SCHOOLS AS ZONES OF PEACE:
The Challenges of Making Afghan Schools Safe for Education

In Afghanistan, children's access to education has improved considerably during the last decade. Yet, security continues to deteriorate in many parts of the country, placing education gains for many children at risk.

Schools, students, and educators in conflict settings are direct targets of threats and attacks. These include verbal threats (often by phone), so-called night letters (posted on the school gate or on community walls), or the burning of schools (among other forms).

This document provides highlights from research conducted by Samuel Hall Consulting for Save the Children International (SCI) in 2013 in three provinces of Afghanistan: Faryab, Nangarhar, and Uruzgan. The study analyses existing mechanisms to mitigate attacks and threats and identifies potential measures to provide further protection to schools, students and educators.

How are schools zones of peace?

The Schools as Zones of Peace (SZOP) concept is guided by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and is a program and advocacy concept which aims to ensure access to violence-free schools in armed conflict and post-conflict situations.

What is the impact of insecurity on education in Afghanistan?

Teachers and children live in fear when they walk out of their homes and head to school. For children, this entails worrying about everything from kidnapping to stepping on an improvised explosive device (IED). These fears are founded on legitimate security risks. Our research revealed that:

- More than half of the schools surveyed had received threats in written and/or verbal form.

- Motivations behind threats and attacks were primarily ideological in nature in Nangarhar and Uruzgan provinces, while mostly financially-driven in Faryab.

- Silence and secrecy were common responses to threats, often for fear of spreading panic.

- Threats and attacks often decreased school attendance, increased drop-outs, and diminished the quality of education, in both the targeted and nearby communities.

Are schools perceived as neutral?

Overall, 16 of the 26 surveyed schools were reportedly used as polling stations during the last election rounds in 2009-2010. Using schools as polling stations is controversial and more and more communities appear to be opposing this practice, which is seen as an action promoting a particular political agenda and potentially making the school more vulnerable. Communities prefer that their schools not be used without their permission and would like to be involved in the decision-making process for such matters.

Community perceptions: Measures for improved school protection
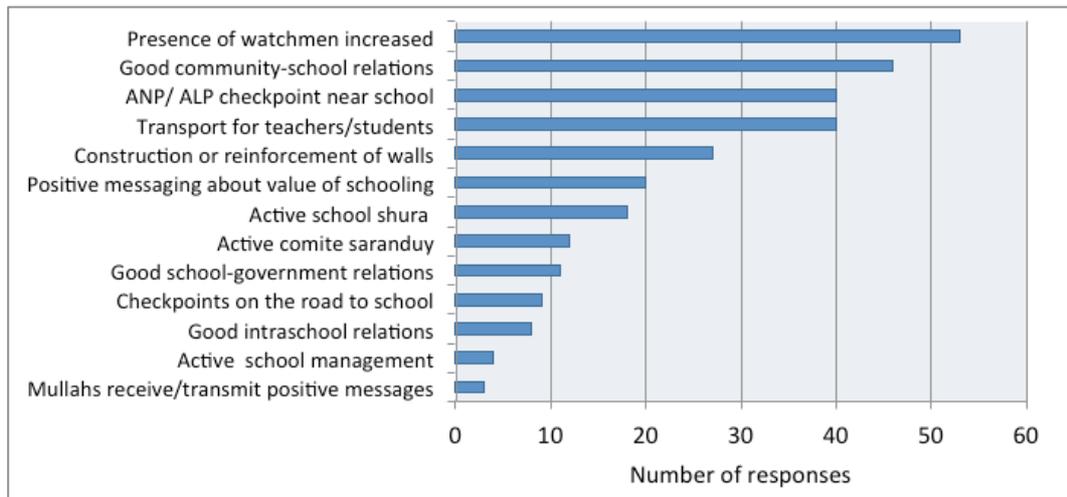
What should be done to improve school protection?

School watchmen and good community-school relations are broadly accepted amongst community stakeholders as mechanism that can improve school protection. However, opinions about other measures—such as engagement with opposition groups and the presence of armed guards—are more divided.

Engaging opposition groups in discussions to guarantee the safety of schools, students, and educators is a mitigation strategy accepted by communities in Nangarhar and in some parts of Uruzgan, but are less welcome in Faryab.

Having armed guards or checkpoints next to school premises is desired by some respondents, yet strongly opposed by others, with opinions varying even within the same community.

What role can community-based mechanisms play?

- School shuras act as the main link between schools and communities, and are thus important actors for school protection.

- Religious leaders are critical stakeholders and potential change-makers at the community level.

- The social fabric of a community—notably its cohesion—is a critical component in strengthening or weakening school security.

- Many communities further away from the district centers do not believe the government can protect them. Hence, the need for community-based measures is especially great in these areas.

"Schools as Zones of Peace," commissioned by Save the Children Download the report: http://bit.ly/18eKt6T

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