STFA
Special Trust Fund for Afghanistan



FINAL REPORT

NORTHERN REGION JOINT PROGRAMME

Workers in a carpet weaving centre supported by STFA in Balkh Province. © UNDP/Mohammad Haroon Hamdard

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Programme[1] Title & Project Number	Country, Locality(s), Priority Area(s)/ Strategic Results [2]
Programme Title: STFA Joint Programme for the Northern Region of Afghanistan: Addressing Basic Human Needs through UNSFA MPTF Office Project Reference Number[3]: • 00129785 • 00129786 • 00129787 • 00129788	Country: Afghanistan Region: Northern Priority areas/Strategic Results: UNSFA Priorities 1, 2, 3 Priority 1: Sustained Essential Services Priority 2: Economic Opportunities and Resilient Livelihoods Priority 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: 12 PUNOs • Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) • International Labour Organization (ILO) • International Organization for Migration (IOM) • United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) • United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) • United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) • United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) • United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) • United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) • United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) • United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) • United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS)	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 Contribution[4]:	49,965,414		
Agency Contribution	N/A	Start Date [5]	1 Jan 2022
Government Contribution)	N/A	Original End Date [6]	31 Dec 2023
Other Contributions (donors):	N/A	Current End Date [7]	31 Dec 2025
Total Contributions:	49,965,414		

Programme Assessment/Review/Mid-Term Eval.	Report Submitted By
Assessment/Review - if applicable please attach Yes ☑ No Mid-Term Evaluation Report – if applicable please attach Yes No ☑	• Name: Peter Nordstrom • Title: Senior Trust Fund Manager • Participating Organization (Lead): N/A • 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

ABADEI	Area-Based Approach for Development Emergency Initiatives
CAP	Community Action Planning
CB-DEWS	Community-Based Drought Early Warning System
CfW	Cash-for-Work
CME	Community Midwifery Education
CRC	Community Resource Centre
DaO	Delivering as One
FHH	Family Health House
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
MHPSS	Mental Health and Psychosocial Support
MSME	Micro, Small and Medium Enterprise
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
PUNO(s)	Participating United Nations Organization(s)
RMNCAH	Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn, Child and Adolescent Health
STFA	Special Trust Fund for Afghanistan
TEF	Transitional Engagement Framework
UCT	Unconditional Cash Transfer
UN	United Nations
UNSFA	United Nations Strategic Framework for Afghanistan
WASH	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene



Executive Summary



Abdul Satar supported through the STFA-funded cash for work intervention in Balkh Province. © ILO

The Special Trust Fund for Afghanistan (STFA) Joint Programme in the Northern Region supported integrated recovery, resilience, and essential service interventions across Balkh, Samangan, Sar-e-Pul, Faryab, and Jawzjan provinces. Implemented through the Delivering as One (DaO) framework by 12 Participating UN Organizations (PUNOs), the programme addressed the interconnected effects of poverty, displacement, climate vulnerability, declining livelihoods, reduced public service capacity, and restrictions affecting women and girls in a complex and evolving operational environment.

Through integrated interventions across four outputs, the programme combined support for essential services, livelihoods recovery, climate resilience, disaster preparedness, social cohesion, and community participation while prioritizing vulnerable populations, including returnees, internally displaced persons (IDPs), women-headed households, people who use drugs, and underserved rural communities. Across the implementation period, the Joint Programme achieved the following cumulative results across the Northern Region:



3,036,907

people, including 1,609,264 women and girls, 53%

reached through essential services, infrastructure, livelihoods, climate resilience, social cohesion, and protection interventions.



2,569,138

people, including 1,404,456 women and girls, 55%

benefited from improved access to essential services and community infrastructure, including healthcare, renewable energy systems, water systems, sanitation facilities, roads, irrigation infrastructure, educational facilities, and community-based service delivery mechanisms.



459,794 +

women, children, and vulnerable individuals

accessed reproductive, maternal, newborn, child, and adolescent health (RMNCAH), psychosocial support, referral, and community health services through Family Health Houses (FHHs) and related outreach interventions.



17,925

households, including 7,165 women-headed, 40%

received livelihoods, agricultural recovery, and economic resilience support through Cash-for-Work (CfW), Unconditional Cash Transfers (UCTs), agricultural support packages, livestock interventions, vocational training, micro, small, and medium enterprise (MSME) development, and home-based livelihood activities.



4,309 +

MSMEs, including 3,417 women-owned, 79% and entrepreneurs

received support through business development services, technical training, grants, salary support, market access initiatives, trade facilitation, and women's economic empowerment interventions.

290,616

people, including 142,222 women and girls, 49%

benefited from climate resilience, irrigation rehabilitation, climate-smart agriculture, renewable energy, water management, and disaster preparedness interventions designed to strengthen food security and reduce vulnerability to drought and environmental shocks.

42,600

women and girls

participated in literacy, livelihoods, psychosocial support, media, community consultation, and women-led civil society activities despite severe restrictions affecting women's mobility, employment, and public participation.

The programme significantly expanded access to essential services and strengthened local resilience through investments in healthcare, water systems, sanitation, renewable energy, education, livelihoods recovery, climate adaptation, and community infrastructure. FHHs emerged as a particularly effective integrated service-delivery model that combines healthcare, psychosocial support, renewable energy, and community engagement in remote and underserved areas. Livelihoods interventions supported household recovery through cash assistance, agricultural support, vocational training, enterprise development, and women-led economic activities, while climate resilience investments strengthened drought preparedness, water management, disaster risk reduction, and protection of farm-based livelihoods.

Social cohesion, community participation, and women's engagement were supported through participatory planning processes, psychosocial support, media initiatives, literacy programmes, community dialogue, and women-led civil society activities. Despite a highly constrained operating environment, adaptive implementation approaches helped preserve access to services and opportunities for women and vulnerable groups while strengthening local ownership, community resilience, and social cohesion.

An independent final evaluation (February 2026) found that the programme delivered relevant, community-aligned and effective interventions, contributing to measurable improvements in access to services, livelihood resilience, climate adaptation and social cohesion. The evaluation highlighted strong beneficiary satisfaction, positive perceptions of fairness and transparency, and the effectiveness of integrated community-based implementation approaches. It also identified sustainability of community infrastructure and long-term maintenance capacity as continuing challenges.

Implementation took place in a highly constrained environment characterized by restrictions affecting women's participation, economic volatility, displacement, climate-related shocks, and operational access challenges. In response, the Joint Programme adopted flexible and locally adapted delivery approaches, including community-based systems, home-based modalities, women-led outreach approaches, and strengthened engagement with local communities and authorities.

Together, these results demonstrate the value of integrated, area-based, and community-driven approaches that link immediate assistance to longer-term resilience and recovery. Through coordinated implementation under the DaO framework, the Joint Programme contributed to strengthened household resilience, improved access to services, expanded livelihood opportunities, climate adaptation, and more localized recovery pathways across the Northern Region of Afghanistan.

Purpose



An employee at a Women's Empowerment Centre supported by STFA in Balkh Province. © UN-Habitat

The STFA Joint Programme for the Northern Region was established in response to the humanitarian, economic, and institutional crisis that followed the political transition of August 2021. Implemented initially under the United Nations Transitional Engagement Framework (TEF) and subsequently aligned with the United Nations Strategic Framework for Afghanistan (UNSFA), the programme aimed to sustain essential services, support basic human needs, and strengthen community resilience in a rapidly deteriorating operating environment. The programme was implemented through the Area-Based Approach for Development Emergency Initiatives (ABADEI), providing an integrated framework linking humanitarian assistance with longer-term recovery and resilience-building.

Covering Balkh, Faryab, Jawzjan, Samangan, and Sar-e-Pul provinces, the programme sought to address the interconnected effects of poverty, displacement, economic contraction, declining public-service capacity, climate vulnerability, and restrictions affecting women and vulnerable populations. Emphasis was placed on women, returnees, IDPs, women-headed households, rural communities, and other groups facing heightened vulnerability.

The programme contributed to three UNSFA outcomes:

STFA Output Areas	Are Fully Aligned With	UNSFA Priority Areas
Output 1: Essential Services	→	**Priority 1:** Sustained Essential Services
Output 2: Improved livelihood **Output 3:** Disaster Risk Reduction	→	**Priority 2:** Economic Opportunities and Resilient Livelihoods
Output 4: Social Cohesion	→	**Priority 3:** Social Cohesion, Inclusion, Gender Equality, Human Rights, and Rule of Law

Through integrated interventions across healthcare, education, livelihoods, enterprise development, climate resilience, disaster preparedness, community participation, and social cohesion, the programme aimed to strengthen household resilience, support local recovery, and preserve critical community systems and social investments.

Programme implementation was guided by principles of inclusion, participation, gender equality, accountability, and “do no harm”. Community-based approaches, vulnerability-based targeting, and adaptive implementation modalities were used to maintain access and sustain delivery in a highly constrained operating environment. Through coordinated implementation under the DaO framework, the programme sought to support both immediate recovery needs and longer-term, locally led and resilient development pathways across the Northern Region of Afghanistan.

Results



A worker in Nawras Saffron supported by STFA in Balkh Province. © STFA/Mohammad Omar Kamal

Assessment of Programme Results

Outcome

The Northern Region Joint Programme contributed to all three relevant outcomes of the UNSFA through integrated interventions in essential services, livelihoods, climate resilience and social cohesion. The final independent evaluation found that the programme remained highly relevant to community priorities and local needs and that its community-based delivery model contributed to measurable improvements in service access, resilience, and social cohesion compared with non-beneficiary communities. The evaluation found that 69.5 percent of beneficiaries considered programme support aligned with their priority needs, while overall beneficiary satisfaction averaged 4.28 out of 5 and 92 percent of beneficiaries reported satisfaction ratings of 4 or 5. In addition, 89.2 percent of beneficiaries considered programme assistance processes fair and transparent, particularly where interventions were delivered through community-based structures and participatory planning mechanisms.

UNSFA Priority 1: Sustained Essential Services

The programme contributed to improved access to essential services through investments in healthcare, education, water systems, renewable energy, psychosocial support and community infrastructure. The independent evaluation found that beneficiaries experienced improved physical access to services, including shorter average travel times to health facilities (26.5 minutes compared with 35.8 minutes among comparison households) and fewer unsuccessful attempts to access essential services.

The Family Health House (FHH) model emerged as one of the programme's most effective interventions. By combining community-based healthcare, female health workers, integrated services, renewable energy, and community engagement, the model expanded access to healthcare, reduced travel burdens, and strengthened confidence in local services. The evaluation found that FHH coverage reached approximately 228 percent of planned targets, reflecting strong demand and the effectiveness of integrated community-based delivery approaches. Community structures such as health shuras and Village Literacy Committees further strengthened participation, accountability, and local ownership.[8]

UNSFA Priority 2: Economic Opportunities and Resilient Livelihoods

The programme contributed to improved livelihoods and household resilience through integrated support to agriculture, enterprise development, vocational skills, cash assistance, climate adaptation, and disaster preparedness. Beneficiary households reported stronger well-being and livelihood outcomes than comparison households, with 19.7 percent reporting improvements in income and well-being compared with 2.9 percent among non-beneficiaries.

Integrated interventions linking livelihoods, infrastructure, and climate adaptation strengthened household coping capacity and local resilience.

[8] Health shuras are community-based health committees that support local health service delivery through community mobilization, health promotion, oversight, problem-solving, and liaison between communities and health providers.

Women's economic participation emerged as a particularly important outcome, with evaluation findings indicating significantly higher levels of financial autonomy among beneficiary households than among comparison groups. Climate resilience interventions also generated measurable benefits: 73.5 percent of beneficiaries reported reduced climate-related losses, while 88.2 percent observed wider adoption of climate-smart agriculture and disaster-preparedness practices within their communities.

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

The programme contributed to stronger social cohesion, participation, and inclusion through community-based planning, psychosocial support, women's participation initiatives, media engagement, and community dialogue. Community structures enabled local participation in recovery efforts and strengthened community ownership.

The evaluation found positive changes in community relations and resilience, with 93.4 percent of beneficiaries reporting improved relationships within their communities and 86.9 percent reporting greater confidence in resolving disagreements peacefully. Community institutions also played an important role in sustaining programme delivery and supporting access for women and vulnerable groups under restrictive conditions. Women's participation in local decision-making and community planning increased where community-based and women-led approaches were adopted.

Overall outcome-level contribution

The evaluation concluded that the programme's integrated and area-based approach strengthened linkages between service delivery, livelihoods recovery, climate adaptation, and community resilience, contributing to more sustainable and locally grounded recovery outcomes. Evaluation findings also indicated that beneficiary households consistently reported stronger outcomes than comparison communities across multiple dimensions of service access, resilience, and wellbeing. Technical performance was also strong, with 92 percent of assessed infrastructure assets rated as good or very high quality.

At the same time, the evaluation identified continuing sustainability challenges, including limited community capacity to finance and maintain infrastructure, procurement and approval delays, and persistent barriers affecting some vulnerable groups. Although infrastructure quality remained high, only 1 percent of surveyed households considered their communities to possess both the technical and financial capacity required to maintain assets without continued external support. Nevertheless, the evaluation confirmed that coordinated, area-based and locally led approaches can deliver meaningful recovery and resilience gains even in highly constrained operating environments.

Output-level Results

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.

Output 1 benefitted

Number of Beneficiaries

2,569,138

Women and Girls

1,404,456 (55%)

The STFA Joint Programme in the Northern Region improved access to essential services and resilient community infrastructure across Balkh, Faryab, Jawzjan, Samangan, and Sar-e-Pul provinces. Interventions focused on healthcare, education, water supply, sanitation, renewable energy, psychosocial support, community infrastructure and institutional strengthening, with particular emphasis on women, children, returnees, IDPs, women-headed households and other vulnerable groups. Together, these interventions strengthened service delivery, community-level systems and resilience in remote, underserved and displacement-affected communities. The independent evaluation identified healthcare, infrastructure and community-service interventions among the strongest-performing components of the programme, highlighting their contribution to improved access, resilience and community wellbeing.

Health services and community health infrastructure

Investments in health infrastructure, community-based healthcare, reproductive, maternal, newborn, child and adolescent health (RMNCAH) services, psychosocial support, renewable energy and outreach services expanded access to essential healthcare across remote and underserved communities. Family Health Houses (FHHs) formed a central component of Output 1 and represented one of the programme's most important integrated service-delivery models.

During implementation, 22 new FHHs were constructed across Balkh, Samangan and Faryab provinces, while support was also provided to 61 FHHs, including 32 existing facilities and 29 temporary facilities.

The model combined healthcare services, female health workers, renewable energy, water access and community engagement to expand access to primary healthcare and RMNCAH services in hard-to-reach communities. All completed facilities remained operational during the reporting period, with 13 FHHs connected to climate-adaptive water systems and all facilities benefiting from reliable water access and complementary solar-energy support.

Through the FHH network and associated healthcare interventions, 415,896 beneficiaries, including 341,850 women and girls, accessed essential healthcare services. During implementation, 18,110 women received antenatal care, 11,408 women received postnatal care, and 4,142 deliveries were attended by skilled birth attendants. A total of 187,794 beneficiaries accessed outpatient consultations, while 194,442 individuals participated in health education sessions.

The programme also strengthened health workforce capacity through recruitment, training, and deployment of midwives, while a Community Midwifery Education (CME) school was established in Balkh to support longer-term sustainability of the health workforce and expand educational opportunities for women. Essential medicines and health kits were procured and distributed to support continuity and quality of care.

Psychosocial support was integrated into healthcare services through Psychosocial Support Corners established in six FHH in Faryab province and deployment of dedicated counsellors. During the implementation period, 15,688 women and girls received psychosocial support services, while training in Psychological First Aid strengthened local service capacity.

