livelihood support, including training and distribution of inputs for home gardening, poultry, greenhouse cultivation, and livestock rearing, enabled farmers – particularly female-headed households – to improve food security and diversify income sources.



These interventions promoted climate-resilient agricultural practices and facilitated the transition from subsistence to semi-commercial production. Support to MSMEs including training, market exposure, and employment retention schemes, contributed to local job creation, expanded market linkages, and improved business sustainability. Initiatives targeting women entrepreneurs and returnees strengthened their economic participation and autonomy, while vocational training programmes offered alternative livelihoods for youth and former poppy farmers, fostering reintegration and long-term economic inclusion. Complementary technical training and improved market linkages further enhanced the enabling environment for trade and enterprise development. Collectively, these efforts increased the adaptability of local economies, improved livelihoods across diverse population groups, and supported more inclusive and sustainable economic recovery.

The programme also contributed to strengthened community resilience and enhanced adaptive capacity in the face of increasing climate and environmental shocks. By investing in early warning systems, climate-smart agricultural practices, and water management infrastructure, the programme protected farm-based livelihoods and reduced community vulnerability to droughts, floods, and related natural hazards. Additionally, through participatory implementation and knowledge sharing, the programme enhanced local capacities to anticipate and respond to climate-related risks, improved household-level preparedness, and informed community decision-making, contributing to improved food security and more timely responses. These interventions helped stabilize agricultural productivity, reduce the risk of crop failure, and promote more sustainable farming systems. This laid the groundwork for more climate-resilient rural communities by embedding preparedness mechanisms, enhancing local knowledge, and strengthening the environmental foundations of sustainable rural livelihoods.

STFA Third Party Monitoring Insights (2024) - South Region: 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. 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. These findings, collected in the absence of completed outcome evaluations, serve as a credible proxy for gauging progress toward intended results. In the Southern region, where relevance ratings stood at 85%, beneficiaries overwhelmingly affirmed that interventions were timely and responsive to the socio-economic vulnerabilities and service gaps within the region. Interventions aimed at improving essential services—such as access to water, electricity, and health facilities—were particularly well-received, with a 98% relevance rating. Livelihoods and income-generation initiatives followed closely with a 92% relevance rating, highlighting their alignment with community priorities for economic stability. While social cohesion activities were valued, they received a lower relevance rating of 65%, suggesting the need for further investment in participatory approaches and trust-building tailored to the southern context. Effectiveness ratings in the South were at 74%, reflecting solid progress in addressing community needs, particularly in livelihoods and infrastructure-focused activities.

This indicates that while significant strides have been made, there are areas where the implementation strategy could be enhanced for greater impact. Sustainability of benefits was rated highly, with 83% of beneficiaries expressing confidence that the interventions, particularly in livelihoods and essential services, would continue to provide long-term value. This high level of confidence reflects both strong community ownership and an improved capacity to sustain the outcomes of these interventions. Collectively, these outcomes improved local service delivery, supported the recovery and resilience of rural economies, and strengthened community preparedness in a fragile and complex operating environment. By building and reinforcing the enabling environment for long-term human development, particularly for women, children and other marginalized groups, these outcomes reflect meaningful progress towards more equitable, sustainable and resilient development outcomes rooted in local capacities and aligned with UN values.



III. Outputs

In 2024, approximately 94,791¹ people, (29.9% female) benefited from the STFA-funded JP in the Southern region. The majority benefited from the provision of essential services, most significantly access to improved 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-level consultations under Output 4 contribute to programming for the other three output areas. The following section provides a more detailed breakdown of all four STFA JP output areas for the Southern region.



Girls in a class at a school that was built through STFA's support in Kandahar Province. © STFA

[1] 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 41,161 people, including 17,978 (43.7% female) benefited from the provision of essential services. The initiatives addressed infrastructure and essential health services.

