



Cairo/Kabul, 6 September 2021 – A pause in funding for the Sehatmandi project – the backbone of Afghanistan’s health system – has left millions of vulnerable Afghans at risk of losing access to essential health care.

The Sehatmandi project is the main source of health care in the country, provided through more than 20 000 health workers at 2309 health facilities. In 2020, more than 30 million people benefited from health services provided through the project, in addition to 1.5 million children vaccinated.

A funding pause that went into effect in late August 2021 means that more than 2000 (90%) of these health facilities are now at risk of closing.

“It is the poorest of the poor who will suffer if this critical lifeline is cut. We know that donors are under complex constraints and we appreciate that they are working hard to find solutions. Efforts to identify a flexible funding mechanism for the continuation of the Sehatmandi project must proceed with the utmost urgency,” said Dr Ahmed Al-Mandhari, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean Region.

With the expected closure of these health facilities, only 3% of the 1318 COVID-19 isolation beds in Afghanistan will remain functional. This hinders efforts to contain COVID-19 amidst an increased risk of transmission due to the circulation of the Delta variant, low vaccination coverage and large-scale population displacement.

If not urgently addressed, lost access to health care could lead to thousands of preventable

illnesses and deaths. Women's access to female health workers would also be severely affected. To mitigate these impacts, WHO is working with NGO partners to ensure continuity of services at around 500 prioritized health facilities affected by the funding pause.

Reduced access to health care will compound the impact of conflict, food insecurity, poverty, and COVID-19. Half of all children under five in Afghanistan are projected to face acute malnutrition this year, and disruptions to malnutrition care services will have devastating consequences.

Prior to the funding pause, essential health care activities such as routine immunization, malnutrition care, antenatal care, and services for pregnant women were already being interrupted by conflict and insecurity. At least nine out of 37 COVID-19 hospitals had already discontinued operations.

WHO is committed to staying and delivering in Afghanistan. Since 15 August 2021, WHO has airlifted lifesaving medical supplies to help cover the basic health needs of more than 200 000 people, as well as provide 3500 surgical procedures and treat 6500 trauma patients. Additional airlifts with other countries and partners are planned in the coming days and weeks.

As part of a UN appeal for Afghanistan launched on 5 September 2021, WHO and health sector partners are requesting US\$ 66 million to deliver essential and life sustaining health care services for 3.4 million people until the end of the year.

### **Note to Editors**

Sehatmandi is a multi-donor funded project that provides access to affordable primary and secondary health care, nutrition and family planning services across all 34 provinces of Afghanistan.

The project is implemented by nongovernmental organizations, which manage 2309 health facilities that deliver essential package of health services (EPHS) in hospitals and the basic package of health services (BPHS) in clinics. The project focuses a) on supporting primary health centres where services are more likely to be utilized by the marginalized population; b) on rural areas where poverty levels are high; (c) expanding the number of primary health centres in provinces that lack of health care and are poorer compared to others; and (d)

supporting completely free health care through facilities providing BPHS, which reduces financial barriers to access.

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