Afghan children paying the price of global COVID-19 vaccine rollout failures: Save the Children

KABUL: Following reports that Afghanistan has exhausted its existing stock of COVID-19 vaccines—with doses promised by the WHO delayed until August—and an estimated 740% increase in reported cases since 1 May, where Save the Children called for urgent attention and vaccines from the international community to protect Afghan children from the impacts of the third wave of COVID-19.

Athena Rayburn, Director of Advocacy and Communications at Save the Children in Afghanistan, said: "Afghanistan is in the grip of a third wave of COVID-19 at a time when the country is already struggling with increasing conflict and a drought that is exacerbating an already devastating hunger crisis. While many wealthy countries are reaching 50-60 percent full vaccination rates for adults, countries like Afghanistan have once again been left behind—and it is children who are paying the price."

"Afghanistan has now exhausted its existing vaccine stock, which numbered less than one million doses. Less than one percent of the population have been fully vaccinated. In late May, just six weeks after schools reopened in early March, the government announced again the closure of schools in provinces across the country to prevent the transmission of COVID-19. This will have a serious impact on the country's children, whose learning has already been disrupted by years of war."

Save the Children estimated that children in Afghanistan have already lost up to 13 percent of their lifetime schooling, with figures even higher for girls at almost 21 percent. With recent school closures and this latest surge in cases, that number is likely to grow, with many children unlikely to return to school at all. Remote learning opportunities are extremely limited in Afghanistan, where many children have little to no access to internet or technology that would enable them to learn while schools are closed.

"The international community must step up and correct its shameful failure to protect the most vulnerable children from bearing the brunt of this pandemic. What we have learned in the past year is that none of us is safe from COVID-19 until we are all safe. To protect Afghan children's future and bring about a true end to this pandemic for all, vaccines must be urgently provided to Afghanistan."

The Kabul Times

Afghanistan holds political consultation with Poland after 30-year

From P1

for peace, stability and prosperity of Afghanistan. He added that Poland hoped for maintaining a lasting peace and Afghanistan's achievements built during the last 20 years, including in the field of human rights, especially the rights of women and religious minorities.

Afghan Ambassador to Warsaw Tahir Qadiry, Ambassador Hamid Sediq, senior advisor to the MoFA, Witold Sobków, Director General of the Asia-Pacific Department, MFA Poland, and Polish Ambassador to Afghanistan Adam Burakowski also attended the political consultations.

Direct diplomatic relations between Afghanistan and Poland were established during Ghazi King Amanullah Khan's reign in 1927. Both countries have been enjoying close ties ever since. Poland has been a solid partner in the security and infrastructure fields since 2001.

The Kabul Times

MoIC remembers Ghazal maestro Sarahang on his death anniversary

From P1

He assured the artists, that the Ministry of Information and Culture was taking practical steps to develop the art of music in the country and that to tackle the challenges ahead of it.

Meanwhile, Deputy Minister of Culture and Arts, Haroon Hakimi, also spoke at the event, describing art as imagining life, adding that life is difficult without imagination. He also said that art eases imagination, and stressed that he was committed to paying special attention to holding cultural events.

Mohammad Hussain Sarahang, "the crown of Afghanistan's music"—a title given to him after his death—passed away 39 years ago in Kabul. He learned music first from his father and then pursued higher studies in music in India for 16 years.

Ustad Sarahang was 65 years old when he died.

He was awarded many medals and earned many nicknames for his magical Ghazal songs.

Kabul's Kharabat Street is his birthplace, an area that once housed Afghanistan's famed and most loved musicians, maestros and singers, many of whom had followed their ancestors in the pursuit of music.

Today, the street houses a small number of families of composers. **The Kabul Times**

Addressing child labor through protection response . . .

From P3

managed to pick up dried up when winter started, and the family slipped more and more into debt, borrowing from neighbors and using credit to get food from the shop.

To cope with this dire situation, Noorullah resorted to taking his children out of school. His teenage son was sent to work as a live-in servant for another household, and his two younger sons started to beg on the streets, collecting plastic and wood to meet the household's heating and cooking needs.

The boys had previously been enrolled in the local government school but were forced to stop, joining some 3.7 million (48% of boys and 59% of girls) of all school-age children across Afghanistan who are estimated to be out of school – returnee and internally displaced children even worse off with 55 per cent of boys and 67 per cent of girls out of school (Afghanistan HNO, 2021).

To address protection risks faced by undocumented returnees, IOM's Protection Program works in provinces of high returns and opened a new office in Noorullah's home province of Badakhshan in January 2021. Having received IOM assistance at the border, Noorullah approached the office for support and the Protection Program caseworker visited him at his home to discuss his situation in depth and draw an action plan that would allow the family to re-enrol the children in school.

