



SCHOOLS AS ZONES OF PEACE:

The Challenges of Making Afghan Schools Safe for Education



INTRODUCTION

This report was commissioned by Save the Children International (SCI) in Afghanistan as part of a small Schools as Zones of Peace (SZOP) pilot program being implemented in Faryab and Nangarhar provinces.

The 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. It originated in Sri Lanka as Children as Zones of Peace in 1998 and was introduced to Nepal by Save the Children Norway in 2001 in partnership with UNICEF, numerous Nepali NGOs, and other international stakeholders.

Key amongst the underlying principles of the concept of SZOP is the notion that the home, school and the community are all connected for peace. Mobilizing and empowering children as promoters of peace is an important element.

In Afghanistan, children's access to education has improved considerably during the last decade. Yet, as 2014 approaches— a year of national elections and of full security transition from the international coalition to Afghan national security forces—security continues to deteriorate in many parts of the country. This places the education gains and potential learning opportunities of many children at risk.

The purpose of this study was primarily to understand the coping mechanisms that individuals, communities, civil society and authorities use to mitigate the attacks and threats that schools, school staff, and students face. If these can be understood, there is potential for Save the Children and other stakeholders to provide support that will enhance those existing capacities.

At the same time as this research was undertaken, UNICEF and CARE International were also researching attacks on schools. In combination, these reports can provide valuable information for all development partners.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

ACG	Armed Criminal Group
ALP	Afghan Local Police
ANA	Afghan National Army
ANP	Afghan National Police
ANSF	Afghan National Security Forces
AOG	Armed Opposition Group
CDC	Community Development Council
DED	District Education Department
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
IED	Improvised Explosive Device
IMF	International Military Forces
MoE	Ministry of Education
Mol	Ministry of Interior
PED	Provincial Education Department
PTSA	Parent-Teacher-Student Association
SCI	Save the Children International
SDC	School Defense Council
SMC	School Management Committee
SZOP	Schools as Zones of Peace
TA	Teachers' Association

Executive Summary

The security situation in many parts of Afghanistan is deteriorating and likely to escalate further as a result of the uncertainty surrounding the upcoming elections and the full transition from international military to Afghan National Security Forces. There is now a real risk that education gains of the last decade may not be maintained. As a consequence, Save the Children International in Afghanistan commissioned this report to examine i) the nature and perceived impact of attacks on education; ii) local coping mechanisms used to mitigate the attacks and threats that schools, school staff, and students; iii) opportunities for strengthening and scaling up a 'Schools as Zones of Peace' pilot program implemented in Faryab and Nangarhar provinces.

The report draws on qualitative research conducted in 26 schools in ten districts in the provinces of Faryab, Nangarhar and Uruzgan and draws attention to the following findings:

Nature and perceived impact of attacks on education

1. **Threats** are an everyday reality for many of the students and school staff and more than half the schools surveyed had received them. They take the form of verbal threats (often by phone), or so-called night letters (posted on the school gate or on community walls). Armed opposition groups, and criminal groups are usually blamed although the exact source of the threat is often unknown. Motivations appeared to be primarily ideological in Nangarhar and Uruzgan whereas they were mostly financially-driven in Faryab.
2. Understanding **gender and vulnerability** is central to the discussion on school protection. Schools that girls attend, whether solely as girls or in mixed classes with boys, appear to be more vulnerable to attack. There is opposition to girls education for ideological, religious and cultural reasons although this may not be accompanied by threats and attacks. The position of Taliban is that girls should not study with boys or be taught by male teachers. This is a dilemma for the Ministry of Education because of the serious shortage of female teachers. It is also problematic for NGOs such as Save the Children because many, if not most, community based education classes are taught by men.
3. **The effect of threats**, in a context of general insecurity, is that children and teachers are afraid when they walk out of their homes and head to school. Children worry about many things, including being caught in an explosion, being kidnapped, or stepping on an improvised explosive device (IED). Silence and/or secrecy is a common response to threats as neither children nor adults want to spread panic. In some communities children are aware of bad relationships between community members and know that this means schools may not be safe.
4. **The effect of fear** is that students may drop out of school either temporarily or permanently and teachers may not attend regularly or quit their jobs. Consequences can go beyond the target school, creating a ripple effect on nearby schools. These affect the quality of the learning environment and potentially the quality of learning achievement.

5. A point of concern for communities is that *schools are sometimes used for non-educational purposes*. Opinions were mixed about whether schools should be used as polling stations in elections. However, they were clear that they would like to be involved in the decision-making process and that schools should not be used during elections without their permission. In two cases, schools had been used as military outposts. After communities protested to the Provincial Education Department the outposts were removed.

Local coping mechanisms

1. *Identifying key actors*. Although school personnel notify the department of education about threats and attacks, they rely on their own resources such as the school shura and influential people in the community to respond. The further a school is from the provincial or district centre, the less likely people are to believe that government is capable of responding. Non-government or international military forces are not seen as responsible for school protection.
2. *Community Responses*. Communities in all provinces are taking a variety of measures to protect their schools through official mechanisms and through their own initiatives. Communities, and particularly religious leaders, are therefore at the centre of reducing threats and attacks. Providing support so that they can increase this self-reliance is therefore very important. Where communities are divided, and where education is contested, there is a greater degree of conflict and violence.
3. *Schools have various protection mechanisms*. These include School Management Committees, Teachers' Associations, School Shuras, and School Scouts. School Shuras were perceived as important for the wellbeing of the school. However, they were not necessarily active and not always seen as effective in relation to school security. Most respondents had some form of physical protection in the form of watchmen, armed guards, or boundary walls. Having armed guards or checkpoints next to school premises is desired by some respondents, yet strongly opposed by others.
4. *Spreading the value of education*. Religious leaders were acknowledged to be very important by everyone because of the high degree of influence on the beliefs, attitudes and actions of communities. Their opinions can have strongly positive or negative consequences for education. One of the most frequently mentioned strategies to make schools safe is to spread messages about the value of education, to counter negative views. Government, school Shuras, religious leaders and NGOs all mentioned the importance of positive messages.
5. *Dialogue*. Protection mechanisms that are supported and work in some areas can be controversial in others. Whereas engaging opposition groups in discussions to guarantee the safety of schools, students, and staff is a mitigation strategy accepted by communities in Nangarhar, and in some parts of Uruzgan, it is not common and not well supported in Faryab.

As highlighted by this report, the reasons why schools are threatened and attacked are complex and often unclear. Education is a politically contentious subject and schools are caught in the middle of conflicting viewpoints about the role of education in a particular district or community. Schools may be attacked simply because they are symbols. As a

consequence, no single model for school protection is either appropriate or possible and advocacy needs to be locally owned and specific to each particular context.

However, it is clear that community institutions are crucial in spreading positive, pro-education messages. It is also clear that advocacy to declare schools as zones of peace is very important as 2014 approaches. This report provides a springboard and framework for facilitating discussions at both local, district and national levels on how best to protect schools and prevent attacks on education.

CHAPTER I. METHODOLOGY

1.1 Research Questions

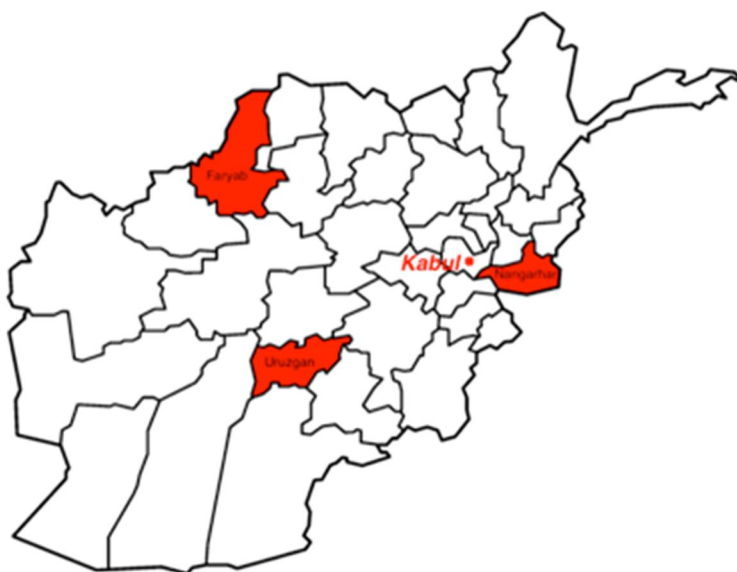
The purpose of this study was primarily to answer the research question: **What mechanisms are currently in place to mitigate the attacks and threats that schools, school staff, and students face directly, and what more can be done to protect them?**

The key research questions, as defined by the research team were:

- What attacks and threats do schools, school staff, and students face and why?
- How does it affect them?
- How do they currently mitigate these attacks?
- What more can be done to protect them?

1.2 Study Locations and Participants

In order to get a picture of the situation in separate parts of the country, the research framework targeted 3 provinces where Save the Children operates: Faryab, Nangarhar, and Uruzgan [see Map 1]. These provinces present three different security paradigms as shown in Figure 1.