Preventive health and outreach interventions further expanded access to healthcare. Eighteen Mobile Health Teams comprising 90 staff members, including 36 women, delivered healthcare services to 145,062 beneficiaries, of whom 104,941 were women and girls. Services included outpatient consultations, psychosocial support, vaccinations, antenatal and postnatal care, family planning, and health education. Additional investments included the installation of 291 handwashing stations benefiting an estimated 74,560 individuals, awareness-raising on COVID-19 prevention reaching 1,371 individuals, and the distribution of 4,281 COVID-19 kits.

Renewable-energy investments strengthened the continuity and reliability of health and community services. Solar systems were installed in 164 structures, including schools, mosques, and healthcare facilities, benefiting an estimated 270,240 individuals. Twenty-two FHHs were equipped with solar power systems, while four additional health facilities received solar-energy support. A further 892 clean-energy kits benefited 12,444 individuals, including 6,982 women and girls, thereby improving access to reliable energy and reducing dependence on firewood.



A midwife carrying a child at the Community Midwifery Education School supported by STFA in Balkh Province. © UNDP/Mohammad Haroon Hamdard

Drug use prevention, treatment and psychosocial support

Integrated drug-use prevention, treatment, rehabilitation, and harm-reduction services strengthened access to healthcare, psychosocial support, and recovery pathways for people affected by drug use in Balkh province through support to a Drop-In Centre and a 50-bed women-only Drug Treatment Centre.

During the implementation period, 20,007 individuals, including 4,983 women, benefited from integrated services. These included prevention services for 18,249 individuals, psychosocial counselling and harm-reduction support for 10,417 beneficiaries, and primary healthcare services for 4,406 individuals. Local service capacity was strengthened through training for 145 healthcare and psychosocial service providers, while youth-led prevention initiatives engaged 180 young people.

A total of 153 women successfully completed residential treatment and reintegration support. In addition, 1,750 hygiene kits were distributed to homeless people who use drugs in Mazar-e-Sharif, contributing to improved dignity, health and wellbeing among vulnerable populations.



Water, sanitation and resilient community infrastructure

Investments in water supply, sanitation, irrigation, renewable energy and community infrastructure improved access to essential services, strengthened resilience and supported recovery across rural, urban and displacement-affected communities throughout the Northern Region.

A total of 311 infrastructure projects were constructed or rehabilitated, including 82 canals, 24 roads, 51 Community-Based Education classrooms, 53 flood protection walls, 33 culverts, 33 latrines, 25 water infrastructure projects and 10 health facilities. Collectively, these interventions benefited more than 1.09 million people, approximately half of them women and girls, through improved access to water, sanitation, education, healthcare, irrigation and transport infrastructure.

Agricultural productivity and rural livelihoods were strengthened through rehabilitation of 100 community-level irrigation structures, providing irrigation water to approximately 16,975 hectares of agricultural land. Approximately 25,000 community members gained access to repaired or rehabilitated irrigation infrastructure, while 10,180 smallholder farming and herding households, equivalent to approximately 82,394 people, including 41,383 women and girls, received agricultural and livestock assets, inputs and equipment to improve productivity and resilience.

Water supply and sanitation interventions expanded access to safe drinking water and improved public health conditions. Eight water supply systems and two water-network extension projects benefited approximately 34,380 people, while sanitation facilities constructed or rehabilitated in schools, markets and commercial areas improved access to sanitation services for approximately 45,995 people.

Community-based environmental management activities generated 17,400 workdays for 1,160 workers, including IDPs, persons with disabilities and youth, through canal cleaning, waste management, road sweeping and tree planting. An additional 36 waste collection points improved municipal waste management and public health conditions for an estimated 216,000 people.

Women's participation and community engagement were supported through construction and equipping of two Women Empowerment Centres benefiting more than 40,000 women and girls. Renewable-energy interventions further strengthened resilience through provision of solar-energy systems to 700 households, including 280 women-headed households, improving access to reliable electricity in underserved communities.



Literacy, education and vocational infrastructure

Literacy, education and community-learning interventions expanded opportunities for women, adolescent girls and vulnerable populations while strengthening community-based learning systems and evidence-informed education planning across the Northern Region.

A total of 6,508 learners aged 15 and above, including 4,829 girls, completed nine-month literacy courses through 433 literacy classes across Balkh, Faryab, Jawzjan, Samangan and Sar-e-Pul provinces.

Learners received learning materials and classroom support, while facilitators benefited from pre-service and in-service training. To strengthen community ownership and sustainability, 419 Village Literacy Committees comprising 2,095 members were established to support local monitoring, advocacy and community engagement. Public awareness campaigns promoting literacy were conducted through billboards, television broadcasts and radio messaging across multiple provinces.

The Youth and Adult Literacy and Basic Education (YALBE) programme contributed to improved literacy, numeracy and life skills among learners, supporting greater social participation and improved access to vocational training and livelihood opportunities for women and adolescent girls previously excluded from education.

Educational infrastructure was strengthened through construction of five classroom blocks equipped with solar-energy systems, water supply systems and school furniture, benefiting approximately 400 learners in underserved communities.

The programme also supported evidence-based education planning and policy dialogue through research and assessments relating to higher education, teacher competencies, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), and restrictions affecting women's education. Initial studies catalysed eight additional assessments funded through other sources, contributing to improved understanding of education-sector needs and informing future programming and policy dialogue.



Psychosocial support, displacement response and protection services

Integrated psychosocial support, protection and displacement-response interventions strengthened access to counselling, information, referrals, legal assistance and community-based support services for returnees, IDPs, host communities and other vulnerable groups.

Psychosocial support services reached 3,118 individuals, including 1,557 women, through group and individual counselling delivered by mobile teams and trained counsellors, contributing to improved wellbeing and resilience among vulnerable populations.

Community Resource Centres (CRCs) in Balkh and Sar-e-Pul provided integrated support services for displacement-affected communities. During implementation, CRC activities reached 6,174 individuals through awareness-raising, legal assistance, referrals, multipurpose cash assistance and community-led initiatives. A total of 4,549 individuals participated in awareness sessions, while 3,137 individuals benefited from Information, Counselling and Legal Assistance (ICLA) services. In addition, 126 referrals were made for specialized support services.

Community-led solutions and Cash-for-Work (CfW) activities coordinated through the CRCs benefited 6,310 individuals across 12 communities, contributing to local recovery, community participation and resilience. The CRCs also strengthened local coordination capacities through training and outreach activities before being handed over to communities to promote local ownership and sustainability.

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.

Output 2 benefitted

Number of Households	Women-led Households	Number of MSMEs	Women-led MSMEs
17,925	7,165 (40%)	4,309	3,417 (79%)

The STFA Joint Programme in the Northern Region supported livelihoods recovery, employment generation, micro, small and medium enterprise (MSME) development, women's economic empowerment, agricultural production, vocational-skills development and local economic resilience across the Northern Region.

Activities combined cash assistance, business development, agricultural support, market access and entrepreneurship promotion, with particular attention to women, returnees, IDPs, vulnerable households and communities affected by economic contraction, displacement and climate-related shocks. Together, these interventions strengthened household resilience, income generation and local economic recovery. The independent evaluation found that beneficiary households reported stronger livelihood outcomes and greater resilience than comparison communities, highlighting positive results in women's economic participation through home-based livelihood activities and women-led enterprises.

Cash assistance and employment generation

Across the Joint Programme, cash assistance and CfW interventions provided immediate income support to vulnerable households while contributing to rehabilitation of productive assets, community infrastructure and local economic recovery.

A total of 1,000 households, equivalent to approximately 6,791 people including 3,861 women and girls, received Unconditional Cash Transfers (UCTs), of which 676 were women-headed households. Additional cash assistance averaging approximately US$140 reached 6,832 households, comprising an estimated 42,123 individuals including 21,705 women and girls, while other cash-based interventions reached 7,542 households comprising approximately 52,794 individuals through support for basic needs, persons with specific needs, shelter assistance, reintegration grants and winterization assistance. These interventions helped vulnerable households meet immediate needs, support reintegration and reduce reliance on negative coping mechanisms. Some beneficiaries, particularly women, also invested part of the assistance in small-scale livelihood activities.

