

Terre des hommes Magazine

Courage

Afghanistan
**Health is the
children's
future**





“Your support is vital for children. Because here, every smile and every dream counts.”

Rana Alhelsi, Country Director
at Terre des hommes in Afghanistan

Every child in the world has the right to a childhood. It's that simple.

Every day, I read the Terre des hommes slogan posted outside my office: *“Every child in the world has the right to a childhood. It's that simple.”* This slogan guides me and my colleagues in everything we do and reminds us of our responsibilities towards children in Afghanistan. We have to make sure we are doing everything possible to allow children to fulfil their potential especially in the communities we support where many families have no access to even the most basic health care or a minimum of protection.

In 2024, Afghanistan witnessed an increase in vulnerability as more than half the population was considered in need of basic support according to Afghanistan Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan. The outlook for 2025 does not inspire optimism as needs are expected to increase while international funding continues to dwindle. It is often the children and women who are the most susceptible in such situations as they constitute around 70% of the people in need.

Tdh established its office in Kabul in 1995; over these 30 years, Afghanistan witnessed drastic political changes and suffered several climate related crises which only exasperates the vulnerabilities. Yet, with your support, we persist despite challenges to deliver on our slogan, our belief.

In the following pages, you will discover the daily lives of Afghan children like Hajira, Fatima and Khudba, in what is known as “white areas”; these are basically communities in hard to reach rural areas that suffer from weak basic services and infrastructure. There, the health centres and safe spaces created by Terre des hommes allow children and mothers to feel that they are being looked after and cared for. I hope you will appreciate how much your support is vital for children, allowing them to enjoy a normal childhood and to have a bright future. Because here, every smile and every dream counts.


Rana Alhelsi

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Health is the children's future

In the isolated villages of Nangarhar province, Terre des hommes is restoring hope to those who have long since lost it. In this region devastated by years of conflict, the creation of health centres and safe spaces for children is changing lives: people are regaining their dignity and allowing themselves to think about the future. But there is still so much to do...

"The first time, I found it hard to make the long journey, but when I got there, I realised why the local people needed us, and I quickly forgot how tired I was." Dr Safiullah Amarkhel describes his first journey of more than two hours from Jalalabad, capital of Nangarhar province, to Bandar Khula, in the Achin district.



"I realised why the local people needed us, and I quickly forgot how tired I was."

Safiullah Amarkhel, doctor

Terre des hommes (Tdh) set up one of its thirteen healthcare centres there in April 2024. Every day, Tdh teams travel to this area close to Pakistan with vans loaded with medical equipment. Little by little, the vehicles penetrate steep landscapes and reach smaller roads which finally become paths bordered by mountains and infinite plains. Afghanistan is as astonishing for the beauty of its landscapes as it is disconcerting for its sense of emptiness. Suddenly, you see villages and small communities where families live in houses made of stone or dried earth. Many are returnees that came back home after having fled to Pakistan or Iran.

Hassan Khan Maroof, regional programme coordinator, sets the scene in Achin, Deh Bala and Nazyan, the three districts where

Tdh started its activities. *"If we are not there, there is no health or protection. We're not talking about 'a little' or 'a minimum': we're talking about 'nothing'."*

Did you know?

198'700

people, mostly
children and women
were provided with
healthcare support
in 2024



Tdh is only allowed to set up in the "white zones", those regions where there is no infrastructure, like here, where for forty years, there has been nothing but suffering. The calm you feel when you set foot on this land contrasts with the pain of the past. Before the arrival of the Taliban in 2021, the Islamic State group controlled the territory for several years. In 2017, the infamous 'MOAB bomb' (Massive Ordnance Air Blast), nicknamed the 'Mother of All Bombs', was dropped by the United States in the Achin district. The most powerful non-nuclear bomb in history caused a great deal of damage, and the region still bears the scars today. It is here, at the heart of these battered lives and landscapes, that Tdh is helping to build the Afghanistan of tomorrow. Health is an absolute priority because the lives of young mothers and children are in danger. A few months after the launch of the health centres, