

## Introduction

UNHCR in the Southern Region continues to strengthen community-based protection, implementing an integrated approach to address community needs, support **community participation and representation/decision-making** (with particular attention to women, boys, and girls), promote **self-reliance, social cohesion, and peaceful coexistence**. This is achieved through **community engagement**, providing support to **community-based leadership structures, women and youth empowerment**, and implementing **feedback and response mechanisms**. The activities are also aimed to strengthen the linkages between humanitarian and development actors through the UNHCR leadership of the Durable Solutions Working



Participants during the celebration of Youth International Day (12 August), Kandahar city

In 2024, UNHCR community-based protection activities supported 80 communities and estimated **16,216** individuals

## Community empowerment and community outreach



Community outreach volunteers conduct awareness sessions in Kandahar and Zabul provinces. One of the COVs, Mr. Hotak, says "Even small volunteer efforts can make a big difference".

UNHCR strengthened a network of **14 Community Outreach Volunteers (COVs)** who operate in Kandahar, Zabul, Uruzgan, Nimroz, and Helmand provinces of the Southern Region, in areas that may be outside of UNHCR and partners' networks to ensure **nobody is left behind**. The COVs function as a bridge between UNHCR and the IDP/returnee communities, is playing an important role in identifying and referring cases with heightened protection risks, such as unaccompanied and separated children, GBV survivors, people with disabilities, the elderly, disseminating protection messages. Protection counseling and referrals provided by COVs offer displaced populations and returnees a chance to address key issues they face. The information collected is further used for UNHCR programming and advocacy with other clusters to address concerns raised. COVs also engaged in meetings with community leaders, organizing various cultural and recreational activities, including Youth International Day jointly celebrated with UN Women, UNAMA and UNDP in August, and World Refugee Day in June through children's painting contests and handicrafts exhibitions by women. These activities promote cohesion amongst returnees, IDPs, and host communities and strengthen their sense of belonging. In August, UNHCR and partners provided a training on protection and GBV core concepts, referral mechanisms, and prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse to 14 newly selected COVs from displaced and host

communities. The COVs act as **agents of change and social transformation** who bring forward longer-term and sustainable protection solutions. By the end of 2024, **UNHCR will complete the construction of 2 community complexes** in Helmand and Zabul provinces which will serve as a safe space for community meetings and provide a wide range of protection services (psycho-social support, women protection, and legal awareness).

### **Awareness raising and capacity development of community leadership structures**

UNHCR conducted awareness-raising sessions for community leaders on women's protection, and child rights to enhance understanding and equip individuals and communities with the skills, and knowledge that enable them to protect effectively vulnerable community members. Upon completion of the sessions, participants have shown an enhanced capacity to facilitate community discussions on community-driven initiatives aimed at strengthening the protection of vulnerable groups, addressing protection risks faced, and reducing discrimination. In 2024, **2,054 community leaders** benefitted from the sessions and are engaged in their community, developing capacities and delivering critical messages through structured and informal interventions. UNHCR and its partners also advocate with *Shuras* to include displaced populations and returnees in the community decision-making process.



Capacity development session with male community leaders, Kandahar

### **Community self-reliance**

260 midwives are being trained in 5 provinces of the Southern Region, aimed to contribute to tackling high maternal and infant mortality rates, especially targeting females. The 8-week course includes topics of basic emergency obstetric newborn care, family planning, integrated management of acute malnutrition and child blood illness, infection prevention and control, health management, and helping baby survive/breath. Through relevant coordination mechanisms, information is regularly shared including with the health cluster partners to provide networking job-market linkage opportunities for graduate midwives to support them in becoming more resilient, achieve self-reliance and be empowered to shape their future. In the conservative context of the Southern Region where no education opportunities are available for women and no women centers are functional, this training significantly contributes to community resilience and helps to boost self-worth, therefore reducing mental health issues among women.



Midwifery training practice session

### **Gaps and Challenges**

- Restriction by de-facto authorities on awareness raising and capacity development limits protection space and requires innovative approaches.
- Limited capacity of existing services to assist vulnerable groups such as unaccompanied and separated children, people with disabilities, older persons, and GBV survivors.
- Reduced funding available to scale up community-based protection interventions.

### **Key recommendations**

UNHCR plans to expand its community-based protection programs in the Southern Region through further capacity development of community leaders, and elders, assessment of community capacities, and bringing synergies with development actors to scale up its interventions into more substantial ventures. This collaboration will identify development potential that helps strengthen resilience and social cohesion through integrated support. Together with partner organizations, UNHCR is also exploring ways for greater engagement with affected communities to harness improvement ideas prioritized by the communities, including community-based vocational training.