Cash for Work activities formed a major component of livelihoods recovery efforts. Income-generating opportunities linked to community asset rehabilitation and agricultural infrastructure support reached 10,000 households, equivalent to approximately 74,283 people including 37,146 women and girls. Additional CfW interventions generated temporary employment for 36,295 labourers, including 637 women, and created 413,727 workdays through construction and rehabilitation of canals, roads, flood protection structures and other community infrastructure. Further canal and ditch cleaning activities generated 58,110 workdays for 745 workers while contributing to improved irrigation systems and flood resilience. Women's participation in labour-intensive activities remained constrained, although women participated more actively in home-based and community-level livelihood initiatives.

Agricultural livelihoods and income-generating activities

Agricultural and home-based livelihood interventions strengthened food security, diversified income sources and improved resilience among vulnerable households.

Poultry production packages reached 1,250 households, including 1,235 women-headed households, while home gardening support reached 3,500 households, including 3,198 women-headed households. Additional interventions included beekeeping packages for 250 households, mushroom cultivation support for 250 households, micro solar dryer packages for 375 households and greenhouse packages for 150 households. These activities contributed to improved household nutrition, income generation and women's economic participation through small-scale and home-based productive activities suited to restrictive operating environments.

Livelihoods support also reached 3,725 individuals, including 1,540 women, through bakeries, livestock, poultry production and small-business activities. Beneficiaries received productive assets, start-up kits, business materials and technical support designed to strengthen self-reliance and support durable solutions for returnees, IDPs and host communities.

Agricultural productivity and resilience were further strengthened through construction of eight stone masonry irrigation canals totalling 3,865 metres. The canals benefited more than 2,000 farming households and improved irrigation across more than 2,000 hectares of farmland by improving water management, reducing water losses and supporting agricultural production. Community members were encouraged to establish local maintenance contributions linked to agricultural income to support long-term sustainability.

MSME development, entrepreneurship and market recovery

Support to micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs), entrepreneurs and local market systems contributed to employment retention, enterprise development, market recovery and women's economic empowerment across the Northern Region.

A total of 3,158 MSMEs, including 2,959 women-led enterprises, received technical and financial support through business development training and small grants linked to identified business needs. An additional 25 women-led businesses received e-commerce training and support to access online marketplaces through collaboration with the Afghan Women Chamber of Commerce and Industry (AWCCI), expanding digital business and market opportunities.

Targeted interventions strengthened private-sector resilience, preserved jobs and supported market-based recovery through business development services, financial support and enterprise capacity-building. Women's economic empowerment was further strengthened through support to 85 women-owned businesses, benefiting approximately 861 women through income generation and employment opportunities. Business and marketing training, financial literacy, mentoring and digital-business support were provided across sectors including tailoring, handicrafts, jewellery, food processing and dairy production. Businesses subsequently received asset support typically valued between $800 and $1,000, including equipment, raw materials and refurbishment support.

Support was also provided to sustain two women-only markets in Balkh that were at risk of closure due to declining economic conditions and restrictions affecting women's participation. Improvements to market facilities, solar-energy systems and water services helped preserve important economic, social and psychosocial spaces for women entrepreneurs.

Trade and business capacities were further strengthened through 39 rounds of training delivered between 2022 and 2025. A total of 662 MSME employees, including 307 women, from 594 MSMEs received training on business development, export promotion, trade management, entrepreneurship and gender-responsive business approaches.

Pre- and post-training assessments demonstrated substantial improvements in business knowledge, with average test scores increasing from 7.15 to 16.14 out of 20. Beneficiaries reported applying the training to improve business planning, marketing, financial management and export readiness.



Women receive beekeeping packages with STFA support in Balkh Province. © FAO

Vocational skills development and women's economic participation

Vocational training and skills-development activities contributed to improved employability, women's economic participation and longer-term livelihood resilience.

Vocational training programmes in tailoring, mobile phone repair, carpet weaving, bead sewing and computer skills reached women, youth and other vulnerable groups through delivery modalities adapted to restrictions affecting female participation. Tailoring and mobile phone-repair training reached 340 beneficiaries, including 100 women, while additional tailoring training reached 102 women and was complemented by stipends and start-up kits, enabling 61 women to establish home-based businesses. Carpet weaving and bead sewing training reached 70 women, and computer training was provided to 120 young people, including 90 women.

Across Output 2, interventions demonstrated the importance of combining immediate income support with longer-term livelihoods recovery, enterprise development and economic resilience. Cash assistance, agricultural support, MSME development, vocational training and women-led enterprise initiatives contributed to improved household stability, strengthened food security, expanded economic participation and preservation of local economic systems during a period of severe economic contraction and operational uncertainty.

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.

Output 3 benefitted

Number of Beneficiaries

290,616

Women and Girls

142,222 (49%)

The STFA Joint Programme in the Northern Region strengthened climate resilience, disaster preparedness, water management and protection of farm-based livelihoods across Balkh, Faryab, Jawzjan, Samangan and Sar-e-Pul provinces. Activities focused on drought preparedness, climate-smart agriculture, land rehabilitation, irrigation infrastructure, traditional water systems, renewable energy and community-based disaster risk reduction in drought-affected and environmentally vulnerable communities. Together, these interventions strengthened access to water, improved agricultural productivity and enhanced resilience to climate-related shocks. The independent evaluation identified climate-resilience, water-management and livelihood-protection interventions among the strongest-performing components of the Joint Programme, with beneficiary households reporting lower climate-related losses and stronger adaptive capacity than comparison communities.

Drought preparedness, climate-smart agriculture, environmental restoration and community-based disaster resilience

Integrated climate-resilience interventions strengthened local adaptive capacity, protected agricultural livelihoods and improved preparedness for drought, environmental degradation and climate-related shocks through drought early warning systems, climate-smart agriculture, environmental restoration, land rehabilitation and community-based disaster risk reduction.

Community-Based Drought Early Warning Systems (CB-DEWS) were established across 16 districts in Balkh, Faryab, Jawzjan, Samangan and Sar-e-Pul provinces, strengthening community-level drought monitoring, preparedness planning and response mechanisms.

Large-scale training programmes further strengthened resilience and adaptive capacity: approximately 25,000 smallholder farmers and herders, including 12,250 women, received training on early warning systems, anticipatory mitigation measures and preparedness mechanisms, while a further 13,000 farmers and herders, including 5,537 women, received training in climate-smart agriculture and climate-smart livestock management.

Environmental restoration and natural resource management activities strengthened landscape resilience and sustainable stewardship of shared resources. Two community-level approaches to natural resource management were introduced, while approximately 17,176 hectares of land were rehabilitated and regenerated to improve resilience to environmental stress and climate-related shocks.

Agricultural resilience was further supported by providing agro-kits and climate-smart agriculture training to 5,030 farmers, including 2,519 women. An additional 100 hectares of degraded land were rehabilitated, benefiting approximately 25,693 people, including 14,280 women, while generating temporary employment for 609 labourers through CfW activities.

Community-level disaster preparedness was strengthened through disaster risk reduction training reaching 3,409 individuals, including 1,894 women. In addition, 75 Disaster Management Committees comprising 1,070 members, including 258 women, were established to support local risk mapping, preparedness planning, early warning, search and rescue, first aid and emergency coordination.
Integrated investments in water systems, irrigation infrastructure, climate-adaptive technologies, and traditional water-management approaches strengthened water security, agricultural productivity, and resilience to climate-related shocks across vulnerable communities in the Northern Region.

Traditional water-management systems were preserved and rehabilitated by restoring nine kandas in Balkh and Samangan provinces.[9] Implemented through CfW modalities, the interventions benefited approximately 6,200 people, half of them women, generated 6,820 workdays, and engaged 291 local labourers. Improved access to water for irrigation and domestic use supported agricultural productivity, livestock activities, and local economic recovery while preserving traditional water-management knowledge.