Infrastructure

In 2024, 9,282 people, including 4,787 (51.6% female) benefited from improved community-based infrastructure that provided access to essential services and reduced risks of natural hazards, particularly flooding, and improved access to water supply. Highlights include the following:

25,000

individuals benefited from 100 community-level irrigation infrastructures rehabilitated by the programme. The rehabilitation improved access to water for agricultural activities and contributed to increased agricultural productivity. This intervention is expected to irrigate approximately 2,774 ha of land, directly benefiting farming households by enhancing water availability and supporting crop production. Efforts were also made to reduce leaks and inefficiencies in existing water supply networks to ensure that water reached areas where it was needed most, and ponds and check dams were built to capture and store surface runoff, ensuring that water could be utilized during dry spells.

Essential Health Services

During the reporting period, 1,906 people (26.3% female) benefited from improved access to essential health services. Highlights include the following:

21

Family Health Houses (FHHs) are being constructed to improve access to essential healthcare services in underserved and remote areas of Helmand province. Of the 15 completed FHH buildings, six included waiting areas for men, and four have been completed with boundary walls. The FHHs were equipped with water supplies via boreholes, with six more FHHs² yet to be completed. The joint programme will complete solarization of the 21 FHHs with 5 kW solar systems and solarize eight other health facilities to reach a target of 29 health facilities.

29

temporary FHHs established in 2022 with support from STFA continued to be maintained through other funding sources. Despite the absence of STFA funds, the two Community Midwifery Education schools in Helmand and Nimroz provinces continued to operate using alternative funding sources. Both schools successfully concluded the 40th module of their curriculum with 62 midwifery students. After a two-month internship programme at nearby FHH health facilities, all graduates were deployed as second midwives in the FHHs.

[2] The JP made progress in constructing Family Health Houses (FHHs) to improve access to essential healthcare services in underserved and remote areas of Helmand province. The initial target of 29 newly constructed FHHs is now reduced to 21 due to significant increase in the unit costs following modifications of the technical designs. However, the target for solarization remains for 29 FHHs as there were no modifications to the solarization package. Based on a list of priority areas issued by the DfA Ministry of Public Health, the JP conducted joint field assessments and in coordination with the local authorities and community health council agreed on the exact locations for the FHH buildings. The list of FHH final locations was signed by the DfA Provincial Public Health Directorate as a formal agreement.

Psychosocial support (PSS) services continued at five PSS Corners in temporary FHH using other sources of funding. Women and girls received life-saving mental health services and improve well-being coping strategies for women and girls.

1,500

individuals (401 female) were supported with evidence-based drug prevention, treatment and harm reduction services at a 50-bed drug treatment centre (DTC) and a drop-in centre (DIC) in Zabul province.

- 80 patients (all male) completed 45 days of voluntary residential treatment at the DTC that aided their recovery and social re-integration.
- STFA provide technical and equipment support, this improved technical skills and knowledge of 23 health services providers (1 female) including psychologists, counsellors, and social workers from Kandahar, Helmand and Zabul DTCs.
- 1,336 people (401 female) who use drugs and other vulnerable individuals and 84 people (all male) benefited from harm reduction service outreach services at the DICs.
- 1,160 at risk individuals received PSS and counselling services.
- 473 drug users and their families received primary health care services
- 1,172 individuals received awareness about the harmful effects of drugs and drug use.

106

women service providers supported 200 vulnerable women in supporting health and livelihood needs. Six service providers were trained then facilitated women returnees' registration, enabling access to cash assistance from the DfA and referrals to UN agencies. Another 100 female health workers received training in nutrition, childcare, family planning and sexual and reproductive health, along with primary delivery kits to support safe childbirth. To enhance economic stability, 200 vulnerable women were engaged in small businesses and livestock ventures with cash assistance. Five women-led CSOs (27 staff) were trained on KOBO Toolbox and emergency project management, for effective humanitarian responses.

The ASYREC system is now installed and was tested and ready for implementation with Pashto and Dari language customizations.³ The system also enhances coordination among stakeholders involved in relief operations, including aid organizations, government agencies, logistics providers, and local communities. The first phase of the project concluded with comprehensive testing, business unit creation, and collaboration for feedback.



Farida in a Mother and Child Health Centre in Nimroz Province. © UNFPA

[3] ASYREC stands for ASYCUDA for Relief Consignments with ASYCUDA (Automated System for Customs Data) being a computerized system developed to assist customs authorities in processing declarations and managing revenue. The ASYREC module is specifically designed to facilitate and expedite the clearance of relief consignments during emergencies, ensuring that humanitarian aid reaches affected populations promptly.