To mitigate the protection risks faced by Noorullah and his family, including child labor, the caseworker provided cash assistance enabling them to buy some essentials for their home – a buhari [a traditional wood-fired heater] and fuel for heating, a solar lamp for lighting the home – and enough to pay back their debts. Together with his wife, Noorullah bought enough flour so they could start a small bakery in their home.

"We started our bakery and, with the support from IOM, we can rent a house in the future and possibly extend our business, so we have income and are able to save for any future needs," said Bahar*, Noorullah's wife.

By reducing the economic vulnerability of the household, the protection risks associated with child labor and diversion from education were averted.

The support provided by IOM enabled Noorullah and Bahar to send their children back to school, helping to secure their futures. The two youngest boys stopped begging, and Noorullah brought his eldest son back to live with the family.

"The parents are relieved that they can support their children's education and provide them with a good life thanks to the income of their cottage bakery: "I was exhausted; really sick and tired of doing daily wage jobs. Now I'm self-employed, running a bakery and starting a grocery business which was a dream that has turned into a reality, thanks to IOM's Protection Program."

The COVID-19 pandemic has been disastrous in a multitude of ways, and in a country where educational needs are exceptionally high, the eradication of child labor remains a key priority for Afghans of all ages. By providing comprehensive assistance to undocumented returnees' households, IOM aims to build their resilience and reduce the likelihood of child labor amongst some of the most vulnerable communities.

Monitoring Desk

The keeper of Afghanistan's poetic past

(Part II)

By Lynzy Billing

The country has been home to Sufi sages and scholars who made significant contributions to Islamic literature. It is also the birthplace of several Sufi orders or "Brotherhoods". For more than 1,000 years, many of its towns and cities remained among the most important centres of Sufism.

These mystic communities have survived the upheavals of the last half-century and today, Sufism lives on across Afghanistan – in, among other people, the students who huddle around their teacher after hours in Herat city, their rhythmic chants echoing down their school's corridors, and the women's only group that gathers in a darkened Kabul basement cafe to discuss Sufi poetry over tea and shisha.

Sufi practices emphasise the inward search for God. Sufism's poetry, primarily written in Persian, is composed on Islamic mystical themes. The earliest Sufi poetry generally consisted of short ascetical laments on the human condition. Today, some, like Wujodi's, embrace the ideas and language of love.

For years, Sufism has played a role in the Afghan resistance – to occupation, civil war and Taliban rule – its poetry sometimes used to disguise political messages, Wujodi explains. It still does so today, he adds. Although the setting and participants have evolved, the message remains. "To be a good person and to do good to others, it's really just that," says Wujodi, adjusting his spectacles, which have been slipping down his nose as his hands have been enthusiastically dancing with his words.

Wujodi transfers these Sufi values into his first love – his poems. "Like a father who loves his sons equally, poets also love their poems equally. My poems are what I have to show for my 80 years and I love them all," he chuckles. "We can critique poems according to technical weaknesses but it doesn't mean that we don't love them all, really."

Wujodi does not take his talent lightly or without responsibility. With 65 years of experience in writing poetry he has also made a commitment to teaching it and has tutored students and poetry enthusiasts in Kabul for more than 30 years. "My students learn from me and I learn from my students. Even at my old age, I have much to learn," he says. Books stacked on his desk have been carefully selected, with notes scribbled in the margins, for some students who will visit later.

Wujodi believes that young Afghans are not encouraged enough and so he has dedicated his time to sharing his passion with others. "No one is encouraging young Afghans to read any more. The education system is lacking and there are other concerns for people but I want young people to feel encouraged to read more and always learn more. I want them to feel someone supports them and will join them in their learning," he says, adding with a little smile: "That is what I am here for."

A book held by one of the members of the Sufi poetry group [Lynzy Billing/Al Jazeera]

Thirty years ago, Wujodi also formed a Sufi poetry group that meets at Kabul Public Library twice a week. Lost in a trance, its members sway in rhythm as he sings out his poems. At the centre of the room stands an iPhone on a tripod, from which he live streams the class on Facebook.

"Some people cannot join in person, so we go to them on social media and with online broadcasting. I also share my lessons online for students who can't attend in person," he says. Once the pandemic began, he took his classes entirely online.

"Poems have the power to lead society, poems can enlighten the mind. Poems can motivate people to do good in society and be good despite the war that surrounds us. This is the power and effect that poetry has on our lives." Wujodi stops talking as he spots a young Afghan girl who has been lingering in the doorway listening in. He invites her to sit with us, before continuing.

"Forty years of war has greatly impacted cultural affairs," he explains. "Before war, we had a big association of writers, its members came from all across the country and they were male and female poets. Unfortunately during the war, many writers escaped Afghanistan, many others were killed and during the Taliban regime which started in the early 90s, women who were active were forced to remain at home."

Through the Soviet regime, the civil war that followed its collapse and the rule of the Taliban, Wujodi and his fellow poets remained dedicated to their art form. But it did not come without its challenges. They had to go underground, poetry groups no longer met in public and many stopped publishing their work.