Climate-adaptive water supply systems were established at 14 sites, including 13 FHH communities and 1 additional community, benefiting approximately 66,780 people, including 31,506 women. Eight sites adopted indigenous kanda systems using underground reservoirs, while five communities were supported through spring-fed water systems. These interventions improved water availability, strengthened hygiene and sanitation conditions and enhanced the long-term sustainability of health and community services in remote areas.

Agricultural water management was further strengthened through construction of eight stone masonry irrigation canals totalling 3,865 metres. The canals benefited more than 2,000 farming households and improved irrigation across more than 2,000 hectares of agricultural land, contributing to increased agricultural productivity and improved water management.

[9] Kandas are traditional community-managed water-harvesting systems, typically consisting of underground reservoirs that collect and store rainwater and snowmelt for domestic use, livestock and irrigation in water-scarce areas.

Water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) interventions further strengthened climate-resilient access to safe water supplies and improved living conditions in vulnerable communities. Across the Northern Region, 20 WASH projects benefited approximately 159,312 individuals, including 80,975 women, through construction and rehabilitation of deep wells, solar-powered water systems, water reservoirs, pipelines, latrines and water-storage facilities. Many interventions incorporated renewable-energy and climate-smart technologies, while construction and rehabilitation of 320 latrines in Samangan province contributed to improved sanitation and public health outcomes.

Renewable energy and sustainable recovery approaches

Renewable-energy technologies contributed to climate resilience, sustainable recovery and improved economic productivity by reducing dependence on unreliable energy sources and supporting more resilient local economic systems.

Private-sector support interventions incorporated renewable-energy technologies through provision of solar solutions to 24 enterprises. The technologies helped reduce operational costs, mitigate unreliable electricity supply and extend productive working hours, strengthening enterprise resilience and supporting more sustainable local economic systems.

Across Output 3, integrated investments in climate resilience, disaster preparedness, water management, climate-smart agriculture and renewable energy strengthened local adaptive capacity and helped protect rural livelihoods from environmental shocks. The combination of traditional knowledge, locally adapted technologies and community participation contributed to more resilient and sustainable management of natural resources and productive assets.



Children in front of a solar-powered water supply network constructed with STFA support in Balkh Province. © UNDP/Mohammad Haroon Hamdard

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.

Output 4 benefitted

Women and Girls

42,600

The STFA Joint Programme supported social cohesion, community participation, women's voice, psychosocial wellbeing, access to information and community resilience across the Northern Region. Women and girls participated in literacy, livelihoods, psychosocial support, media, community consultation and women-led civil society activities despite severe restrictions affecting women's mobility, employment and public participation. Interventions included community engagement, conflict resolution, media support, awareness-raising, civil society strengthening and evidence-generation initiatives designed to strengthen participation, trust and resilience in a highly restrictive operating environment. Together, these interventions strengthened social cohesion, community participation and inclusion while helping preserve opportunities for engagement by women and vulnerable groups. The independent evaluation found that community-based implementation approaches strengthened local ownership, participation and trust, while highlighting the important role of local institutions, community structures and women-led initiatives in sustaining engagement and preserving access for women and vulnerable groups.

Community participation, social cohesion and local dialogue

Community participation, social cohesion and local dialogue initiatives strengthened local ownership, peaceful coexistence and inclusive decision-making across target communities through participatory planning, dialogue, conflict-resolution training, awareness-raising and community-led activities.

Community Action Planning (CAP) processes were conducted in six target communities between 2022 and 2023, engaging approximately 346 participants, including women and representatives of different ethnic and social groups. The processes informed subsequent livelihoods, MSME and community-development interventions.

Social cohesion activities promoted tolerance, dispute resolution and community dialogue. Connection, Acceptance and Respect (CAR) sessions reached 480 participants, equally divided between women and men, across Balkh, Jawzjan, Samangan and Sar-e-Pul provinces. Seven community-led social cohesion events, including sports, cultural and community activities, engaged approximately 280 participants, while dispute-resolution training reached 60 participants, equally divided between women and men.

A subsequent phase focused on strengthening women's participation and local leadership. Thirty women received conflict-resolution training and implemented locally led social cohesion initiatives through small grants. Resulting community events attracted approximately 980 participants across multiple districts, with endline monitoring indicating improvements in participation, inclusion and social interaction, including greater engagement of vulnerable groups.

Additional awareness-raising and community-capacity-building activities strengthened human rights awareness, conflict resolution and peaceful coexistence. Social cohesion workshops reached 4,501 participants, including 1,094 women, while workshops addressing harmful traditional practices reached 2,036 participants, including 1,069 women.

Community participation and local ownership were further strengthened through engagement of 108 community structures in Mazar-e-Sharif, which participated in identification, prioritization and implementation of community projects using participatory planning approaches.

Psychosocial support and community wellbeing

Psychosocial support and community wellbeing interventions strengthened resilience, coping capacities, and social support networks among women, displacement-affected populations, and other vulnerable groups through counselling, awareness-raising, referrals, capacity-building, and community-based support services.

Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) interventions reached 2,336 beneficiaries through individual and group counselling, while psychoeducation and awareness-raising sessions reached 7,325 individuals, including more than 5,000 women. Referrals for specialized mental health services were provided to 400 individuals experiencing severe mental health conditions.

To strengthen local capacity, 30 MHPSS counsellors, NGO staff, and community members received training in Psychological First Aid, basic counselling skills, and peer-support methodologies. In addition, 25 vulnerable beneficiaries received livelihood toolkits linked to income-generating activities, supporting psychosocial recovery alongside economic resilience.

Additional psychosocial awareness sessions reached 334 women through collaboration with female psychosocial counsellors, paralegals, and women's business networks. Sessions addressed psychosocial first aid, self-care, women's rights, business rights, family conflict management, and legal awareness, thereby strengthening psychosocial resilience and awareness among women in restrictive operating environments.

Media resilience, access to information and public awareness

Media support, public awareness, and community-outreach interventions strengthened access to information, promoted informed decision-making, and supported accountability and community engagement across the Northern Region.

A total of 100 media reports and content pieces, together with 20 roundtable discussions, were produced and broadcast across Jawzjan, Sar-e-Pul, Samangan, Balkh and Faryab provinces. Content focused on health, education, natural disasters and other issues relevant to local communities. Support also helped sustain local media capacity through recruitment of 12 journalists, including nine women, contributing to continued access to factual and socially relevant information under highly constrained conditions.

Community outreach and accountability mechanisms further strengthened public awareness and understanding of assistance processes. Through billboards, leaflets and toll-free hotlines, approximately 10,000 individuals were reached with information relating to programme activities, beneficiary entitlements and prevention of fraud and corruption, contributing to greater transparency and accountability.

Women's participation, civil society engagement and evidence generation

Women's participation, civil society engagement, and evidence-generation initiatives strengthened understanding of the challenges facing women and girls while supporting locally led advocacy, inclusion, and continued engagement of women leaders and civil society organizations in a highly restrictive operating environment.

Approximately 1,921 women and girls participated in consultations and surveys documenting the effects of restrictions affecting women and girls in Balkh and Jawzjan provinces. Findings informed evidence-based advocacy and national and international policy dialogue. The programme also supported the production and dissemination of three research publications based on evidence generated through these activities.

Targeted initiatives promoted disability rights and inclusion of women living with disabilities. Through training sessions and awareness campaigns, approximately 2,512 individuals, including women, local leaders, service providers, and representatives of women's and disability organizations, participated in activities to strengthen awareness and local commitment to disability inclusion.

Periodic consultations and tele-surveys involving women leaders, activists, and community members were conducted across five northern provinces. Approximately 308 women participated directly in consultations, while tele-surveys reached 1,553 individuals. Findings contributed to broader advocacy and awareness-raising efforts relating to women's participation, protection, and social inclusion.

Support was also provided to 15 women media workers in Mazar-e-Sharif through digital-security training focused on cyber threats, secure communications, and online safety, strengthening their capacity to continue media and advocacy activities.