Overall, a total of 26 schools were selected in 10 districts across the 3 provinces: 3 districts in Faryab, 4 in Nangarhar, and 3 in Uruzgan, with at least 2 schools selected in each district. The districts were selected based on accessibility from the provincial center, ability to access in terms of security, and also considering Save the Children's target areas. As a result, the survey included some schools that are receiving support from SCI

and some that are not. In each of the three provinces, the provincial center was also included in the sample in order to see how the situation and perceptions in the urban centers compare to those in the rural areas. Map 1 – Map of Provinces Surveyed

Given the small sample size, the findings are not representative of the state of affairs throughout the country. Nevertheless, they *are* meant to shed light on the situation in some schools in these districts, which are of particular concern¹ and can serve as examples for what protection mechanisms exist, which ones work, and how they could be further supported.

1.3 Data Collection and Analysis

In order to collect extensive and nuanced data, qualitative tools were employed instead of quantitative methods. The tools consisted of in-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and key informant interviews (KIIs). In order to provide summary data from the interviews, a small number of quantitative questions were asked during the qualitative interviews.

Due to the sensitivity of the issues being discussed, interviews and FGDs were conducted separately, usually in an empty classroom, so that the presence of non-participants would not affect the respondents' freedom of expression. Furthermore, interviewers were instructed to select the teachers and schoolchildren randomly and not let the principal choose them, due to the possible bias that might be introduced by pre-selection.

The tools were refined over the course of the fieldwork based on additional information collected along the way in order to improve and supplement the original questions.

The interviews and FGDs were conducted in Dari (in Faryab)² and Pashtu (in Nangarhar and Uruzgan) by experienced local Afghan interviewers. The tools were translated into both Dari and Pashtu and the interviewers took notes in the language in which the interview was conducted. These transcripts were then translated into English, from which quotes have been extracted and used throughout the report.

Once the data was translated, the quantitative questions from the in-depth interviews were entered into a database. In addition, a separate data entry sheet was created, in which all the qualitative questions from the interviews, as well as from the FGDs were entered and coded. These two data sets serve as the basis for the analysis for many of the graphs and charts presented below.

The target respondents were primarily school staff and students, but community members as well as other government and non-government stakeholders were also consulted, allowing for the data to paint a well-rounded picture of school protection issues, taking into account the perspectives of individuals inside the school and out. For each school the following were conducted:

- One (1) in-depth interview with the principal or head teacher;

¹ In Faryab and Nangarhar, half of the schools selected were schools that SCI had already chosen for its pilot of SZOP. The selection for these SZOP schools had been done in consultation with district authorities based on vulnerability to attacks—either based on previous threats or rising insecurity in the area—which meant that these schools had already been identified as schools of particular concern.

² It is worth noting that Uzbek, not Dari, was the local language in the communities surveyed in Faryab, however the respondents were fluent enough in Dari to respond to all the questions being asked. At the beginning of the FGDs participants were told that they could decline to participate if they did not feel comfortable speaking Dari, which did in fact occur with some younger school children.

- Two (2) in-depth interviews with teachers (one school *shura* member, one non-member)
- Two (2) FGDs with 5-7 students (at least 12 years of age);
- At least one (1) FGD with 5-7 community members (including religious leaders and parents).

1.4 Ethical Implications

Given the sensitive nature of the study, certain precautions were taken in order to protect the respondents. First of all, participation was voluntary and every interview or FGD began with asking the participants whether they were willing to take part in the study. In the case of the students, it was the teachers acting *in loco parentis* who gave permission for them to participate. Although early attempts were made to record the interviews and FGDs, respondents adamantly refused. It was thus decided that recording would not be pursued. Additionally, none of the participants were photographed without their consent.

There was concern that even members of the same school or community could use what they heard respondents mention against them in the future. Therefore, to reduce the chance of endangering the lives of the participants, the interviews and FGDs were conducted privately, so that the respondents' answers would not be audible to non-participants. Finally, throughout the report, although many quotes do appear, none of them are attributed, assuring anonymity for the participants of the study.

1.5 Limitations of the Study

Security

The security context in the three provinces is delicate and presented various challenges, even more so due to the sensitivity of the topics being discussed. In Faryab, for example, some community leaders were not ready to meet the field interviewers for fear that they would be later questioned by armed groups in the area.³ In one district in Faryab, in response to one question, a teacher avoided giving details as to which teacher had exactly been threatened because the interviewee said the person threatened, for his own safety, did not want to share anything. It is also worth noting that one school that was originally selected as part of the sample in Uruzgan had to be substituted with another school due to inaccessibility for security reasons at the time of the research.

Timing

Although schools in Uruzgan and Faryab were in session during the period of the fieldwork, schools in Nangarhar had already started their summer holidays.⁴ This meant schoolchildren and teachers could not be found in the schools in Nangarhar, but had to be assembled for interviews and FGDs by other means. This proved to be especially problematic in one school in Jalalabad City where many students had already left the city for the countryside, thus not allowing for the student FGDs to take place.

Transcription

The fact that the interviews could not be recorded, but relied on live transcription by the researchers means that it is not possible to re-check the actual comments of the interviewees.

³ This fear was substantiated by the fact that one of principals admitted to having received a phone call the evening after the interview team's visit, asking who had come to speak to him and what they had asked.

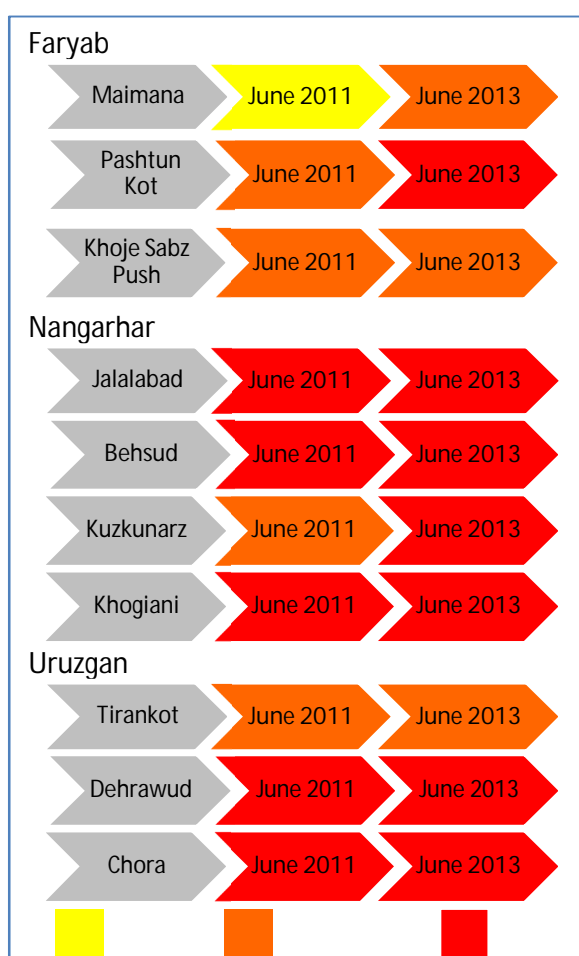
⁴ Summer holidays begin earlier in Nangarhar due to the heat.

CHAPTER II. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

2.1. Security Context

"I feel unsafe outside because nowadays everyone is armed and kills people for pleasure."
 –Student at Onjelad Boys' School

Figure 1 – Change in security risk assessment for surveyed districts (Jun 2011-Jun 2013)⁵



The provinces of Faryab, Nangarhar, and Uruzgan face different and unique challenges of security. As can be seen in Figure 1, seven out of the 10 districts in this survey now face high levels of insecurity compared with five in 2011.

Faryab is in the north, on the border with Turkmenistan. After years of relative security, it has experienced a sharp rise in insecurity since 2009, as the Taliban have strengthened their presence.⁶

Nangarhar is a geo-politically and economically strategic province in the east, on the border with Pakistan and located along either side of the main route from Kabul to Peshawar.

Uruzgan is in the south and one of the most insecure provinces. It is an interior province and has historically been one of the least developed.

2.2. Education Context

"Some children would like to come to school, but they can't because their families do not allow them."
 –15-year-old boy in Deh Sang, Uruzgan Province

Absenteeism from schools, particularly for girls, is common across the Afghan education system for many reasons. According to school staff in the surveyed schools, the top three reasons for student absences are: sickness, low family income, and family responsibilities. A

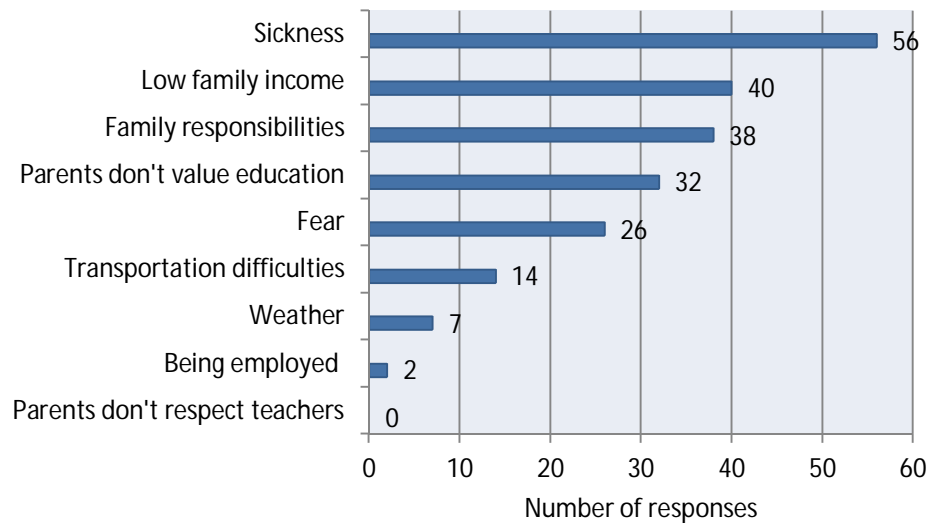
⁵ Based on mapping done by UN in Afghanistan according to its international security assessment criteria.

⁶ Antonio Giustozzi (2010), "The Taliban Beyond the Pashtuns", The Afghanistan Papers, CIGI, No. 5.

fourth reason was the low value placed on education by parents, mentioned by 42% of interviewed school staff. Fear was the fifth reason, mentioned by 26%.

Fear is therefore an important factor in school attendance and it figures strongly in this report, which focuses specifically on attacks and threats on schools. However, it is important to keep it in perspective.

Graph 1 – Reasons for children missing school mentioned by school personnel



Base: School Personnel (n=77)⁷

⁷ The principal of Qizil Qul Girls' School in Faryab Province was unavailable and it was the principal of Qizil Qul Boys' School who was acting in his absence. This meant that the team simply asked the principal of Qizil Qul Boys' School (already a respondent for his own school) further questions related to the girls' school. That is why only 77 and not 78 individuals were interviewed as part of the school personnel component of the survey.

CHAPTER III. FINDINGS

3.1. Concerns About Safety

3.1.1. There is general insecurity and fear

"I have feared twice that the Taliban will come and kill us all, but fortunately it has not happened."

–12-year-old girl in Qalacha, Uruzgan

At the time of the research the general security situation in the three provinces had been steadily deteriorating. Consequently, a common sense of fear was present in all areas surveyed, particularly amongst school-aged children. This fear appears pervasive and is a sign of the general conditions in which Afghan children in these districts live. Children were asked specifically whether they were ever afraid in school or on their way to school and, more generally, in which places they felt the safest and which the least safe. As one 12th-grade boy in Tirin Kot put it, "except for at home and at school, we never feel safe anywhere else". With foreign troops and the Taliban⁸ intensifying these fears in Uruzgan, respondents had little hope that this situation would quickly improve.

Fears of children

"We feel unsafe out of our homes mostly when we go to school, because the situations is very dangerous... bombs are buried and blast everywhere."

–15-year-old student in Behsud District, Nangarhar Province

The majority of the fears mentioned by children were related to hazards on the road, outside of the four walls of their home or their school, indicating that children overwhelmingly fear for their safety on the way to/from school. Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) are especially a problem in Uruzgan, as described by many of the schoolboys in Khairo Kariz, and some in Deh Sang, who mentioned being scared of hidden mines on the way to school.

The responses overall presented a bleak picture of life for a child in these districts, where nearly every public place can appear dangerous. In Qalacha Village, in Uruzgan Province for example, a 12-year-old girl admitted to being afraid even when she went on picnics with her friends. Likewise, crowded areas where there are lots of people present a danger and children said they were afraid of the risk of suicide bombers in such places. Beyond this, it was the fears around the presence of the security forces and ultimately the threat posed by the Taliban that produced the strongest responses.

As the main target of armed opposition groups, foreign troops present a real source of fear to children, who worry that they may be harmed if near them. This is especially true in Nangarhar where the international military forces (IMF) still have a large presence. Children in both schools in Behsud District said they had not gone to school on the day foreign troops visited their area and that they felt unsafe when IMF vehicles passed near their school or near the bazaar. As one boy explained, "one day foreign forces came to our village and entered our school; I felt insecure on that day. After the foreigners left we were no longer

⁸ Throughout the report, the term Taliban will only be used when referencing a specific quote, otherwise the terms AOG and/or ACG will be used.

afraid." Police checkpoints also proved to be places of concern for children, as well as areas where there were large numbers of Afghan Local Police (ALP), which might be targets of Armed Opposition Group (AOG) activity.

"I feel unsafe every day because I am wearing my school uniform and the Taliban may kill me just because I'm a student."

–10th grader at Deh Nau Boys School, Faryab Province

Beyond the presence of the armed forces, it is the ever-present fear of the Taliban that has a profound effect on children. Particularly in Uruzgan, children live in fear and under threat: "we are scared because Taliban has warned us 'if you go to school we will kill you.'" Such threats will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

Fears of school staff

Children are not the only ones who are afraid. Teachers and school staff also expressed serious concerns. Teachers in Pashtun Kot District who had to travel from the city to teach at their school said they prayed every day when leaving their homes that they would return to their families that evening. In Khoje Sabz Push District of Faryab Province, at the Deh Nau School located in the district center, there was a curtain in the principal's office so that staff could travel from home to school wearing traditional dress and change at the school into western dress. The principal of the school said this was a practice that the school staff had begun for fear of being harassed on the way to school.

Fears for the future

"When insecurity exists within the country, no one will consider the importance of the school, and when this happens it is possible that schools will come under attack."

–School staff member of Salam Baba School, Tirinkot

The research found that the general state of insecurity is the main factor in increasing the potential for threats and attacks on schools as opposition groups become bolder, and criminal groups take advantage of the overall deterioration of the security situation. During the course of the research there were few signs of optimism that would point towards a potential amelioration of the situation. As a teacher in Onjelad Girls' School in Faryab reflected, "I don't know about the future, but if the security situation gets worse the school will be threatened." Other respondents reiterated this sentiment, as did a 12-year-old girl in Qalacha, in Uruzgan, who admitted, "I always feel unsafe, and if the security gets even worse I would stop coming to school."

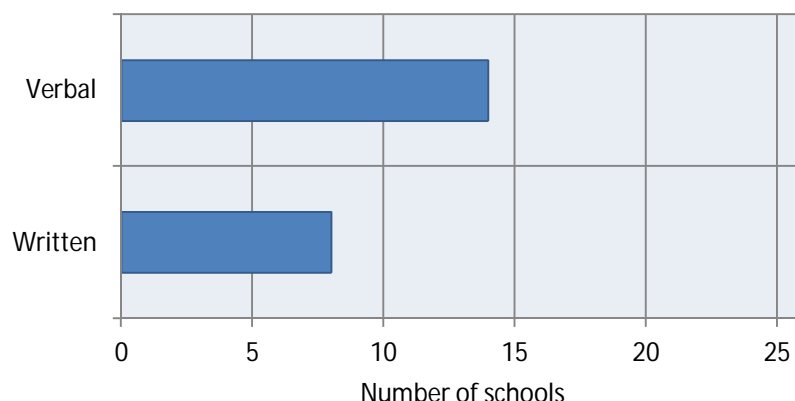
3.1.2. Students, teachers and schools are threatened and attacked

"We are not happy with such behavior... such actions are un-Islamic."

–An elder in Khairo Kariz, Uruzgan, commenting on threats and attacks taking place in his area

Among the 26 schools surveyed, a variety of examples of threats and attacks emerged. In terms of the threats described by respondents, they were received either in written form or verbally. Most commonly the threat was posted on the school wall in what is commonly known as a *night letter*, or a phone call was placed to a member of the school staff. The list of attacks, meanwhile, were quite serious, and included alleged poison gas attacks, bombs, grenade strikes, or murders.

Graph 2 – Number of schools where respondents reported verbal and written threats



(n=26)

Examples of threats and attacks

In Deh Nau Boys School, in Khoje Sabz Push District of Faryab Province, school children recounted that they received a specific threat saying that the houses of those who attend school would be burned, or that their agricultural lands would be destroyed. Those who had threatened them allegedly killed someone in the bazaar and told others that if they went to school, they would face the same consequences. As the principal of the school explained, threats were made in both written and verbal form to the school staff as well, demanding 10 percent of the teachers' monthly salary and threatening to set the houses on fire of those who did not comply, or kill them on the way to school.

Throughout the course of the fieldwork, various interviewees discussed threats made particularly targeting girls and staff of girls' schools. In one village in Nangarhar Province, the principal of the boys' school explained how at his previous job as the principal of the girls' school he had received threats to stop working and left to save his life. In Uruzgan, female students themselves have several times been warned that females should not go to school. As the head of one school describes, having male teachers and/or staff in girls' schools serves to exacerbate the situation: "it is possible that there would be the same threat because it is a girls' school, but we have just 3 female teachers and all the other teachers are male; if all the teachers were female, I strongly believe that we wouldn't receive threats anymore."

In Uruzgan some of the threats were specifically attacking the government education establishment. As recounted by one principal, "the insurgent told the students: 'this school is not a place for getting an education, it is not knowledge... Knowledge is in the madrasa. You have to study in the madrasa.'"

Box 1 – Fleeing from a threat

Two of the students in Deh Nau Boys School were threatened by the Taliban who had asked them to cooperate and show them the houses of the girls of the village who attended the school, or in other words, to surrender some of the school students to the Taliban. The students, being from the same area, didn't want to betray the people of their area, so they fled to Iran and are still living there.

Consequences of the threats

"Obviously these events can have negative effects. People leave the area and go to cities in order to assure safe education for their children. Some people also prevent their children from going to school."

When a threat is issued or an attack carried out, be it with financial or ideological motivations, it is done with a particular intention in mind. Often the goal is achieved and the school or individuals will capitulate to the threats, but there are many other consequences that a threat or an attack can have on a school and its community. This is most visibly reflected in school attendance, in the target school as well as schools nearby. It also manifests in other ways that may be less perceptible, such as a lower quality of education being delivered.

One of the biggest concerns related to school protection is that lack of safety, or the feeling of insecurity, may lead to a drop in school attendance. In Nangarhar it was common for students to mention that their parents had not let them go to school when security was not good. Some children stayed at home only during the particular threats but, in some cases, children stopped going to school entirely. A number of students in various schools claimed this. The situation has affected girls a lot more than boys.

Box 2 – Following through with a threat in Jamshidi

“There is a girl who has been threatened and attacked for going to school because she was told, if she would go to school, she or her father would be dead. We told the government that a girl had been threatened. When the girl was coming to school with the police for a few days, no one told her that she wouldn’t go to school, but after a few days, the girl with her father were killed. Now, the families of two girls went to the city.”

–As recounted by students at Jamshidi Boys’ School

A 13-year-old girl in Qizil Qul’s story shows how real parents’ fears for their daughters can be: “I know a girl who stopped coming to school forever. Once I saw her mother in the clinic and asked her why her daughter stopped coming to school and she said that she has stopped her from going to school because the Taliban will come and she didn’t want her daughter to be killed for going to school.”

“If the school is threatened or attacked in the future I will refer to the education department and will quit this job because it is not secure.”

–School principal in Pashtun Kot District, Faryab Province

In all three provinces, examples were recorded of teachers not going to work or resigning as a result of threats or attacks. In one village in Pashtun Kot, where teachers were previously commuting from Maimana city, the situation had become difficult for them: “The elders of the village have been threatened several time that they shouldn’t let girls go to school or else they will kidnap them or lay mines on their way, but no one has taken any action against them. It is because of these threats that experienced teachers can’t come to our village from the center of the city.”

As part of the more direct effects of the threats, in Shah Mansoor in Uruzgan, one teacher resigned after his life was threatened if he continued to work there. Likewise in Saracha, in Nangarhar Province, the principal of the girls’ school was threatened and ended up transferring to the boys’ school.

Beyond the response that it initiates, a threat or an attack against a school can have wide-ranging repercussions not simply on the targeted school, but on neighboring schools and communities, sometimes even in other districts. In both the boys’ and the girls’ school in Qizil Qul, despite the school serving 5 different villages and having 500-600 enrolled students, when the research team visited, the classrooms were half-empty. The school was close to where the poison gas attack had been reported. Children explained that “since school poisoning has started by anti-government groups, most students have left schools”

and the principal and one of the teachers cited fear as the biggest reason for students missing school. In general, threats and attacks contribute to a drop in attendance, not only in the targeted school, but also in other schools nearby.

Uncertainty about the perpetrators and their motivations

"They introduced themselves as Taliban, but we are not sure if they were real Taliban."

–Teacher at Onjelad Boys' School, Faryab Province

Many of the threats, particularly the night letters, are delivered anonymously, making it difficult to pinpoint the exact source. Some respondents attributed the threats to criminal groups, particularly those with financial demands, while others named the Taliban as the perpetrators, driven by ideological motivations.

Particularly in rural settings, school employees are the only individuals in the area receiving a regular salary. As such, they become natural targets for common criminals as well as AOGs who are looking to raise funds by 'taxing' the local communities.⁹ In Pashtun Kot District all schools recorded having received demands from Armed Criminal Groups (ACGs) or AOGs for varying amounts of government workers' salaries to be paid. One school reported having received demands for 500 Afs from each teacher's salary, while in another school the demand was for as much as 10% of their salary. At the Onjelad Boys' School in Faryab, one of the teachers mentioned that the threat received for non-compliance was for the school to be shut down or set on fire. By not complying with such threats, school staff felt they were putting not only their own lives at risk, but also the wellbeing of the entire school.

Compared with Faryab, where threats appeared to be motivated by financial interests, in Nangarhar and Uruzgan they could be described as being more ideological in nature. Most of the threats appear to be specifically directed at secular government education in general and girls' schools in particular, with opposition to girls studying beyond 6th grade, and to them being taught by men.

3.1.3. Schools are used for non-educational purposes

The use of schools for non-educational purposes adds another variable to the equation.

"School is the place for getting education. If the school is used for other purposes rather than education then it is possible that schools come under attack."

–Principal in Uruzgan Province

In discussions with various stakeholders, both from government and non-government institutions, one of the main methods to ensure that schools stay safe is disassociation from political and/or military matters. As the leader of one community in Faryab declared, "we don't want the school to be used for purposes other than education and teaching." Beyond the advantage of maintaining the school premises as neutral ground and sparing it from the risk of direct attacks, it also helps to reduce the likelihood of classes being cancelled unnecessarily when the schools are used for other purposes.

⁹ It is important to note that beyond this form of taxation, anecdotal evidence points to land also being taxed by AOGs and/or ACGs in Faryab. This phenomenon, whereby farmers are required to hand over 10% or so of their yield or earnings, is locally referred to as *ushur*.

Polling stations

"We don't agree for schools to be used for the elections because the students and teachers are threatened."

—Elders in Chamtalla, Khogiani District, Nangarhar

The issue of using schools as polling stations is controversial and opinions as to its appropriateness vary. 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. Overall, 16 of the surveyed schools were reportedly used as polling stations during the last election rounds in 2009-2010. In 7 of those the community had opposed the decision.

In Faryab, the team found that many of the schools had been used as polling stations, but that this had little or no adverse effect on the schools and was therefore welcomed by the communities at the time. Now, experiencing a much greater level of insecurity compared to the time of the last election cycle, communities in Faryab are not as keen for their schools to be used as polling stations in the upcoming 2014 elections. One elder in Khoje Sabz Push District was adamant that "schools should be used just for education and the government should find other places for purposes other than education." Communities and district-level authorities were quick to suggest mosques as acceptable locations for polling stations, but as lamented by the District Education Department (DED), the decision as to where to place polling stations is beyond the control of the district-level authorities and remains a decision that is taken at the provincial or national level.



Picture 1 – School principal sitting under a portrait of President Karzai and General Dostum

This was also true in Uruzgan where a high-ranking employee at the Provincial Education Department explained, "the community members and I are not happy with schools being used as polling stations because schools are places for education." This was reiterated at the DED in Dehrawud, where employees believed that if schools were to be used for purposes like elections, then students' and teachers' morale would be negatively affected: "these usages may cause the schools to face problems and threats in the future." This fear was evidenced by the fact that, as recounted by elders in Tirinkot, during the last election cycle Salam Baba School had been used as a polling station, and was consequently attacked by "the rebels", and students and teachers were threatened for a long period of time.

Having faced numerous problems during the 2009-2010 elections, in Nangarhar respondents had the strongest opinions on the subject. In almost every school outside the urban center there was fierce opposition against the use of schools as polling stations, which they saw as a flagrant political use of the schools. The head of one school was also vehemently opposed and described the use of schools for elections as a form of "political activity." School personnel were not the only ones nervous about the prospect of schools being used for elections in the future; community members too expressed their concerns, as was the case with mothers in Samarkhel Village, who worried that "if in the future elections take place in our school, our school students and teachers will be in danger because the security situation is very tense." Both in Behsud, as well as in Kuzkunarz District, respondents mentioned that the community had opposed this decision during the last elections, but that the

government had not considered their opinion.

Military outposts

Discussions at the Provincial Education Department (PED) in Maimana revealed that at least two schools in the province had recently been used as outposts for both the Afghan National Army (ANA) and the ALP. The communities had opposed this practice, reported it to the district and provincial authorities and, after discussions with the provincial-level Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) authorities, the PED managed to have the outposts removed. Meanwhile, in communities where there had been no cases of military outposts being established in schools, when asked whether they would accept such a decision by the government, the communities were quite clear that they would not. Even in communities where they accepted schools being used as polling stations, using schools as military outposts was seen as unacceptable; as the head of the village *shura* in Onjelad village put it, “in the future we would allow the school to be used as a polling station, but not as a military base or for other political purposes.”