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, 13,795 people (1,927; 14.0% female) 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

households (6,232 people, 3,739 female) benefited from unconditional cash transfers, this assistance played a crucial role in addressing immediate financial challenges and stabilizing household expenses. The cash assistance was primarily used for food, health, agricultural inputs, and debt repayment. The UCTs contributed to immediate food security and reduced economic distress, allowing households to allocate resources towards essential expenses.

9,964

people (63 female) out of a total target of 10,000 households participated in CfW to repair 100 critical community infrastructures (reported under Output 1 above). The remaining 36 households were permanent absentees and could not be reached. Households received an average of US\$100 working an average of 20 days with seven-hour workdays. Female participation was low due to the physically demanding nature of the interventions, local cultural norms do not support female engagement in such work.

12

MSMEs (11 male-owned and 1 female-owned) supported in Kandahar (11 MSMEs) and Nimroz (1 MSME) provinces. Five businesses participated in the 8th China-South Asia Expo in Kunming, China, and seven businesses participated in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) exhibition in Sri Lanka. The businesses enhanced market exposure and fostered international trade opportunities by showcasing products, focusing on market linkages, learning modern business trends, and expanding their operations with new technologies. Participating businesses came from various sectors, including fruit processing, pharmaceuticals, juice and bakery production, garments, recycling and production, and shoe making.

454

beneficiaries (19 female) benefited from employment retention support for six months in Kandahar province. These employees were placed in 26 businesses operating in sectors such as agriculture, food processing, textile and garments, recycling, manufacturing and personal care services. Among them, 94 were new employees and 360 were existing employees. They included 69 returnees, 133 internally displaced persons (IDPs), and 252 members of host communities, including 10 people with disabilities. The initiative aimed to stabilize the local economy by ensuring continued employment and income for the beneficiaries, thereby contributing to community resilience and economic sustainability.



168

MSMEs engaging 180 employees (103 female) benefited from 12 capacity development sessions (five for males and seven for females). The 180 employees were trained on trade and business subjects (against a total annual target of 190) and the remaining MSMEs will be trained in 2025. The training sessions were implemented applying principled approaches. They helped participants enhance their trade and business knowledge and skills with the average pre-test mark obtained by the 180 participants being 7.42 out of 20 while in the average post-test mark was 17.61. In addition, 72.2 percent of participants rated the usefulness of the sessions as 'excellent', and 85.6 percent of the participants considered the trainers' presentations as 'excellent'.

54

percent of participants rated their business knowledge after attending the training sessions as 'excellent'. Follow-up studies also show the effectiveness of the programme with many MSMEs applying the new knowledge practically regarding calculating taxes and completing tax returns, for example, as well as designing and applying business, marketing, sales, cost, profit and cashflow plans and improving packaging and labelling for their products.

1,213

vulnerable farming households in Helmand and Kandahar provinces were supported with alternative livelihoods to poppy cultivation. Targeted farmers received training in sustainable farming techniques, business development and market linkages and livestock packages and support to produce high value crops (including trellised grape vineyards), cereals and vegetables.

40

unemployed youth and IDPs (all male) from Helmand province received seven-month vocational skills training on motorbike repairing. They have established their own workshops which serve as sources of income, enabling them to improve their families' economic well-being.

1,173

farmers, entrepreneurs, extension workers and local livestock experts (256 female) were trained on topics such as livestock management, agricultural best practices, saffron production, orchard management, disease control and post-harvest management, improving agriculture production techniques in Kandahar province.

1,057

farmer households (100 female-headed) in Kandahar province received agricultural extension services and monitoring visits to coach them on farming techniques, practices and technologies. This helped improve agricultural productivity and profitability.





Women, part of a STFA supported MSMEs intervention earning a living as tailors in Kandahar Province. © IOM

156

women and six semi-commercial poultry owners in Kandahar province benefited from feed, multivitamins, antibiotics and guidance on disease control and feeding practices.