Across Output 4, interventions demonstrated the importance of locally led engagement, media resilience, community dialogue, and evidence generation in strengthening social cohesion and inclusion. Community participation mechanisms, women-led initiatives, and advocacy activities helped sustain social connections, strengthen community trust, and preserve civic and women-led spaces despite growing operational and societal constraints.



STFA staff meet with communities while on mission in Balkh Province. © UNDP/Mohammad Haroon Hamdard

Qualitative Assessment

A midwifery student in a Community Midwifery Education School supported by STFA in Balkh Province. © UNDP/Mohammad Haroon Hamdard

The STFA Joint Programme in the Northern Region contributed to resilience, livelihoods recovery, access to essential services, and community stability in a highly constrained operating environment. Through integrated interventions implemented under the DaO framework, the programme addressed interconnected challenges relating to poverty, displacement, declining public services, economic instability, climate vulnerability, and restrictions affecting women and vulnerable populations. Despite persistent constraints, the programme demonstrated the value of adaptive, locally led and integrated approaches in supporting recovery and resilience.

Coherence under the DaO framework was a significant enabling factor throughout implementation. The evaluation identified this integrated and multi-sectoral design as a key factor underpinning programme effectiveness and relevance. Complementary technical expertise, operational reach, and sectoral mandates were combined to deliver integrated interventions across healthcare, infrastructure, livelihoods, climate resilience, and women's economic participation, strengthening programme coherence and reducing duplication. Coordinated implementation reinforced linkages between service delivery, local economic recovery, and community resilience, contributing to more sustainable and locally grounded outcomes. The evaluation found that these linkages increased the relevance and effectiveness of interventions by addressing multiple dimensions of vulnerability simultaneously rather than through isolated sectoral responses.

Community participation and locally led implementation were important strengths across all outputs. Community structures, local NGOs, implementing partners, chambers of commerce, health shuras and community leaders contributed to beneficiary targeting, planning, implementation and monitoring, strengthening local ownership, accountability and social acceptance. These mechanisms also helped preserve access for women and vulnerable populations under restrictive conditions.

The programme maintained strong alignment with the UN's principled approach, including commitments to neutrality, impartiality, inclusion, accountability, and "do no harm". Participating agencies applied vulnerability-based targeting and inclusive implementation approaches to ensure that support reached women, returnees, IDPs, women-headed households, persons with disabilities, and underserved rural communities. Community feedback and accountability mechanisms were incorporated across multiple sectors to strengthen responsiveness, transparency, and programme quality.

Livelihoods interventions contributed to household resilience and income generation through agricultural support, MSME development, vocational training, CfW, cash assistance, and support for women-led enterprises. Beneficiary feedback indicated improvements in food consumption, agricultural productivity, and adoption of productive livelihood practices, while women-led businesses, women-only markets, and home-based livelihood activities helped sustain women's economic participation under increasingly restrictive conditions.

The programme also strengthened climate resilience through climate-smart agriculture, rehabilitation of irrigation and traditional water-management systems, renewable-energy solutions, and community-based disaster risk reduction. Several interventions demonstrated the value of combining indigenous knowledge, climate-responsive design, and community-managed systems within resilience programming.

Health, psychosocial support, and protection interventions improved access to integrated and culturally appropriate services in remote and underserved communities.

The FHH model proved particularly effective in extending healthcare access while supporting continuity of care for women and children. Integrated psychosocial support, reproductive health, referral, and rehabilitation services further strengthened community wellbeing, resilience, and inclusion.

Support for women's participation and economic empowerment represented an important achievement in a highly restrictive environment. Adaptive modalities, including women-only spaces, home-based activities, female outreach workers, and localized implementation arrangements, enabled continued participation in literacy, livelihoods, MSME development, psychosocial support, and civil society initiatives. The evaluation highlighted positive changes in social cohesion, community trust, and local problem-solving capacity, underscoring the contribution of inclusive, community-based approaches to resilience and recovery.

Adaptive programming and operational flexibility were critical to sustaining implementation. Localized delivery approaches, flexible technical solutions, and sustained engagement with communities and relevant authorities enabled continued implementation despite restrictions affecting women's participation, environmental shocks, and operational constraints. Partnerships with local NGOs, women-led organizations, chambers of commerce, and community leaders further strengthened outreach, contextual understanding, and operational acceptance.

Overall, the STFA Joint Programme contributed to important gains in resilience, inclusion, livelihoods recovery, and access to essential services across the Northern Region. Through coordinated implementation under the DaO framework, it strengthened local capacities, supported vulnerable households, and demonstrated the continued relevance of integrated, community-based, and principled approaches in Afghanistan's evolving operational context. Continued investment in adaptive programming, women's participation, local economic resilience, climate adaptation, and area-based recovery approaches will be important to sustaining and expanding these gains.



Mobina Seddiqi, supported through the STFA-funded cash for work intervention in Balkh Province. © ILO

Evaluation, Best Practices and Lessons Learned

Monisa sews a cloth in her home after attending the Enterprises Development Training in Balkh Province. © ILO

Evaluation

The independent evaluation (February 2026) validated the relevance, effectiveness, and adaptive nature of programme implementation in the Northern Region. The evaluation found that interventions were strongly aligned with community priorities and local needs through participatory delivery mechanisms, including CAP processes, Village Literacy Committees, and health shuras. Beneficiary perceptions of fairness, transparency, and local ownership were consistently positive, reinforcing the value of participatory delivery mechanisms and community-based implementation approaches. The evaluation concluded that the programme's integrated and area-based approach contributed to measurable improvements in access to services, resilience, and social cohesion while helping vulnerable households manage the effects of economic instability, displacement, and climate-related shocks.

The evaluation identified the Family Health House (FHH) model as one of the programme's most effective interventions, combining community-based healthcare, female health workers, integrated RMNCAH services, solarization, and community engagement to improve access to essential healthcare in remote areas. The evaluation found that the model improved physical access to healthcare services while strengthening continuity of care and community confidence in local service provision. The evaluation also highlighted positive outcomes associated with women's economic participation, home-based livelihoods, literacy and vocational training activities, including increased financial autonomy among women beneficiaries and stronger participation in household and community decision-making.

At the same time, the evaluation identified several challenges affecting longer-term sustainability and programme efficiency. Despite these constraints, it highlighted important sustainability enablers, including strong community ownership, active community structures, and broad acceptance of community-based service-delivery models. However, concerns remained regarding long-term operation and maintenance capacity, particularly the limited technical and financial resources available within communities to sustain assets without continued external support. The evaluation also highlighted procurement and approval delays, uneven sequencing between some interventions, and continuing access barriers affecting women-headed households and persons with disabilities. Nevertheless, it concluded that integrated, community-based, and adaptive approaches remained highly relevant and effective in supporting resilience and recovery under restrictive operating conditions.

Challenges

1 Implementation of the STFA Joint Programme in the Northern Region took place in a highly constrained operating environment characterized by restrictions imposed by relevant authorities, economic instability, climate-related shocks, administrative delays, infrastructure limitations, and reduced institutional capacity. Despite these challenges, implementation modalities and partnerships were continuously adapted to sustain programme delivery and maintain access to vulnerable communities.

2 Restrictions affecting women's participation, mobility, education, and employment remained among the most significant challenges throughout implementation. Decrees affecting women's participation in NGO activities, vocational training, and public gatherings delayed or constrained activities across several sectors, including livelihoods, literacy, social cohesion, and community outreach. In response, many activities were redesigned or delivered through home-based and other locally acceptable modalities.

3 Administrative and coordination challenges also affected implementation. Delays in approvals, Memoranda of Understanding, beneficiary profiling, site selection and technical validation slowed initiation of some activities, particularly in literacy, health and infrastructure programming. Sustained engagement with relevant authorities, line departments, local leaders, chambers of commerce and community structures proved essential in maintaining operational continuity and preserving participation of women and vulnerable groups.