3.2. Responses to Threats and Attacks

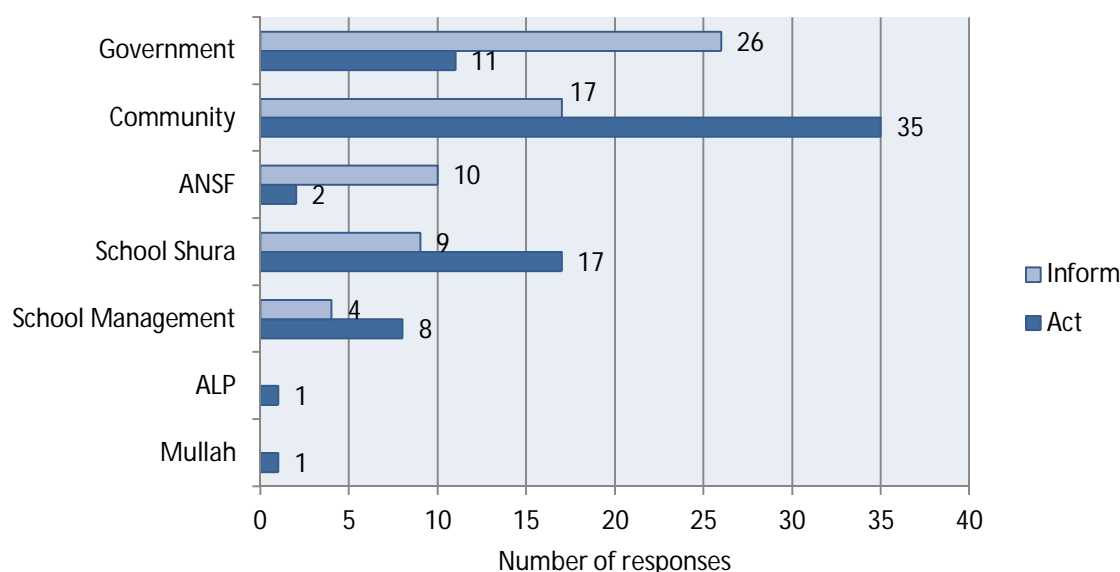
3.2.1 Who is informed and who can act

In response to threats and attacks, schools, the communities around them, as well as local government have all utilized various methods in order to ensure that children can continue with their education.

The majority of the school personnel interviewed said that they had or would notify the government authorities, specifically the education department, in response to a security incident. They would also inform their school or village *shura* [see **Error! Reference source not found.**]. However, when asked who they believed would act in response to an incident, the respondents first mentioned the community, second the school *shura*, and only third the government.

It is worth recalling that a number of respondents mentioned having informed the education department and government authorities about incidents in the past, but that they received little or no support. This seems to indicate that, although the natural response for school personnel might be to say that they would contact the government authorities, they have little hope for a response from them. In the absence of a government response, the need for communities or non-government actors to react becomes critical.

Graph 3 – Who would school personnel inform, and who do they believe would act?



Base: School Personnel (n=77)

Non-government and/or international actors are not seen as responsible for protection. In replying to the question of who was responsible for school protection, none of the respondents mentioned international military forces. Nor did they mention NGOs (either local or international) as actors that bore any responsibility in these matters.

Although NGOs were not mentioned in the unprompted responses related to school protection, when asked specifically what they believed the role of NGOs was in matters of school protection, respondents reflected their experience of current and past projects. They mentioned training for the school *shura*, the community, and religious leaders to strengthen their current protection mechanisms and also to prepare them to respond to future threats. They also valued infrastructural support, such as improving or building boundary walls.

Box 3 – The Center vs. the Periphery

Although, overall, respondents believed that communities were more likely to act than the government in response to a school protection issue, those in the provincial capitals were much more likely to think that the government will act compared with those living in the periphery. One in two respondents in provincial centers believed that the government would act, while this was only true for one in seven respondents outside. This may also suggest that rural community structures play a different role compared with urban one. Conversely, in district or provincial capitals, communities are not perceived to be as active as in the rural areas. 73% of respondents living and/or working in such centers believe the community would react to a problem, whilst 92% of respondents in rural areas trusted in the community to do so.

3.2.2 School-based protection mechanisms

School *shuras*¹⁰

"It is the school *shura* that protects schools from danger and it serves as a bridge between local people and school."

–Community elders in Shaghai, Nangarhar Province

School Management Committees (SMCs), Parent-Teacher-Student Associations (PTSAs), school *shuras*, and School Defense Councils (SDCs), among others, are all entities that have been established over the years to help manage schools. They involve communities in the oversight of the school in order to create a stronger system of accountability.¹¹

Some of these school *shuras* are reported to have actively made changes to improve the schools, including helping construct boundary walls or additional classrooms by collecting money from the community, as well as hiring extra guards, also with community-raised funds. In some cases the school *shura* is also reported to have supported efforts to reduce absenteeism by speaking with parents and convincing them to send their children to school. One of the principal responsibilities of such entities, as described by a number of respondents, is for them to establish a communication bridge between the school and the communities. They are also reported to be playing an important role in promoting the importance and value of education and thus increasing attendance.

The data demonstrate that school *shuras* appear to be quite active in school affairs and are perceived by both school staff and community members as being extremely useful for the well-being of the school. All but one of the respondents considered the school *shura* to be a useful entity and 96% believed that it worked well.

The principal of one of the girls' schools in Pashtun Kot District was extremely positive about the school *shura*'s impact on school protection and believed that "with the existence of the *shura*, students can study in a safe environment." Their work is valued and most respondents believed that they should be supported further through trainings and perhaps even financially, so that they may become even more effective.

Despite the fact that school *shuras* were generally seen as a positive entity, particularly for improving and facilitating community-school interactions, they were not always perceived as effective, particularly in matters related to school protection. In Deh Nau the community members did not believe that the school *shura* had done anything to protect the school, yet the same group of people understood the importance of such a body, and said that they would refer to it if the school were threatened.

In Uruzgan, it appears that school *shuras* are neither as active nor as effective as in the other provinces. In Khairo Kariz, elders and parents lamented that the *shura* was not fulfilling its responsibilities and

Box 4 – Training of the School *Shuras*

When asked what might make the school *shuras* more effective, a number of respondents believed that its members should receive training and/or participate in workshops. DED staff, community members, and school personnel alike put forward this recommendation across the three provinces.

¹⁰ It is worth noting that the term "school *shura*" added a level of confusion due to the fact that it was often shortened to "*shura*" by respondents, which made it difficult at times to differentiate from the Community Development Council (CDC), which is also commonly referred to as "*shura*" for short.

¹¹ It is common for community members, school staff, as well as government and NGO workers alike to refer to these groups interchangeably using the catch-all phrase "school *shura*"; for matter of consistency, this report will do the same, except in cases where the separation of roles is explicit.

would have preferred that it did not exist at all. This was confirmed by the principal of the school who stated, “the *shura* did not do anything for the protecting of the school”. At another school, also in Uruzgan, the principal was also pessimistic about the effectiveness of the school *shura*: “it cannot do anything regarding the security of the school because insecurity comes from outside.”

Teachers’ associations (TA)

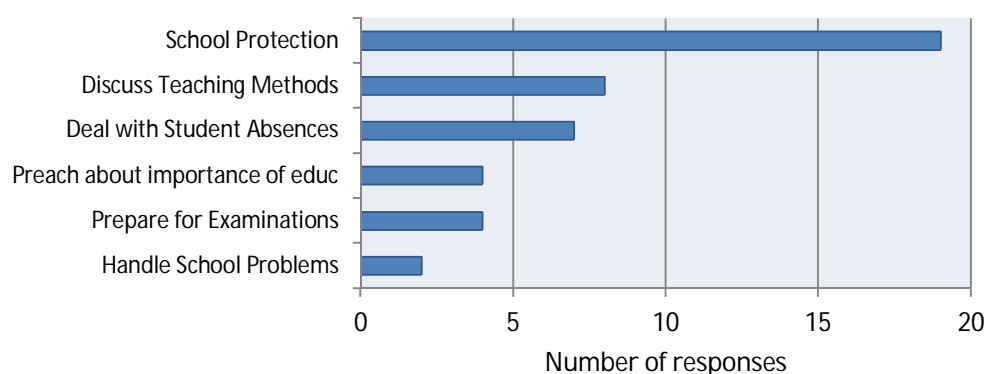
Beyond the school *shura*, which includes members of the school and the communities, the other most active group, which existed in all but 2 of the surveyed schools, was a teachers’ association (TA). Even though no respondent directly mentioned the TA as the responsible entity to deal with protection issues, when asked about the role of the TA, the teachers mentioned school protection as its primary responsibility [see

Beyond their administrative role of preparing for examinations and discussing teaching methods, TAs were also believed to play a role in dealing with student absences and teaching about the importance of education. This serves as a mechanism for protecting schools and encouraging attendance. Given the fact that teachers in some schools are not necessarily from the local communities, the TA is a forum that allows members of the school staff to raise and discuss safety issues that might not be perceived as important to the community members themselves, such as transportation to/from school.

Graph 4].

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Graph 4 – The role of the teachers’ association according to teachers



Base: Teachers (n=46)¹²

¹² This question was not asked of the principals and some schools did not have a teacher’s association.

School scouts (*comite-saranduy*)

In addition to the school *shura* and teachers' association, many schools have established internal school scouts, known as *comite-saranduy*, as a defense mechanism. These consist of students from the upper classes, selected by the principal and overseen by some of the teachers. Their mandate is to protect the school and the students by searching students and staff at the entrance, and registering any visitors. Among other functions, the scouts are tasked with enforcing school rules related to security, such as the ban on weapons and cell phones.

At Badghisi Girls' School, in Faryab, the school scouts appeared to be working very well, with the entire survey team being searched and asked to sign a visitors' log book upon entering the gate. The team's vehicle was also not allowed inside by the watchmen until the school management had given its approval. The school scouts can thus play the role of guards at the school gates, especially at girls' schools where the customarily male watchmen would not be allowed, for cultural reasons, to search female students. In certain schools, such as Deh Nau Boys' School, where the school staff suspected that students were cooperating with the opposition and were thereby a real threat to the school, school scouts would serve as an additional layer of protection from its own students.