20

women as Start and Improve Your Business (SYIB) trainers through a Training of Trainers programme. Out of these 20 women, 17 went on to train 500 Afghan women entrepreneurs using the SYIB curriculum, covering topics such as business planning, market research, and financial management.

50

women participated in an apprenticeship programme implemented in partnership with BRAC, an international NGO. Under this initiative, 12 established women entrepreneurs mentored apprentices for three months, enhancing their skills and business capacity. While the project was initially designed to support women-led MSMEs, STFA funds were leveraged to extend income-generation support to women returnees after original project targets were met. This initiative not only contributed to economic empowerment but also fostered trust and stronger relationships within the community.



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 37,462 people (6,047; 16.1% female), elevating their capacity and resilience. Highlights include the following:

21

CB-DEWS were established completed across 14 districts (1 in Helmand, 11 in Kandahar, 4 in Nimroz, 4 in Urozgan, and 1 in Zabul provinces). These interventions, implemented through active community participation, strengthened local drought preparedness and response capacity, primarily targeting male heads of households as cultural sensitivities and restrictions on female staff limited direct engagement with women. However, as critical early warning information is shared within households, women receive updates through family members. This direct and indirect engagement contributed to improved preparedness, food security and resilience to drought and floods.

23,405

small holder farmers and herders were trained in early warning systems, community level anticipatory mitigation actions, and other preparedness mechanisms. This increased community knowledge on early warning signs and strengthened drought preparedness, enhancing ability to respond effectively to drought-related challenges.

13,000

small holder farmers and herders (5,947 female) were trained on climate smart agriculture (CSA) and livestock management techniques, enhancing farmers' and livestock keepers' knowledge on water conservation, productivity, pest and disease control, and storage techniques in Helmand, Kandahar, Nimroz, Urozgan, and Zabul provinces.

To support water conservation and drought preparedness, the JP implemented public awareness campaigns that educated communities about the importance of managing water resources effectively. Communities were trained in drought management and mitigation techniques to enhance their resilience to climate change and to empower them to manage their resources effectively. The involvement of local communities in monitoring drought conditions and their impacts were integral to ensuring that interventions were timely and relevant. Through these interventions, the JP built long-term resilience, improved food security, and reduced vulnerability to climate-related shocks. By leveraging CSA practices and community-based initiatives, the project empowered beneficiaries to adapt to changing climatic conditions while ensuring sustainability.

7

rainwater harvesting and irrigation structures were constructed (3 in Helmand, 4 in Kandahar province) to enhance the local irrigation system, mitigate flash floods and contribute to the recharge of the underground water table. These interventions improved irrigation, boosting agricultural productivity, promoting the adoption of sustainable farming practices, and enhancing crop irrigation efficiency. As a result, farmers experienced improvements in their livelihoods, increased agricultural yields, and enhanced knowledge of best agricultural practices.





A boy leads a flock of sheep to drink from a check dam constructed with STFA support in Qalat, Zabul 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, community outreach and engagement programmes benefited 2,373 people, including 2,373 (100.0%) female, with JP activities focusing on building capacity at CSOs and media organizations, and collecting socio-political data. This includes the following:

58

civil society leaders, media workers and activists (40 women) in Kandahar and Kabul, received digital security training, resulting in improved technical capacity of staff from 21 women-led/gender-focused CSOs and 12 local media organizations.

1,173

Afghans (817 women, 233 men) engaged in community consultations. The results revealed important insights, including that 90 percent of women in the South were denied access to public spaces, and 21 percent reported diminished influence in decision-making related to marriage. The proportion of male family members enforcing restrictions in the South rose sharply from 25 percent to 55 percent surpassing the national increase from 22 percent to 43 percent. The collection of regional-level data on socio-political developments is crucial in developing evidence-based strategies for further advocacy and programming. To include women from hard-to-reach areas these processes, the JP piloted the Women Community Volunteers (WCVs) approach as part of the quarterly consultations, aimed at further amplifying the voices of Afghan women. As a result, 18 WCVs from the South participated in a two-day training event in Kabul in August 2024 to enhance their community engagement skills and strengthen their networks.