4 Infrastructure implementation was further affected by harsh winters, mountainous terrain, poor road conditions, earthquakes, remote locations, and adverse weather. Inflation, exchange-rate fluctuations, liquidity shortages, and rising transport costs added pressure to budgets and procurement processes. Some infrastructure activities also required redesign following technical assessments, particularly regarding groundwater availability and water-system design.

5 Economic volatility and declining market conditions created additional challenges for livelihoods and MSME interventions. Limited numbers of women-owned businesses in some locations constrained participation, while agencies noted that short-term cash assistance alone had limited long-term impact unless linked to broader livelihoods, enterprise-development, and market-support interventions.

6 Operational access and communications disruptions further complicated implementation. Internet and mobile network outages affected reporting and coordination, while restrictions on GPS use necessitated alternative monitoring and reporting approaches, including increased reliance on community-based coordination mechanisms.

Lessons Learned & Best Practices



1 Adaptive programming and operational flexibility emerged as central lessons across the programme. Home-based training, women-led outreach, flexible participation arrangements, remote working modalities, and community-based delivery mechanisms enabled continued implementation despite a shrinking operational space. In several cases, activities were redesigned to align more closely with local socio-cultural and environmental conditions, strengthening acceptance and sustainability.



2 The programme also demonstrated the importance of strong community engagement and locally led implementation. Coordination with community elders, Community Development Councils, local NGOs, women-led organizations, and local authorities helped maintain access, resolve implementation challenges, and strengthen accountability. Participatory planning, community consultation, and local ownership approaches enhanced acceptance, resilience, and sustainability across multiple sectors.



3 Implementation experience highlighted the value of early technical assessments, context-sensitive programme design, and integration of climate resilience within infrastructure and livelihoods interventions. Locally adapted approaches, including the use of indigenous water-management systems and climate-responsive technologies, often proved more sustainable and effective than conventional models.



4 The programme further demonstrated that women's participation can be sustained, although often in constrained forms, through adaptive and locally appropriate approaches, including women-led outreach, home-based economic activities, flexible scheduling, and dedicated consultation mechanisms. However, maintaining meaningful participation required continuous negotiation, adaptive management, and sustained community engagement.



5 Overall, implementation experience in the Northern Region underscored the importance of adaptive management, integrated programming, strong coordination, and locally led approaches in fragile and restrictive contexts. Lessons learned highlighted the value of early stakeholder engagement, flexible planning, and resilience-based programming that combines immediate support with longer-term recovery and sustainability objectives.



Annexes

A signpost of a Priority Area of Return and Reintegration, where the STFA-supported community-led SME development intervention is implemented in Balkh Province. © UNDP/Mohammad Haroon Hamdard

Annex I. Indicator-based Performance Review

(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 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. (MPTFO Project id# 129785)						
1a. Number of people that have benefited from UN-supported essential services and/or new/rehabilitated infrastructure, disaggregated by type of service and sex.	Households	0	25,000	25,000		PUNO report
	People	0	1,969,408 (1,034,357)	2,540,291 (1,392,969)		PUNO report
1c. Number of people that have benefited from drug-treatment, drug rehabilitation services (health)	People	0	8,000 (2,400)	20,007 (4,983)		PUNO report
1d. Number of functional, UN-supported, facilities providing basic health assistance (including basic health assistance services for women and girls)	Facilities/Infrastructure	256	125	195		PUNO report
1f. Number of children, adolescents and adults (including adolescent girls and women) who benefit from primary and secondary education, basic general literacy and vocational education programmes (at least 50% female)	People	0	7,470 (4,215)	8,840 (6,504)		PUNO report
1g. Hectares of rehabilitated and/or newly irrigated land for agricultural activities	Facilities/Infrastructure	0	100	100		PUNO report
Output 2. Livelihoods, businesses and local economy are able to recover and are more resilient to instability (MPTFO Project id# 129786)						
2a. Number of people who have benefited from UCT (at least 80% women)	Households	0	1,000 (1,000)	1,000 (676)		PUNO report
	People	0	58,145 (25,302)	49,665 (23,767)	Access constraints; verification/approval delays; liquidity and payment-delivery challenges	PUNO report

Annex I - Indicator-based Performance Review	Unit	Baseline	Target	Progress	Reasons for Variance with Planned Target	Source of Verification
2b. Number of people who have benefited from newly-created income-generation opportunities, disaggregated by sex, age and province	Activities	0	1,650 (1,415)	1,650 (1,443)		PUNO report
	Households	0	4,125 (3,825)	6,925 (6,460)		PUNO report
	People	0	28,355 (2,280)	29,217 (4,682)		PUNO report
2b.1. Number of people who have benefited from productive employment through CfW schemes (at least 30% women; 50% youth)	Households	0	10,000 (0)	10,000 (29)		PUNO report
	People	0	55,385 (6,106)	51,210 (3,795)	Cultural/gender restrictions; physically demanding CfW work; access and approval delays.	PUNO report
2c. Number of worker-days generated with UN-support	Work days	0	167,500 (46,128)	645,571 (47,502)		PUNO report
2f. Number of MSMEs that benefit through financial capital support, training and/or other forms of asset	MSMEs	0	3,653 (2,848)	4,309 (3,417)		PUNO report
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 (MPTFO Project id# 129787)						
3a. Number of districts with functional early warning systems and other preparedness mechanisms for climate shocks and natural disasters	Districts	0	11 (0)	16		PUNO report
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	26,735 (622)	29,480 (2,152)		PUNO report
3c. Number of farmers who benefited from training and assets for improved, climate-smart, agriculture (at least 30% women)	People	0	16,607 (6,395)	21,344 (8,141)		PUNO report

Annex I - Indicator-based Performance Review	Unit	Baseline	Target	Progress	Reasons for Variance with Planned Target	Source of Verification
3d. Number of people who benefit from rehabilitated and/or newly constructed disaster-resilient community infrastructure and nature-based solutions	Hectares	0	100 (0)	34,352		PUNO report
	People	0	192,062 (12,565)	239,792 (119,679)		PUNO report
Output 4. Social cohesion, human rights, access to justice are strengthened at local level. (MPTFO Project id# 129788)						
4a. Number of CBOs/CSOs with improved capacity for participatory and inclusive community planning (at least 20% women-led)	CSOs	0	115 (0)	123 (8)		PUNO report
4b. Number of people with better awareness about human rights, social cohesion and conflict prevention (at least 50% women)	People	0	4,648 (1,556)	7,061 (2,592)		PUNO report
4g. Proportion of women in target areas that perceive benefits from measures addressing gender-based discrimination and GBV (including preventive measures)	People	0	39,700 (39,700)	40,000 (40,000)		PUNO report

Annex II. Stories from the Field

Mushroom farming strengthens women's livelihoods in Faryab

In Faryab province, the devastating 2025 drought left mothers like Maryam, a parent of six, facing severe food shortages, dry wells, and sky-high food prices. With women's employment severely restricted, putting nutritious food on the table seemed nearly impossible.

A climate-smart solution emerged through the STFA Joint Programme. Maryam joined a local women's group trained in mushroom cultivation, a high-yield, indoor farming practice that requires very little land or water, making it perfect for drought-hit regions and home-bound women.

Together with nine other women, Maryam set up a local production unit. She now harvests up to 40 kilograms of mushrooms monthly, earning approximately AFN 8,000 ($115) from home. This new income has transformed her family's diet, bringing affordable, protein-rich food back to their table.

"Now I can earn from home," Maryam says. "I grow mushrooms and feed my children better."

Maryam's success has sparked a movement. Women growers in her village have formed Common Interest Groups to share technical knowledge, solve production challenges and coordinate collective sales, creating a sustainable, woman-led economic network.



A mushroom harvest in Faryab Province. © FAO

Shoemaking enterprise creates jobs and stability in Balkh

After spending nearly five years in Türkiye and Iran, Mohammad Ehsan Rezaei returned to Mazar-e-Sharif determined to establish his own shoemaking business. Drawing on skills acquired while working abroad, he opened a small workshop using borrowed funds and second-hand equipment. However, limited machinery and workspace constrained his ability to expand production and hire more workers.