The existence of school *shuras*, teachers' associations, and school scouts all point to efforts on the part of the government, the communities, and the schools themselves, to improve the safety of the school. These mechanisms work hand in hand with additional security measures, as discussed below.

Watchmen

"The guards of the school are old people. The active people should be selected as the guards of school so that they can control the school well."

—Student at Deh Nau Boys' School, Faryab Province

The most basic protection mechanism available to communities for safeguarding their schools before and after the regular school hours is to have unarmed watchmen on the premises, both during the daytime and at night. In Uruzgan, the security situation is so tense that at Deh Sang School there are five watchmen, while in Faryab most schools only had two. Such guards are meant to guard the gate, patrol the school perimeter, and ensure that nobody could bury a mine or throw anything at the school without being seen.¹³

The respondents' most frequent worry [see Graph 6] was that there were not enough watchmen to cover all shifts, especially at night, and suggestions were often made for their number to be increased. This was true at all levels, even at the provincial level in Uruzgan where the head of the PED lamented inaction with regard to the issue of guards: "we have several times asked for the number of school watchmen to be increased in order to better protect the schools, but no action has been taken". The head of the Khoje Sabz Push DED in Faryab also said that funds had recently been cut and that they would like to see night watchmen listed on every school's salary list (*tashkil*).

These unarmed guards, however, were not always seen as valuable. Students in a number of schools complained that the guards were old and ineffective in terms of being able to "run after children."

¹³ These particular concerns are related to recent attacks in the area, which were fresh in people's minds.

3.2.3 Joint school-community protection mechanisms

"For example when I am threatened personally I will inform the shura immediately."

–Onjelad Boys' School Teacher, Faryab Province

Schools are sometimes not fully incorporated into the communities they serve, either because the teachers and/or school management are from elsewhere, or because the school serves multiple villages and is physically removed from some of them. Despite being at the center of school affairs, and having the ability to sound the alarm any time a problem arises, the majority of the school management did not assume responsibility for school protection themselves; rather, they were quick to point to the government or local community as those holding this responsibility. Moreover, as will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter, the nature of the relationship between a school and the communities it serves is often a strong indication of the level of protection. The school *shura* and religious leaders play an important role in this.

One of the major responsibilities of the school *shura* is to ensure close relations between the schools and the communities it serves and there was a strong consensus amongst government authorities, school management, and community members that good school-community relations are the key to a successful protection mechanism. As such, principals and teachers in a number of schools wished that the community would cooperate closely with their schools. Many respondents shared the sentiment of the principal in Onjelad in Faryab, who believed that "if the community is cooperative with us, nothing will happen in the future." Children shared this sentiment as well, as expressed by a girl in Uruzgan who said that: "as long as people and government are in unity and peace, we will always feel safe both on our way to school and in school."

Conversely, as was mentioned by a principal in Maimana "the lack of cooperation between the school and the community makes schools more vulnerable." An employee at the DED in Dehrawud shared his fears that, "if the school doesn't have relations with the people it will face lots of problems." This relationship is therefore one of the linchpins in strengthening school security.

School management is instructed to report any incident to the DED or PED, but in most cases where the government did not prove reliable, the communities were asked to step in and act. As the principal of a school in Pashtun Kot recounted, having responded himself after an incident, "we informed the education department and governmental authorities. The government didn't do anything, so we informed the community through the school *shura* and they solved the issue."

After a threat or fear has crept into the community, causing attendance to wane, the responsibility often falls on the school *shura* to encourage parents to send their children back to school. In a variety of examples in the surveyed communities the *shura* took on the role of bringing students back to school after a threat, often with at least partial success. As recounted by the girls in Saracha in Nangarhar, parents and relatives were not allowing girls to go to school and the *shura* was able to convince the parents and relatives that they should go.

Although the community sometimes steps in when the government does not act, they are also at times unable or unwilling to do so. In the same district one boy told a story of his friend whose father was killed by the Taliban and was then threatened not to go to school if

he wanted to live. He said that the Taliban had also been threatening him for the past three or four months, but that he still went to school. When he told the people of the area and the government about it, they had not done anything.

Religious leaders

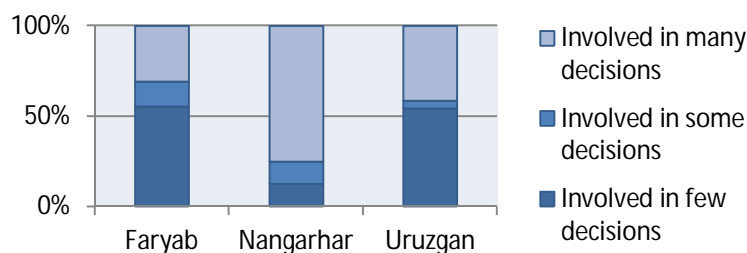
“Mullah imams should raise the awareness of the people regarding the importance of teachers and preach that these teachers are the ones who spread knowledge and instruct children.”

–Principal of a school in Uruzgan Province

Higher walls, barbed wire, and guards might help to deter an attack in the short-term but the ultimate goal is to remove or restrain the source of the threat. Most respondents believed this could only be done with the full support of the community and, more importantly, with a greater role for the religious leaders. The religious leaders at community level—*mullah imams* as they are locally known—are the heads of the mosques and those who preach to the community at Friday prayers, setting what often becomes the moral code of conduct. Their role in affecting perceptions and behavior in the community can be powerful. As one teacher in Faryab put it, “they are leaders of the people and their words have an effect on people.”

As can be seen below, the data show a high level of involvement on the part of the religious leaders in school affairs in Nangarhar, but to a lesser extent in Faryab and Uruzgan.

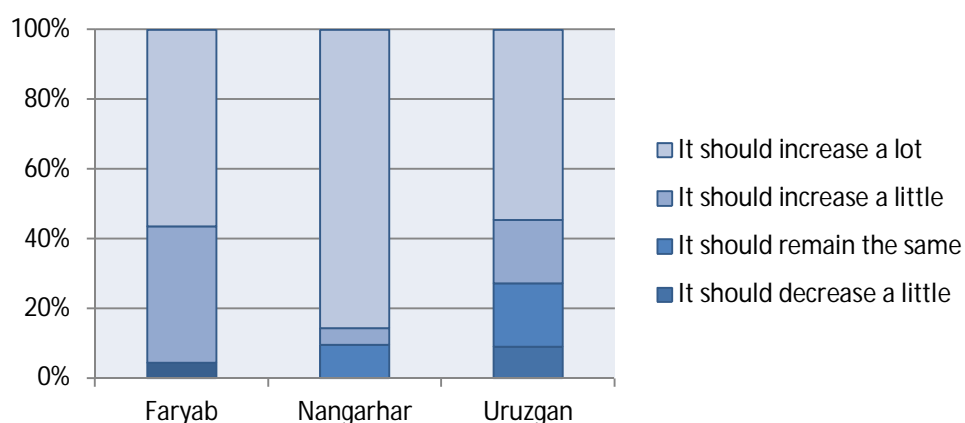
Graph 5 – Involvement of the religious leaders in school affairs



Base: School Personnel (n=77)

What is more significant, especially in Nangarhar, is that not only is the participation of the religious establishment in school matters high, but respondents believed that their involvement should be even greater. The majority of respondents believed that the mullah’s role in school matters should increase a lot [see Graph 6 below]. Beyond teaching religious education, at the mosque (specifically during Friday prayers) they are important in passing on messages that can either encourage or discourage school attendance.

Graph 6 – Perception of how the involvement of the religious establishment should change



Base: School Personnel (n=77)

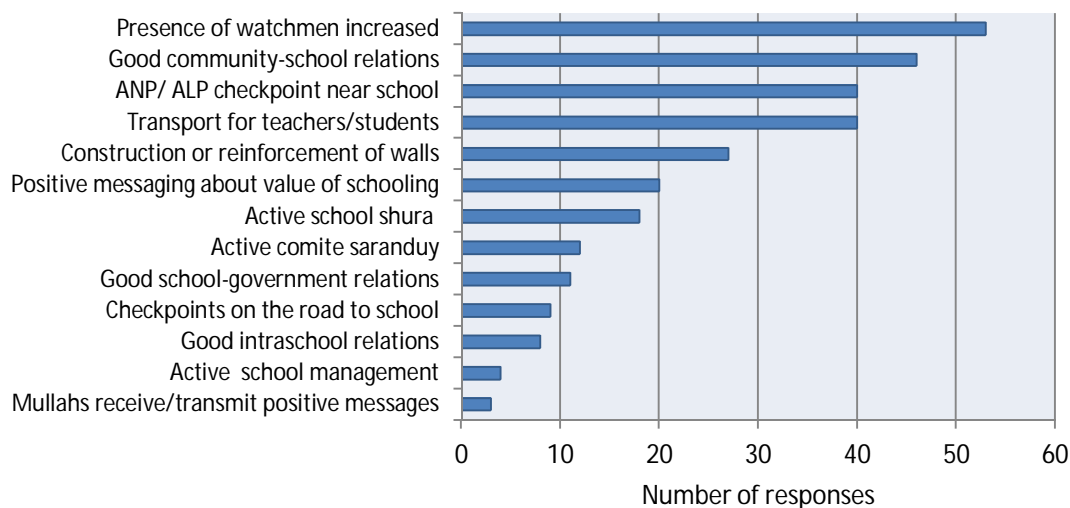
A multitude of positive examples emerged, which show how mullahs *do* and *can* play a role in safeguarding education. In fact, the vast majority of the comments regarding the involvement of the mullahs in school matters were positive. As one principal in Nangarhar said, “the Mullah tells the people that every man and woman should get an education.” The school personnel in particular appreciated the work being done by the religious leaders in the communities. They believed it had a strong, positive effect, as they preached about the value of education in the mosques and encouraged people to support the school and send their children to school.