But after the fall of the Taliban in 2001, they resurfaced as a group stronger and more inclusive, he says. Public poetry readings resumed, drawing new audiences. "After the US-led forces toppled the regime in 2001 we began establishing poetry associations again for both male and female members."

Poets, who wrote in secret under Taliban rule, came together to share their new work, he recalls. "Afghan poetry goes back as far as Afghanistan's history and we wanted to see this Afghan tradition which had already survived so much, come out strengthened by the war."

Wujodi passes his hands carefully over the shelves and pulls out a small, inconspicuous volume. The first edition of "Shariat", a monthly magazine published on March 22, 1998, by the Taliban. Inside, an article praises the talent of Persian and Pashtun women poets. Wujodi highlights it as an exception to the Taliban's broader beliefs about the role of women in society.

"Women have always had a role in Afghan poetic history," he explains, adding that he sees the library – where women and men can work and learn together – as a symbol of progress towards gender equality.

He delves into the history of Afghan female poets.

"10th century Rabia Balkhi is the nation's most famous female poet – writing about love," he explains. "Rabia Balkhi was imprisoned and killed by her brother for falling in love with a slave."

Many believe that she wrote her last poem on the wall of the bathhouse she was imprisoned in, using her own blood.

To understand why men and women have largely been separated in Afghan society, particularly in rural contexts, you must go back to the beginning, says Wujodi. Both genders vary greatly from each other in how they relate to their emotions and how they are expected to express them.

"The main qualities for Afghan women are suffering, acceptance and patience," says Wujodi. Such values have been enshrined in tribal customs for thousands of years and provide a context in which women, who otherwise have limited voice in the public sphere, can express their hardships and emotional pain. Cultural norms encourage women to express such emotions among one another through storytelling and poetic verse, he says, adding: "Women gain a level of recognition and understanding within their female peers by expressing their suffering publicly."

A well-known Pashto proverb says, 'A woman is born with sorrow, married with sorrow, and will die with sorrow'.

For men, the qualities of masculinity are quite the opposite. Masculine honour is centred on prowess and endurance of pain without showing it, which is all to do with nartob or "manliness" which includes possessing pride, courage, strength, fearlessness and assertiveness. "For Pashtun men, a public display of emotions, such as sadness, fear, jealousy or tenderness, is considered to be a sign of weakness and demonstrates a lack of self-control," says Wujodi, flicking through the pages of a well-worn little poetry book, searching for something.

Instead, men share such emotions through verse privately, says Wujodi, having found the poem he was looking for.

They are the words of 17th century Pashtun warrior-poet Khushal Khan Khattak, says Wujodi, illustrating traditionally key characteristics of what it means to be a Pashtun man.

Today, such values continue to prevail, but Wujodi says that new qualities in both genders have also arisen, that they are becoming interchangeable and that Afghan society is adjusting. "Poetry is changing, the verse of men and the verse of women are both changing, both are publicly sharing their voices in spaces together and society as a whole is finding its own path to meet these changes."

During our last meeting in May 2020, Wujodi explains that his Sufist poetry group could no longer meet during lockdown, but this did not stop him from coming to work at the library every day. He had lived through restrictions before, under Taliban rule, and continued to live-stream his Sufi poetry lessons during the pandemic. As a protector of Afghanistan's poetic past, he will not let the books gather dust. He is preserving the country's rich history for its role in its future renaissance, he explains.

He shares a poem he wrote for a past lover. Scrawled on a scrap of paper and always pocketed ... "close to my heart," he laughs. "She never read it. I was just a young man and it wasn't appropriate of me, but it is a special poem to me."

Afghanistan remains a cradle of poetic expression and for Wujodi's students, Sufism remains a sacred fibre. Both Kabul Public Library and Wujodi have acted as vessels carrying Sufi poetry through the years. Today, technology offers Wujodi's students a safer and more private way to share their work with one another. A newfound love of poetry has taken hold of the country's capital, driven by young Afghans seeking new ways to interact with one another and express themselves in spaces where gender is no longer an insurmountable hurdle.

On April 14, President Joe Biden announced that he would end the United States' longest war and withdraw the remaining 2,500 US troops from Afghanistan by the 20th anniversary of the September 11th, 2001, attacks, overstaying a May 1 deadline that had been agreed by the Trump administration with the Taliban in Doha last year. About 7,000 NATO troops will also be withdrawn by September. As Afghanistan enters a new era, it will remain to be seen if Wujodi's teachings can survive another hurdle.

"Poetry was gifted to us and it is the duty of every poet to share poetry and the meaning and the essence of poetry with others," Wujodi told me. "We cannot understand each other, the human mind, why we do what we do, the good, the bad . . . we cannot try to understand humanity without verse. And now we need to see it move forward with a new generation."

Concluded