Delays in Implementation, Challenges, Lessons Learned & Best Practices

Dotted design of the Afghanistan map. © STFA/ Chanil Jung



IV. Challenges

In 2024, implementation of activities faced multiple challenges, including conditions imposed by the DfA, limited skilled labour, exchange rate fluctuations, and remote project locations. The following are the most significant challenges reported by STFA 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 South. 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. Simultaneously, a shortage of skilled labor 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 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 emergency assistance while adhering to Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) minimum programming criteria and humanitarian principles. Key priorities included maintaining a unified UN-NGO approach, ensuring a needs-based response, rejecting male-only delivery mechanisms, strengthening Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP) and safeguarding standards, and promoting gender-sensitive programming. To mitigate risks for female beneficiaries and staff, regional gender specialists conducted ongoing protection risk analyses at the district and provincial levels to help determine whether to proceed, adjust or halt activities based on a Do No Harm approach.



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 providing training sessions in private houses. 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 prevailing operational challenges. It also became apparent that women-owned MSMEs require more comprehensive support than short-term training and cash or asset assistance.

DfA involvement: Negotiation and handover coordination with the DfA was essential to ensure approval for implementation planning. Flexibility in timelines and budgets, stakeholder engagement, risk assessments, community training and innovative construction methods proved necessary. 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.

DaO collaboration, coordination and innovation: In many cases PUNO working groups successfully collaborated to share experiences and knowledge and organize joint visits and activities. To prevent such delays, it is essential to assess inter-agency policies on data sharing and collaboration during the planning phase and address any potential barriers in advance. Likewise, early coordination on milestones and site selection is essential to minimize external interference that could hinder implementation. A phased approach allows PUNOs 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.

Continuous Innovation: Flexibility and innovation in developing pragmatic solutions are crucial, especially in the current fragility context. In one instance, the swift reallocation of resources to address urgent livelihood needs allowed the project to start without delay and for relations to be built with local DfA authorities, who appreciated the timely response. This flexibility highlights the effectiveness of bottom-up, localized approaches, which are widely supported by communities and authorities.



VI. Risk Analysis

During the planning and development of the Joint Programme for the Southern Region, a risk management framework was established to categorize risks into contextual (political, security), programmatic, operational/financial, and organizational types.

In 2024, as in the previous year, no new risks were reported. However, the primary materialized risk continued to be the deterioration of the human rights situation, particularly affecting women across the country. Despite these persistent challenges, PUNOs have maintained a principled approach to delivery. Mitigation measures included sustaining 'by women to women' modalities and adapting implementation strategies to preserve access, inclusion, and accountability across the STFA-supported portfolio.

VII. Qualitative Assessment

In 2024, the STFA Joint Programme in the Southern region of Afghanistan continued to make progress improve the lives and livelihoods of the most vulnerable people and communities, demonstrating strong alignment with local priorities and effective coordination among PUNOs. Coherence under the DaO approach enabled timely delivery and adaptive management in a complex operating environment.

The JP significantly advanced resilience, human development and community stability. Its integrated, multi-sectoral design was central to this success, enabling complementary outcomes across essential services, livelihoods and climate adaptation initiatives. The programme's integrated and principled approach, enabling the delivery of inclusive, sustainable and adaptive solutions that addressed both immediate needs and structural drivers of fragility, ensured that support reached the most vulnerable populations, including women, returnees and internally displaced persons. 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 represented an important move 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. Community consultations were instrumental in securing local buy-in, which facilitated implementation and strengthened accountability. Access to essential services, including healthcare and drug use treatment facilities, and PSS 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 UCTs helped meet immediate financial needs while supporting infrastructure rehabilitation and reducing negative coping strategies. Diverse forms of livelihood support – including agricultural inputs and training, business and vocational training, market linkage enhancements and business inputs – enabled individuals, families and communities to build economic self-reliance. Other initiatives – such as apprenticeship and trainer programmes – built future resilience and laid the foundations for more sustainable rural economies. The outcome monitoring survey found that 41.4 percent of beneficiaries participated in canal cleaning, 36.6 percent in canal rehabilitation, 4.1 percent in protection walls, and 17.8 percent in animal water reservoirs. These CfW activities provided critical short-term financial relief while contributing to long-term community resilience. Participants not only earned income but also actively contributed to restoring and maintaining vital community infrastructure, ensuring continued functionality and lasting benefits for agricultural productivity and water management.