There were also indications that not all mullahs’ statements in the surveyed areas were pro-education. Girls in Pashtun Kot District divulged in focus groups that mullahs had contributed to drops in attendance. As one schoolgirl put it, “most girls don’t come to school because the Mullah Imam doesn’t allow them.” Her peers agreed; one of whom added, “yes, the Mullah Imam of our village says that young girls are not allowed to school.” This was confirmed by the principal of another school in Faryab, while in another case, a teacher reported that she suspected that one of the threats received by the school had been initiated by a mullah in a nearby village.

3.2.4 Other security measures

Respondents had various views about how school protection can be improved, as shown in Graph 4 below.

Graph 7 – Perceptions as to what mechanisms can improve school protection



Base: All Respondents¹⁴ (n=153)

Checkpoints near schools

“There should be police in our area in order to establish security”

–Teacher in Qizil Qul, Faryab Province

A large number of respondents suggested establishing a checkpoint near the school in order to protect the schools [see **Error! Reference source not found.** below]. Options include not only the Afghan National Police (ANP), but also the ALP. But this is a highly controversial topic with strong voices opposed to it. The presence of armed guards, usually in the form of government security forces, is believed to improve security in some schools, but worsen it in others.

“If the government wants to establish security points near to school, people of the area will not let them do that because it will disturb the study and educational activities of the students.”

–Teacher in Deh Sang, Uruzgan Province

According to a number of respondents, particularly in Faryab and Uruzgan, the presence of ANSF will attract anti-government elements and increase insecurity at the school. As one teacher put it in Onjelad Village, “if the government does not interfere, security around the school will improve. If the government builds checkpoints near the school, the opposition will get involved in fights with the government.” Also in Chora District in Uruzgan Province, the same concern exists and respondents believed that the introduction of the ALP has contributed to more insecurity in the area.

This issue is so contentious that even within the same community there are strong opinions on both sides, as in the case of Jamshidi Village in Faryab where some female community

¹⁴ For FGDs, each unit indicates one mention during an FGD by any of the respondents

members would have liked to have a checkpoint established. When they suggested this to the school *shura*, they were told that “the existence of security forces near the school is dangerous.”

Boundary walls

“If a school has surrounding walls then the school, teachers, and students are safer”

–Employee at Dehrawud DED, Uruzgan Province

To safeguard the school, the primary physical improvement that respondents would have liked to see was the construction of walls. In some schools where a surrounding wall already existed, school personnel, community members, and students alike suggested that the wall’s height be raised and that barbed wire be placed along the wall. Such improvements could help deter attackers and help keep students away from the eyes of passersby, particularly in the case of girls.

Box 5 – Additional Suggestions: Uniforms and Emergency Response Training

In addition to responses to questions on the subject, students made unsolicited suggestions about school protection. When asked what they would do if they were head of the school, students mostly emphasized the importance of hiring qualified teachers, but other suggestions give some interesting insights as to what might make them feel safer.

A few students mentioned the importance of uniforms. As one student in Deh Nau Boys School explained, “if I were head of the school I would assign the students to wear the same uniform so that students could be differentiated from strangers who try to enter the school.”

Another student in Faryab, aware of the reported poison attack, felt that some emergency response training might be in order. “I would talk to the teachers and the students about poisoning. They need to be aware what to do when something like that happens. They should be taught what the rules are and how to react... like that they should cover their nose when they smell something suspicious, or that when they see someone suspicious, they need to report this immediately to the principal.”

3.2.5 Advocacy and dialogue

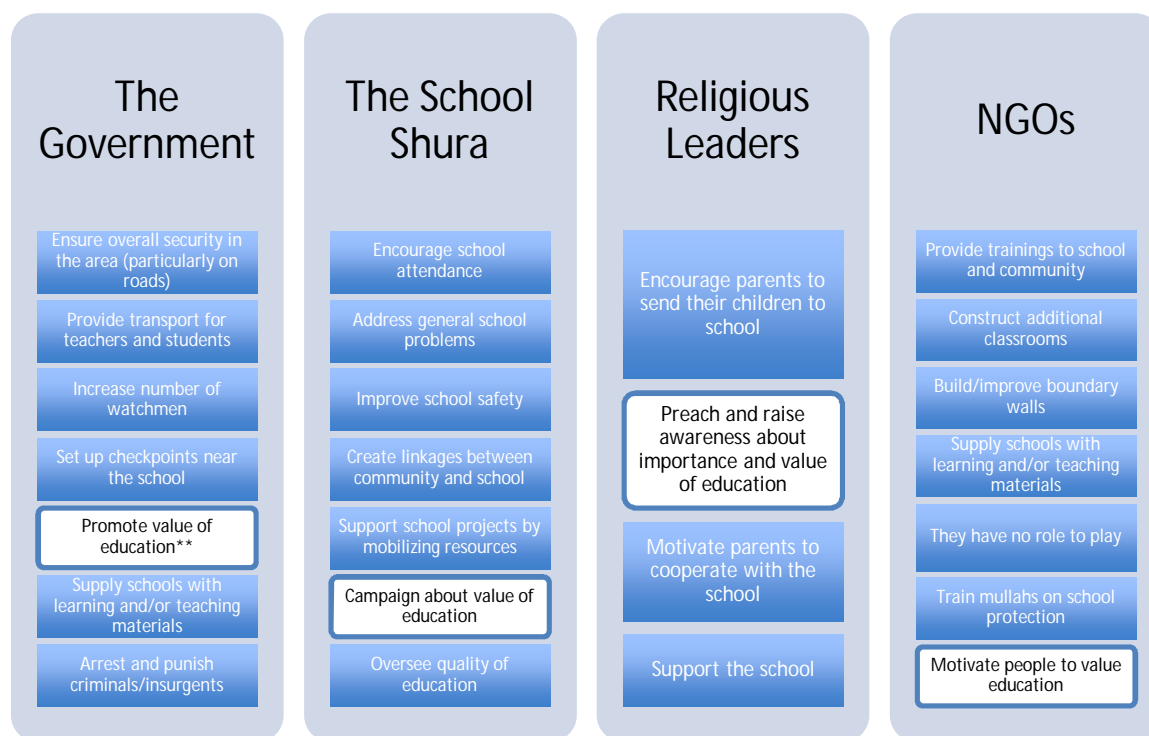
Positive pro-education messaging

“They don’t know the value of education; if they knew it, they would never stop us from coming to school.”

–7th grader in Shah Mansur School, Uruzgan Province

As can be seen in Figure 2 below, one of the most often-mentioned suggestions to make schools safe was to spread messages about the value of education in a campaign meant to counter what was sometimes referred to as “enemy propaganda.” Community members and school personnel alike emphasized the importance of this, referring to the problems related to the lack of value placed on education discussed earlier in this report. In Faryab, this approach has already yielded successes at least in encouraging school attendance, as recounted by one of the teacher in Deh Nau: “in response to the threats, the school *shura* reacted and encouraged students to attend school. Today the school doors would have been closed. It was because of that response that today our lessons are in progress.”

Figure 2 – Roles and Responsibilities of School Protection*



*Listed from top to bottom based on frequency of responses from most to least mentioned by all respondents.

**“Value of education” is highlighted as the only response to appear in all four categories.

The same approach was adopted at Jamshidi High School and neighboring schools after the reported poison attack. School personnel, community members, and religious leaders undertook a campaign to reassure the families in the area that it was safe for them to send their children to school, at the same time reaffirming the value of education and importance of showing resolve in the face of intimidation. For this to take place, there needs to be a positive relationship between the school and the community to allow for such communication channels to be open. This is discussed further in the next chapter.

Discussions with opposition groups

“If the school is threatened, we will make the people and elders of the area negotiate with opposing groups and have them avoid interrupting the classes.”

--Teacher in Badghisi, Faryab Province

As part of the FGDs, respondents were asked how they viewed the possibility of dialogue with the perpetrators of threats and/or attacks as a mitigation strategy. In Nangarhar especially, nearly every community appeared to be ready to sit down and talk with the opposition groups in order to solve protection problems, and believed this approach to be a “very effective” mechanism. In response to a threat, communities would contact opposition groups and try to resolve the issue through dialogue. In Behsud, even female members of the community confirmed this sentiment: “meeting with opposition to come up with a solution is a very effective method...we are in agreement with this method.”

In Uruzgan, the DED acknowledged that the local people had contact with the Taliban and other opposition groups and that they could coordinate with them to try to resolve certain issues. Children also were in favor of engaging with the insurgents, as one 15-year-old girl explained in Chora District: "I would feel safer when a good communication system is established between our people and the insurgents."

"Negotiations are not beneficial with the opposition; if we put our heads at their feet and bow in front of them, their morale will be strengthened and then we must accept whatever they want... it is not good."

