



Community-Based Safe Space

Magal Valley, Sawki District, Kunar Province.

د ټولنو په کچه خوندي
شوکي ولسوالي

2025

ANNUAL REPORT

SECTORAL PROJECT

STRENGTHENING
WOMEN-LED CSOs
TWINNING INITIATIVE

Afghan women humanitarians conducting a community-based safe space session for women affected by the 2025 earthquake in Kunar Province. © UN Women

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United Nations Entity for
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Programme ¹ Title & Project Number		Country, Locality(s), Priority Area(s)/ Strategic Results ²	
Programme Title: Strengthening the Role of Women Civil Society Organizations (CSOs): Supporting Gender-Responsive Humanitarian and Basic Needs Nexus Programming in Afghanistan MPTF Office Project Reference Number ³ : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 140669 • 133763 		Country: Afghanistan Region: Eastern and Western 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: 7 PUNOs 1. 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:	1,200,000	Overall Duration	18 months
MPTF /JP Contribution ⁴ :	1,188,000		
Agency Contribution	N/A	Start Date ⁵	5 Apr 2024
Government Contribution)	N/A	Original End Date ⁶	10 Oct 2025
Other Contributions (donors):	N/A	Current End Date ⁷	31 Mar 2026
Total Contributions:	1,188,000		
Programme Assessment/Review/Mid-Term Eval.		Report Submitted By	
Assessment/Review - if applicable please attach Yes No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Mid-Term Evaluation Report – if applicable please attach Yes No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Name: Peter Nordstrom • Title: Senior Trust Fund Manager • Participating Organization (Lead): UN Women • Email address: peter.nordstrom@undp.org 	

[1] The term "programme" is used for programmes, joint programmes and projects.

[2] Strategic Results, as formulated in the Strategic UN Planning Framework (e.g. UNDAF) or project document;

[3] The MPTF Office Project Reference Number is the same number as the one on the Notification message. It is also referred to as "Project ID" on the project's factsheet page the [MPTF Office GATEWAY](#)

[4] The MPTF or JP Contribution, refers to the amount transferred to the Participating UN Organizations, which is available on the [MPTF Office GATEWAY](#)

[5] The start date is the date of the first transfer of the funds from the MPTF Office as Administrative Agent. Transfer date is available on the [MPTF Office GATEWAY](#)

[6] As per approval of the original project document by the relevant decision-making body/Steering Committee.

[7] If there has been an extension, then the revised, approved end date should be reflected here. If there has been no extension approved, then the current end date is the same as the original end date. The end date is the same as the operational closure date which is when all activities for which a Participating Organization is responsible under an approved MPTF / JP have been completed. As per the MOU, agencies are to notify the MPTF Office when a programme completes its operational activities.

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List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

CSO	Civil society organization
DRC	Danish Refugee Council
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NRC	Norwegian Refugee Council
PUNO	Participating United Nations organization
STFA	Special Trust Fund for Afghanistan
UNSFA	United Nations Strategic Framework for Afghanistan
WLO	Women-led organization
WVI	World Vision International