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. Despite some limitations resulting from the working environment, in 2024 the JP achieved its intended objectives. However, the programme faced significant 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.

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 water, health and education. Despite contextual constraints, the programme promoted inclusivity, supported local ownership, and embedded sustainability into infrastructure and service delivery. Livelihoods interventions reduced reliance on harmful coping strategies and promoted self-reliance through market-based support, with a strong focus on women, returnees, and displaced populations. Climate adaptation and disaster preparedness activities helped safeguard lives and livelihoods, strengthened local risk management, and supported environmentally sustainable practices through community-led solutions. 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 Joint Programme 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.

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 banks⁴, 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.

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.



A pharmacist at a Drug Treatment Center in Kandahar Province. © UNODC



Annexes

A restored water valve brings clean, reliable water back to families in Kandahar Province, thanks to STFA support.
© STFA

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	38,192 (11,852)	39,661 (17,577)		PUNO reports
1c. Number of people that have benefited from drug-treatment, drug rehabilitation services (health)	People	0	0 (0)	1,500 (401)		PUNO reports
1d. Number of functional, UN-supported, facilities providing basic health assistance (including basic health assistance services for women and girls)	Facilities/ Infrastructure	0	21 (0)	25 (0)		PUNO reports
1g. Hectares of rehabilitated and/or newly irrigated land for agricultural activities	Facilities/ Infrastructure	0	0 (0)	41 (0)		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 (777)		PUNO reports
2b. Number of people who have benefited from newly-created income-generation opportunities, disaggregated by sex, age and province	People	818	2,831 (151)	2,831 (1,087)		PUNO reports
	Activities	0	0 (0)	1,982 (1,998)		
	Trainings	0	0 (0)	3,125 (3,121)		
2b.1. Number of people who have benefited from productive employment through CfW schemes (at least 30% women; 50% youth)	People	0	0 (0)	9,964 (63)		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	390 (110)	190 (104)		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	1 (0)	21 (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)	Other	0	0 (0)	2 (0)		PUNO reports
3c. Number of farmers who benefited from training and assets for improved, climate-smart, agriculture (at least 30% women)	People	5,940	1,057 (100)	37,462 (6,047)		PUNO reports
3d. Number of people that benefit from rehabilitated and/or newly constructed disaster-resilient community infrastructure and nature-based solutions	People	0	400 (120)	0 ()		PUNO reports
	Hectares	0	0 (0)	22,923 (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	1 (0)	35 (33)		PUNO reports
4b. Number of people with better awareness about human rights, social cohesion and conflict prevention (at least 50% women)	People	3,410	176 (162)	2,373 (2,373)		PUNO reports



Annex II: Real-Life Stories: From the Field

Greenhouse farming boosts food security and income for female-headed households in Kandahar



A greenhouse built for Bibi Nazia, a female farmer in the Arghistan district of Kandahar Province. © FAO

“
Before, I struggled to provide food for my children. Now, not only do we have enough vegetables at home, but I can also sell the extra and support my family financially.”

In Kandahar Province, Bibi Nazia, a farmer in Badizai village, struggled to provide for her family. As the head of her household, she faced drought, poor seeds quality and limited access to fertilizers, challenges that significantly reduced crop yields and left her family vulnerable.

To address these hardships, the JP introduced a greenhouse farming initiative to help vulnerable households improve food security and increase incomes. After a thorough assessment, Nazia was selected as one of the 50 families in Arghistan District to receive a greenhouse package.

The package included a 1,000-litre water tank, a tank tower, a water pump, greenhouse plastic, an iron structure, drip irrigation pipes, a power button and high-quality seeds, including 15 grams of cucumber seeds and five grams of tomato seeds. Alongside these inputs, Nazia participated in a comprehensive training programme covering greenhouse cultivation, maintenance, irrigation techniques and market linkages to ensure she could maximize her production.