Through support from STFA, Mohammad received advanced shoemaking equipment and six months of salary support for newly recruited employees. The support enabled him to expand operations and establish Takpa Shoes Making Company as a growing local enterprise.

Today, the company produces women's shoes and sandals for other markets across Jawzjan, Faryab, and Kunduz provinces. The business now employs 12 people, 10 of whom were hired through STFA support.



Ehsan's shoe products in Balkh Province. © IOM

Food processing business expands opportunities for women in Balkh

After returning to Mazar-e-Sharif from Iran due to economic hardship, 37-year-old Friba Murowat co-founded a small home-based business producing jams and pickles. As local demand surged, she formally established the Suhar Food Production Company, but its growth was quickly capped by a lack of specialized machinery and cold storage.

With support from STFA, her company was subsequently equipped with industrial food-processing machinery and high-capacity chillers. The impact was immediate: production capacity increased by 60 percent, allowing the business to dramatically scale up both quality and market reach.

Today, Suhar Food Production employs 10 full-time staff (eight of whom are women) alongside five female daily-wage workers. By providing stable monthly wages, Friba's thriving enterprise is strengthening household resilience and driving women's active economic participation in their community.



Friba and her workers producing jams and pickles in Balkh Province. © IOM

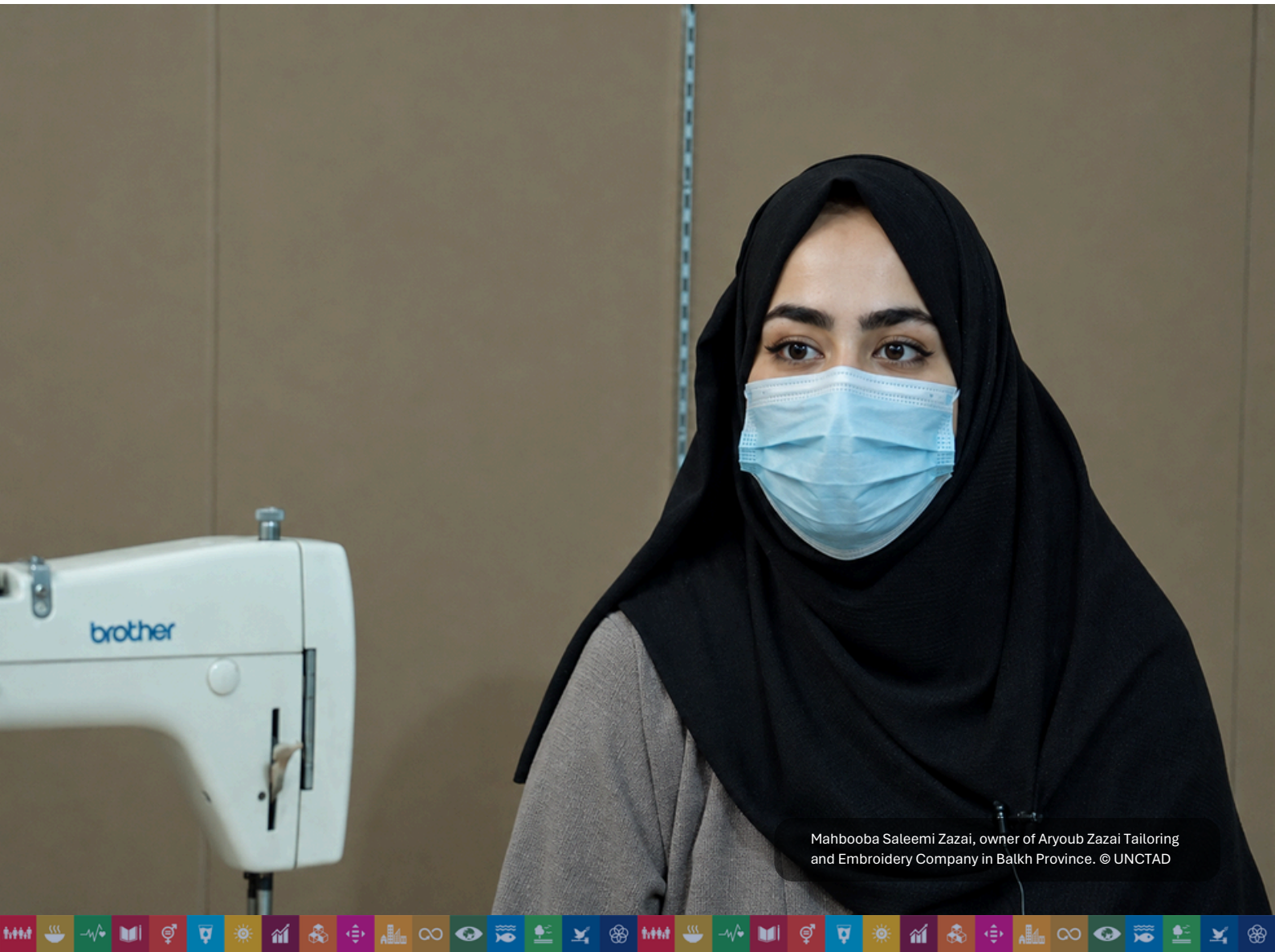
Business training helps revive a tailoring enterprise in Balkh

Mahbooba Saleemi Zazai, owner of Aryoub Zazai Tailoring and Embroidery Company in Balkh province, faced severe economic challenges following the 2021 political transition. Declining demand forced her to reduce staffing levels significantly and the business struggled to cover operational costs, including salaries and utilities.

Mahbooba was selected to participate in the Start Your Business (SYB) and Improve Your Business (IYB) capacity development programs supported by STFA. The training strengthened her business planning, proposal development, and financial management skills.

“After the power shift, my business almost collapsed,” she explained. “By attending the SIYB programmes, I learned how to develop a strong business plan and proposal.”

Using skills acquired during the training, Mahbooba developed a business proposal that was later selected for support by another programme. The additional support enabled her business to stabilize and continue operations despite difficult market conditions.



Mahbooba Saleemi Zazai, owner of Aryoub Zazai Tailoring and Embroidery Company in Balkh Province. © UNCTAD

Handicraft entrepreneur expands production and markets in Jawzjan

In Jawzjan province, Hooria Ahmadi, owner of the Girls Entrepreneurs Handicraft Company, struggled to expand her workshop's reach. Though her team produced beautiful handicrafts, they lacked a clear marketing strategy and a diverse product catalogue to attract a consistent buyer base.

To unlock her business's potential, Hooria took part in the "Improve Your Business" marketing training program supported by STFA. She gained vital skills in product design, branding, customer engagement, and strategic marketing.

Applying her training immediately, Hooria modernized her designs and introduced highly sought-after new product lines, including stylized handbags, baby bags and kitchen sets. The improved branding and presentation immediately drove up customer engagement and boosted sales.

"The training helped me realize how important design and quality are," Hooria said. "Even small improvements helped me connect with more customers."

Today, Hooria is scaling her business through wholesale partnerships. She is also providing handicraft training to young girls in her community, equipping the next generation with practical, income-generating skills.



Hooria and her workers in Girls Entrepreneurs Handicraft Company in Jawzjan Province. © UNCTAD

Literacy classes create new opportunities for women in Jawzjan

Arzo, a young woman from Faizabad district in Jawzjan province, overcame significant social and cultural barriers to complete her education and become a literacy facilitator in her community.

In an area where access to education for women and girls remains limited, Arzo secured a position with support from STFA. She now facilitates literacy classes for women in Jo-e Wazir village, helping learners develop basic literacy and numeracy skills.

One of her students, Shukria, completed a nine-month literacy course and described how the programme transformed her daily life. Before joining the class, she was unable to read street signs, use written information, or record names on her phone. Following completion of the course, she is now able to write letters and read medicine labels independently.



Arzu and students in a literacy class in Jawzjan Province. © UNESCO

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