—Elder in Jamshidi Village, Faryab Province

In Faryab, communities appeared more reluctant to engage with opposition groups. Some respondents in Onjelad Village understood that it might not always be a bad idea: "if meeting these opposing groups can lead to a peaceful situation, it is a good way. We can get nothing by fighting, except destruction...The people of the area, elders and influential people must take a serious step and talk with the oppositions in order to understand their aims and reason with them." However, in general, in this northern province where the strength of the opposition is a relatively new phenomenon, respondents in most villages, and in Maimana as well, appeared to be very much opposed to discussions with opposition groups.

When asked what they thought about instances where, in response to a threat, communities had met with opposition groups to resolve the problem, most community members strongly disagreed with such an approach. Negotiation was not seen as a viable option and was seen as one that would worsen the situation: "it is not good to negotiate because they will gain more confidence and encouragement and they will always threaten us." Rather than engaging the opposition in discussion, fighting back was seen as the preferred method for resolving threats, as described by one young man in Qizil Qul: "we will never give up against their threats. We will fight them till the last drop of blood flows through our veins in order to defend our country and schools. We will never agree to meet or negotiate with opposing groups." And others confirmed such feelings, such as a teacher in Deh Nau who warned: "if they threaten us again, we will ambush and arrest some of them during the night, or we will send someone to spy and find out about their aims."

CHAPTER IV. DISCUSSION

This chapter discusses the findings of the research in relation to the wider literature, particularly around the themes of school vulnerability and mitigation strategies. These points highlight the importance of community involvement and of supporting local coping mechanisms as the most sustainable method of improving school protection. This discussion is then framed within the context of the Schools as Zones of Peace initiative, considering the implications these findings might have on programming and advocacy.

4.1. Vulnerability

“In our school, teenage girls are studying, therefore the school is confronted with threats, because in this area the girls’ school is banned by the Taliban or opposition parties of the government. In Uruzgan, girls are not allowed to go to school.”

–School Principal in Uruzgan Province

Girls Education

“In our school, teenage girls are studying, therefore the school is confronted with threats, because in this area the girls’ school is banned by the Taliban or opposition parties of the government.” – School Principal in Uruzgan Province

Schools that girls attend, whether solely as girls or in mixed classes with boys, appear to be more vulnerable and run the greatest risk of being threatened and/or attacked.¹⁵ a point confirmed by 72% of school personnel respondents in this study. Girls’ schools are vulnerable because of opposition to girls’ education. This opposition can be ideological, religious or cultural and it may or may not be accompanied by threats and attacks on schools. Taliban have a position on education which includes a demand to MoE that girls do not study with boys and male teachers do not teach girl students or vice versa.¹⁶

This presents a dilemma for the MoE. Given the lack of female teachers – a problem they are seeking to address - if girls’ schools were limited to only having female teachers, many schools would have no teachers at all. In communities where parents are keen for their girls to study, the issue of insufficient teachers is often resolved by having mixed schools, where both girls and boys study within the same premises and/or where girls are taught by male teachers. NGOs such as Save the Children support many community-based classes where men, including mullahs, teach girl students in the early grades. This increases access to education but can also increase vulnerability.

¹⁵ CARE International (2009), Knowledge on Fire: Attacks on Education in Afghanistan: Risks and Measures for Successful Mitigation, 2.

¹⁶ Giustozzi and Franco (2013), 9.

Physical protection

Physical protection in the form of a high boundary wall is a real concern for communities as protection for their schools. A boundary wall serves two purposes: to deter potential attackers in general; and also to provide privacy, which is particularly relevant for girls to protect them from being visible in school premises that some stakeholders would consider unsuitable.

Social Cohesion

"If the people are united, there is security." - elder in Badghisi Village in Faryab

"when there are bad relationships among people in a village we feel least secure." – boy in Chora District in Uruzgan

The most critical factor in creating insecurity for schools, according to respondents in all three provinces, is where the community is not united around the school. Principals, teachers, and community members alike, mentioned "disunity of the people" as a problem that makes schools more vulnerable and exposes them to threats and/or attacks. Children also sense this, describing it in terms of bad relationships between people.

Political Use of Schools

The non-educational use of schools clearly increases their vulnerability in some communities. Past experience with schools being used as polling stations for elections in 2010 has increased stakeholder resistance for the forthcoming elections in 2014.

4.2. Community Response

"When the schools have support of the community members they will always be safe."

–Community member, Onjelad Village, Faryab Province

"I don't think schools are easily protected... we can't feel safe in our home, so how can schools be safe? But we try our best to avoid that anyone could hurt any schools."

–Parent in Deh Nau, Faryab Province

Communities in all provinces are taking a variety of measures to protect their schools. Some are through official structures, others are their own initiatives. It is clear from the research that communities, particularly in the rural areas, must be at the center of a project such as SZOP and that support should be provided to strengthen existing community coping mechanisms and strategies. It is also clear that religious leaders are particularly important stakeholders. They have a high degree of influence on beliefs, attitudes and actions of communities, whether in support of education or against it.

Communities are often not comfortable when the school is associated with political activities because they know it compromises their security.

Evidence shows that some attacks on schools are symbolic. A study in Nepal¹⁷ showed that schools were vulnerable where they are the only entity associated with the government,

¹⁷ Margit van Wessel and Ruud van Hirtum (2013), "Schools as tactical targets in conflict: What the case of Nepal can teach us", *Comparative Education Review* 57/1.

especially where they are high-profile.¹⁸ Other factors of vulnerability can be found in a school's infrastructure and strategic location. For example, a school is more likely to be used as a military outpost, and hence be under threat, if it is the tallest building in the area and has a surrounding wall that could be used for defense.

These realities underline the importance of advocacy for declaring schools as zones of peace. For those schools at risk of attack or misuse the issues can be deeply political, involving government as well as opposition groups.

The 2010 UNESCO Education Under Attack report states that "it is possible to negotiate with rebels, even rebels who seem ideologically opposed to education, to end attacks, and reopen schools closed by threats."¹⁹ This has been happening in Afghanistan and the role of the Ministry of Education and wider government has been well researched.²⁰

4.3. Implications for Future Programming and Advocacy

"I don't think schools are easily protected... we can't feel safe in our home, so how can schools be safe? But we try our best to avoid that anyone could hurt any schools."

–Parent in Deh Nau, Faryab Province

Understanding who takes responsibility for the protection of schools can help programmers decide which groups to support.

It is clear from the research that communities, particularly in the rural areas, must be at the center of a project such as SZOP and that support should be provided to strengthen existing community coping mechanisms and strategies. It is also clear that religious leaders are particularly important stakeholders. They have a high degree of influence on beliefs, attitudes and actions of communities, whether in support of education or against it.

Evidence shows that some attacks on schools are symbolic. A study in Nepal²¹ showed that schools were vulnerable where they are the only entity associated with the government, especially where they are high-profile.²² The Hamid Karzai School in Uruzgan is one example of this, having been targeted numerous times, ostensibly due to its association with the President. Other factors of vulnerability can be found in a school's infrastructure and strategic location. For example, a school is more likely to be used as a military outpost, and hence be under threat, if it is the tallest building in the area and has a surrounding wall that could be used for defense.

Actions that associate the school with a particular political activity can also compromise its security, as was the case in Nepal, where schools were used for political gatherings. In Afghanistan, the non-educational use of schools can also be seen to increase their vulnera-

¹⁸ Ibid, 8.

¹⁹ UNESCO (2010), 15.

²⁰ Giustozzi and Franco (2011), *The Battle for the Schools: The Taleban and State Education*, Afghanistan Analysts Network, 8.

²¹ Margit van Wessel and Ruud van Hirtum (2013), "Schools as tactical targets in conflict: What the case of Nepal can teach us", *Comparative Education Review* 57/1.

²² Ibid, 8.

bility. Throughout the country, the IMF and ANSF²³ have used schools as military outposts, and AOGs were reported to also be using schools as gathering places, as reported by one school in Faryab. Similarly, when schools are used as polling stations for elections, opposition groups have been known to disrupt the process by directly attacking such centers in order to deter voters from casting their ballots. When this occurs, schools become a battleground for political and/or military rivalries, rendering them legitimate targets in the current conflict.

These realities underline the importance of advocacy for declaring schools as zones of peace. For those schools at risk of attack or misuse, the issues can be deeply political, involving government as well as opposition groups.

The 2010 UNESCO Education Under Attack report states that “it is possible to negotiate with rebels, even rebels who seem ideologically opposed to education, to end attacks, and reopen schools closed by threats.”²⁴ This has been happening in Afghanistan and the role of the Ministry of Education and wider government has been well researched.²⁵

This makes some aspects of advocacy sensitive and potentially dangerous both for NGOs and for the communities they aim to work with. As demonstrated by this research, communities are divided about whether they want to try to engage or not and how dangerous it can be to do so. The differences between and within the three provinces show that it would be neither possible, nor advisable, to adopt a single model for school protection in the Afghan context.

²³ 65 cases of such occupations were investigated countrywide for a forthcoming UNICEF/CARE International report on attacks on schools in Afghanistan, according to its author, Jennifer Rowell.

²⁴ UNESCO (2010), 15.

²⁵ Giustozzi and Franco (2011), *The Battle for the Schools: The Taliban and State Education*, Afghanistan Analysts Network, 8.

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