In October 2023, Nazia received her greenhouse and all necessary equipment. Within weeks, she started growing fresh vegetables, ensuring a steady support of nutritious food for her family while earning income from surplus produce sold in local markets.

By integrating modern agricultural techniques with local farming traditions, the STFA JP is ensuring rural communities are adapting to climate change challenges and sustaining long-term productivity. For Nazia and many other farmers, this greenhouse represents more than just a structure, it is an opportunity and a step toward self-sufficiency.



Kandahar-based dry fruits business expands export markets and generates new employment

“

With the continued support and lessons learned from this experience, we are now poised for further expansion and have recently employed an additional five workers to fulfil sales orders.

”



Helix Ltd, a dry fruit processing business joins the China Kunming International Exhibition with STFA support, Kandahar Province. © IOM

Helix Ltd., a dry fruits processing business operating in Kandahar, specializes in processing 27 varieties of high-quality dried fruits, which are delivered in attractive packaging to both national and international markets, including China. Despite offering a diverse product range, the company faced challenges in expanding its customer base and enhancing its product visibility in international markets. Having opened a second sales branch in China and with a workforce of around 50 employees, Helix Ltd. was striving to expand its global reach and needed innovative strategies to boost its product appeal and secure more business leads.

In 2024, with the support of the STFA JP, a new opportunity for growth emerged which enabled businesses to participate in the China Kunming International Exhibition. Following a comprehensive assessment, the company was able to participate in the prominent expo, which provided an ideal platform to showcase its products to potential international buyers and partners. The expo experience, proved to be transformative. The company gained valuable exposure to global markets, especially China and other export regions.

As a direct result of participating in the expo, Helix Ltd. secured 12 successful business leads and sales contracts contributing to an expanded market presence. The insights gained on packaging innovations have already enhanced the appeal of their products, making them more competitive in international markets. Helix Ltd. is now better positioned to expand its presence in global markets and achieve long-term growth.

Mr Raofy, Helix's representative, reflects on the impact. Mr Qadem, a 25-year-old IDP, recently joined Helix as an employee. In 2024, he faced considerable challenges as the sole breadwinner for his family. He expressed gratitude for the opportunity to work with the company, which has provided him with a stable income and the means to support his loved ones.

This experience emphasizes the importance of continuous support for businesses seeking to expand their presence in international markets. Going forward, more opportunities need to be developed for local businesses to participate in local and global exhibitions, with a focus on packaging innovations and international networking.



Alternative livelihoods and renewed dignity for former poppy farmers in Helmand



Mahboob, a returnee fixing a motorcycle after completing a vocational training, Helmand Province. © UNODC

“
It’s not just about
learning a trade. It’s
about regaining
dignity and being
able to support my
family.”

Mahboob (a pseudonym), a resident of Marja district in Helmand province, previously earned his livelihood through poppy cultivation. His income source was abruptly disrupted following a ban on poppy farming by the DfA, leaving him without a means to support his family.

With limited options, Mahboob joined many other young men in making the difficult decision to cross the border into Iran in search of employment as a labourer. However, a serious accident resulted in a disability that affected both his legs, forcing his return to Helmand.

Back in his hometown, Mahboob faced persistent unemployment and the additional challenge of adapting to life with a disability. Amidst these difficulties, he was introduced to a livelihood initiative supported by the STFA JP. The initiative offered vocational training in motorcycle repair, combining technical instruction with hands-on practice to enable participants to translate their new skills into income-generating activities.

Under the guidance of a professional trainer, Mahboob successfully completed the course and began planning his journey as an entrepreneur in motorcycle repair. “This project has given me a second chance,” said Mahboob.

Mahboob’s experience reflects the broader potential of alternative livelihood initiatives in the region, especially for former poppy farmers whose primary source of income has been eliminated. The JP has played a critical role in supporting individuals like Mahboob by delivering vocational training and sustainable income opportunities. Beyond practical skills, the programme has helped participants rebuild confidence, enhance resilience, and pursue lives marked by greater dignity, safety, and self-reliance.



DELIVERING AS ONE

Cover Photo:

Sohaila Alizai, the Director of Zaranj Women's Sewing and Training Workshop in Zaranj city, Nimroz Province © UNCTAD



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