Executive Summary

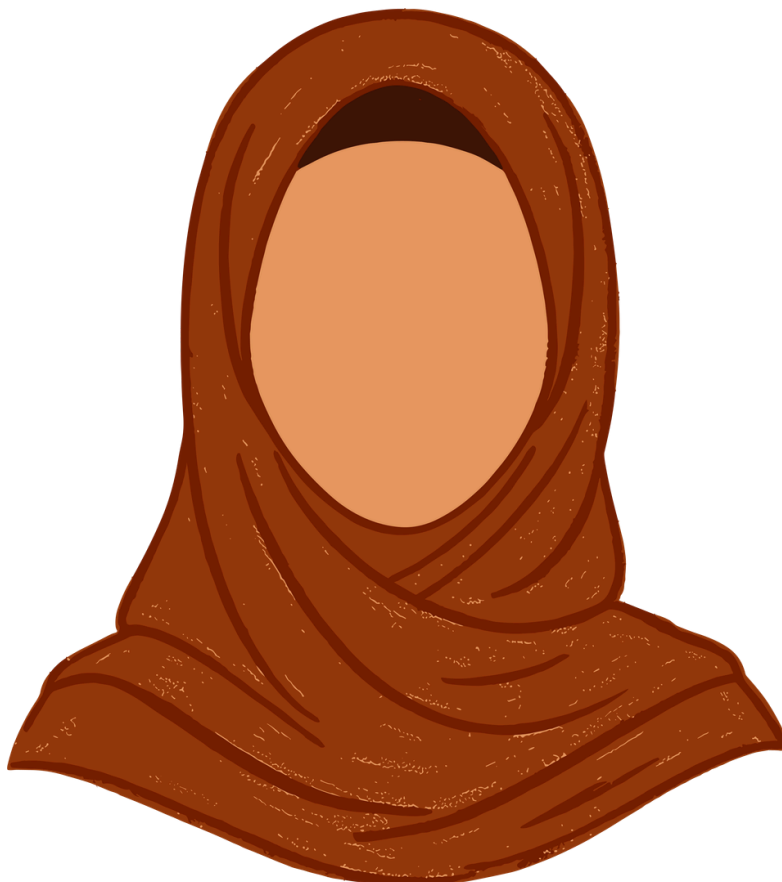


Purpose

The Strengthening Women-Led CSOs Twinning Initiative, launched in April 2024 and running through October 2025, is a direct response to the growing constraints on Afghan women's rights, participation, and access to services. Against a backdrop of severe restrictions on women's movement, employment, and education, coupled with economic fragility and humanitarian needs, the initiative seeks to strengthen the role of 14 women-led and women-focused civil society organizations (CSOs) in Afghanistan's Eastern and Western regions. It aims to counter lingering challenges by building institutional capacity, fostering resilience and amplifying the leadership of women-led CSOs. At its core, the initiative focuses on two objectives:

1. Deliver gender-responsive, results-driven programmes that bridge humanitarian aid and basic human needs programming
2. Influence the aid coordination structure to increase the accountability of the humanitarian response and its connection with basic human needs programming

Engaging women's organizations has a catalytic impact on promoting the humanitarian-development-peace nexus. Interventions become more inclusive, locally driven and sustainable, ultimately fostering greater resilience in conflict-affected and crisis-prone regions. Women-led and women-focused CSOs play a pivotal role in delivering services to women and girls in any context, but their role in gender-segregated societies such as Afghanistan is particularly vital. Embedded in the communities where they work, women-led/focused CSOs help navigate a constrained operational environment. By enhancing their capacity, the Twinning initiative has laid a foundation for inclusive, gender-responsive humanitarian action, contributing to durable solutions and operating in line with the humanitarian-development-peace nexus.



Results

Outcome

In 2025, the Strengthening Women-Led CSOs Twinning Initiative successfully strengthened the technical and operational capacity of 14 WLOs, seven each in the Eastern and Western regions, to deliver gender-responsive humanitarian assistance and basic human needs programming. Standardized capacity-building modules, covering operations, gender-responsive programming and leadership development, supported 35 staff members (16 women, 45.7%) from seven WLOs in the Eastern Region, and 38 staff members (22 women, 57.9%) from seven WLOs in the Western Region. High levels of participant satisfaction demonstrated relevance and effectiveness.

Training, coupled with a strategic partnership modality that “twinned” international NGOs with WLOs, resulted in measurable gains in technical and operational capacities. Subsequently, a series of pilot activities, including livelihood training and community awareness sessions, demonstrated the greater ability of WLOs to effectively implement humanitarian and basic human needs programming in complex contexts.

The 14 WLOs also gained influence within the broader provincial and national humanitarian architecture. The programme facilitated their engagement in coordination mechanisms on gender; protection from sexual exploitation and abuse; food security and agriculture; water, sanitation and hygiene; and emergency shelter and non-food items. International NGO partners enhanced their capacity to systematically engage, mentor and partner with WLOs, contributing to more inclusive, localized and gender-responsive humanitarian and basic needs programming.

Overall, the initiative helped to safeguard operational space and address the programmatic and institutional gaps of small and medium-sized WLOs, which remain the primary interlocutors with women and girls in Afghanistan.

UNSFPA 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.

16

context-appropriate comprehensive trainings (8 in the Eastern Region and 8 in the Western Region) covered institutional systems and operations, humanitarian and basic needs programme design and implementation, access and negotiation, and leadership and gender equality.

73

staff members from 14 WLOs improved skills, including 35 staff members (16 women, 45.7%) from seven WLOs in the Eastern Region, and 38 staff members (22 women, 57.9%) from seven WLOs in the Western Region. Participants represented operations, programmes and management departments. Pre- and post-training assessments recorded substantial learning gains, with average scores increasing by over 42 percent in the Eastern Region and 47 percent in the Western Region on several technical modules. Furthermore, the high quality of delivery was reflected in a satisfaction rate of over 80 percent among participants in the Eastern Region and 87 percent in the Western Region, meeting planned targets for staff engagement and knowledge transfer.

