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Afghanistan: The worst place in the world to be a child or a mother

By: Ahmad Masoud

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Afghanistan has received US\$58 billion in aid in the past 10 years, but the country has still remained as one of the poorest countries with the highest children and maternal mortality rates in the world. According to Save the Children report 2011 http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/sites/default/files/docs/STC_AFGHANISTAN_REPORT_FINAL_WEB.PDF ^[1], one out of every nine children dies before his or her first birthday and one out of every five dies before the age of five.



Every day 550 children die of preventable diseases, primarily pneumonia and diarrhoea,” the report says. It should be mentioned that 133 children die a day in Afghanistan only because of diarrhoeal diseases. `

The mortality rate of children in Afghanistan will significantly go up, if the number of those children is counted, who die because of other preventable diseases such as measles, malaria, typhoid and whooping cough or because of harsh winter, unexploded ordinance, landmines, aerial bombardments, and roadside bomb incidents in the country.

In a single incident, according to media reports, 12 children died of whooping cough and another 350 children were in critical condition in the north eastern Afghan province of Badakhshan in December 2012.

According to the report, Afghanistan remains one of the worst places in the world to be a child and a mother. Maternal mortality ratio in Afghanistan remains unacceptably high, the tally has dropped from 1,600 deaths per 100,000 live births in the year 2000 to 1,400 live births per 100,000 today, showing that genuine progress can be made.

“For mothers, Afghanistan’s maternal mortality statistics are at the bottom of global measurements. The lifetime risk of maternal death is one in 11, a figure directly related to the fact that only 14 percent of births occur in the presence of a skilled health worker,” the report emphasises.

Afghanistan is one of the poorest countries in the world with 36 percent of people unable to obtain the means to satisfy their basic subsistence needs and an estimated nine million Afghans are poor, suggests Afghanistan Human Development Report 2012.

The United Nations Development Program provides a more nuanced perspective on poverty that is based on deprivation in three main areas such as health, education and standard of living. The report says that 84 percent of Afghan households are multi-dimensionally poor.

“About 54 percent of children aged six to nine are stunted (low weight for age) and 67 percent are underweight,” the report says.

Even Worse

According to the results of a World Bank supported study, the prevalence of anaemia is 38 percent in children under five and 50 percent in children six to 24 months old. Both iron and iodine deficiency affect 72 percent of children under five.

The report suggests that no data for zinc are available, but estimates (between 60.5 and 72 percent) can be made from combining the stunting estimate and that of iron deficiency because zinc deficiency typically manifests with these conditions.

According to the report, 20.9 percent of non-pregnant women of productive age had chronic energy deficiency (body mass index less than 18.5). Therefore, chronic energy deficiency is considered a problem of high prevalence according to the World Health Organization (WHO) standards.

The report further highlights that the prevalence of iodine deficiency in pregnant and non-pregnant women was at least 75 percent and iron deficiency was 48.4 percent and anaemia 25 percent among non-pregnant women.

Experts believe that lack of an effective coordination and cooperation mechanism among the relevant government ministries and the main UN agencies, national and international organizations and communities, weak governance, widespread corruption and insecurity are the main factors behind the current crisis in Afghanistan.

The government of Afghanistan has reaffirmed its commitment to reaching the Millennium Development Goals (MDG), including increasing accessing to safe drinking water from 27 to 50 percent and to proper sanitation from five to 50 percent by 2014, but experts believe that Afghanistan has remained far behind reaching any of the eight MDG goals by 2015.

Consumer Rights and Services Organization (CRSO), which is an independent non-governmental organization and promotes consumers rights protection in Afghanistan, calls on the government of Afghanistan and international organisations to seriously work for the development and implementation of an integrated health policy, intersectoral collaboration and communities' inclusion to effectively address and overcome health problems, including diarrhoeal diseases, and ensure access to clean drinking water, enough sanitation and sufficient food.

Access to food, medical facilities, clean drinking water, enough sanitation and education is the basic right of every Afghan citizen; therefore, the government of Afghanistan should take the lead in ensuring that the rights of its citizens are met.