WLO institutional capacities were further developed through mentoring and technical guidance. Assistance focused on addressing gaps in operations, particularly in financial and administrative systems. This strengthened WLO's abilities to access and manage small-scale funding and implement projects that effectively reach women and girls in need of humanitarian assistance and basic human needs support. WLOs took concrete and verifiable steps to strengthen institutional frameworks, including but not limited to:

- Developing and/or revising financial policies
- Establishing and/or revising procurement policies and procedures
- Introducing and/or strengthening internal control mechanisms
- Developing risk mitigation and compliance measures
- Clarifying roles and responsibilities related to financial oversight

14

WLOs (comprising 7 from the Eastern Region and 7 from the Western Region) were supported to design and develop proposals for small-scale gender-responsive humanitarian and basic needs interventions addressing women's key needs and priorities. By the end of 2025, using \$15,000 seed grants, all 14 WLOs had initiated implementation of small-scale projects. Key preparatory steps included staff recruitment; development of operational tools, such as assessment questionnaires and beneficiary outreach and selection; drafting of communication and outreach materials; and stakeholder coordination and access negotiations.

565

beneficiaries are expected to be directly reached through the seven WLOs in the Eastern Region. Small-scale projects, covering Nangarhar, Kunar and Laghman provinces, are primarily designed to support women's livelihoods. They focus on vocational training and kits to strengthen economic self-reliance as well as the provision of psychosocial support and disaster risk reduction measures. Three of the seven WLOs initiated implementation following written or verbal authorization from local *de facto* authorities. Early activities included livelihood training and awareness-raising sessions to increase understanding of local disaster and climate risks, coupled with community-driven actions to reduce vulnerability to hazards such as earthquakes, drought, flooding and landslides. The remaining WLOs initiated procurement processes for vocational training toolkits and hygiene/family kits to distribute to targeted affected populations as part of planned interventions, while awaiting authorization from local *de facto* authorities.

7,504

beneficiaries are expected to be directly reached through the seven WLOs in the Western Region. Pilot projects covering Herat and Farah provinces are designed to address key needs arising from the influx of returnees from Iran, primarily focusing on livelihood assistance, hygiene and sanitation, and civil documentation support. One of the seven WLOs initiated implementation in 2025, following verbal authorization from the local *de facto* authorities in Herat Province. It conducted several awareness-raising sessions for returnee women and their male family members as well as women-headed households on legal aid support for obtaining tazkiras. The remaining WLOs initiated procurement processes for training toolkits and hygiene/family kits intended for distribution to the targeted affected populations, while awaiting authorization from the local *de facto* authorities.



A local women's civil society organization runs a capacity-building class for women business owners in Afghanistan. © UN Women





د بنځپنه ثبت او راجسټر خانګي ته ښه راغلاست!

Welcome to Female
Registration Section

Delays in Implementation, Challenges, Lessons Learned & Best Practices



Challenges

1

Increasing enforcement of restrictions on women and girls as well as shrinking space for WLOs necessitated several programmatic adaptations. The PUNO assumed direct responsibility for seed grant administration and contracting, a role originally intended for international NGO partners. This was a strategic necessity as it provided a more robust institutional shield for local partners facing difficulties with project registrations and administrative clearances. While essential for risk management, this pivot caused initial implementation delays due to the rigorous due diligence and risk-based capacity assessments required. To mitigate these delays, capacity-building modules advanced in parallel with onboarding, sustaining momentum despite administrative hurdles.

2

Variance in the capacity and access of the selected WLOs in the Eastern Region saw some facing challenges in securing formal approvals and memoranda of understanding with the *de facto* line ministries. Others managed this independently with their own networks and negotiation skills. Variation in institutional capacity necessitated targeted mentoring and adaptive programming to address constraints, such as support to strengthen institutional policies and procedures.

Lessons Learned

1

Flexible and creative partnership modalities are critical. These adapt to partner capacities and the context and constraints in their respective provinces, prioritizing principled and security-sensitive programming. Partnerships rely on consistent mentoring for real-time oversight and guidance to facilitate compliance, uphold quality and achieve impact.

2

Localized, community-based programming by WLOs remains possible when supported by the right partnership modalities. This was underscored by the successful roll-out of WLO initiatives by the end of 2025.

Risk Analysis

In 2025, WLOs implementing gender-focused initiatives faced three interrelated strategic risks. First, increasing restrictions on women's participation and mobility limited access for beneficiaries and national women staff at UN compounds and NGO offices. These constraints threatened the inclusivity and reach of programme activities. To mitigate these risks, the PUNO sustained "by women for women" modalities, adopted remote work arrangements for women staff, relocated activities to accessible venues where necessary, and maintained high-level advocacy with *de facto* authorities and international partners to protect operational space.

Second, WLOs encountered administrative and institutional constraints, including regulatory hurdles, registration delays, and variability in organizational capacity.



These challenges affected the ability of local partners to implement activities independently and comply with due diligence requirements. Mitigation measures included the PUNO assuming direct responsibility for seed grant administration, parallel capacity-building during onboarding, targeted mentoring to strengthen institutional policies and procedures, and ongoing negotiation with provincial and national authorities to secure approvals and operational space.

Finally, security and contextual risks in project locations, such as cross-border hostilities and restrictive sociocultural norms, posed challenges to safe and sustainable project implementation. The PUNO addressed these by selecting sites with security considerations in mind, engaging communities to build legitimacy, and adapting programming flexibly to local realities. Collectively, these measures enabled WLOs to maintain access, inclusion and operational continuity, demonstrating that context-sensitive, adaptive approaches can mitigate systemic constraints while sustaining programme impact.

Qualitative Assessment

The Twinning Initiative has made meaningful and credible progress on social cohesion, inclusion and gender equality. It has strengthened the institutional and operational capacities of WLOs to provide women-focused humanitarian and basic needs assistance within a highly constrained operating environment.

While the initiative experienced early delays, primarily due to regulatory constraints and the need for prolonged engagement with the *de facto* authorities, it has demonstrated strong adaptability, effective partnership coordination, and accelerated momentum in the second half of its implementation period. By the end of 2025, the initiative had successfully transitioned from planning and design to active delivery.

Key milestones included the transparent selection and contracting of the 14 WLOs, the roll-out of phased capacity-building modules, and the initiation of small-scale humanitarian and basic needs projects. All these elements marked substantive progress in strengthening women-led humanitarian leadership and institutional capacity.

Cross-cutting issues shaping implementation have included gender equality and women's leadership, embedded across all programme components; regulatory and operational constraints, which drove adaptive strategies and contextual learning; and risk management and accountability, strengthened through standardized tools and tailored mitigation plans. Ongoing coordination and adaptive management, supported by a no-cost extension, enabled quality delivery while maintaining alignment with intended outcomes to the extent possible.

The projected direct beneficiary reach was lower in the Eastern Region (565) than in the Western Region (7,504). This was due to the nature of the pilot projects. In the Eastern Region, these predominantly focus on economic empowerment. Only two projects incorporate wider awareness-raising components, which tend to reach more people. Further, beneficiary targets were set at a lower level than in the Western Region, given security and visibility challenges. To ensure safe and inclusive access, WLOs in the Eastern Region integrated *mahram* (male guardian) engagement strategies into project designs to foster household-level support for women's participation.

The PUNO, in collaboration with international NGO partners, will continue to support the WLOs in completing the remaining components of their small-scale projects, while sustaining targeted capacity-building and mentoring support in line with the project's objectives, until the further extended end of the project in the first quarter of 2026.

Partnerships

1

In the Eastern Region, the Twinning Initiative is implemented in partnership with DRC and NRC and in the Western Region in partnership with DRC and WVI. The initiative in both regions leverages the respective NGOs' comparative technical and operational capacities.

2

Through institutional assessments and tailored capacity-building and mentoring, the NGOs support WLOs to strengthen internal governance, financial management and programme delivery systems. Simultaneously, the PUNO provides overall leadership, coordination, risk management and access negotiations, while administering seed grants and offering technical expertise on gender equality and women's leadership.

3

The 14 WLOs participate as both partners and beneficiaries. While receiving structured institutional support, they also utilize seed grants and newly strengthened capacities to implement gender-responsive pilot initiatives in their communities, translating organizational development into practical programmatic impact.

Annexes

Annex I. Indicator-based Performance Tracker

(The figures in brackets are female figures.)

Annex I - Indicator-based Performance Review	Unit	Baseline	Target	Progress	Reasons for Variance with Planned Target	Source of Verification
Output 4. Social cohesion, human rights, access to justice are strengthened at local level.						
4a. Number of community-based/civil society organizations with improved capacity for participatory and inclusive community planning (at least 20 percent women-led)	CSOs	0	7 (0)	14	To be reported at the end of the initiative's implementation period in Q1 2026.	PUNO reports
	Knowledge products	0	3 (0)	0 (0)		PUNO reports
	Other	0	70,000 (0)	8		PUNO reports
	People	0	1,456 (874)	0		PUNO reports



DELIVERING AS

 **ONE**

The word 'ONE' is rendered in a large, bold, white sans-serif font. To its left is a circular icon representing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which is a ring of 17 colored segments.

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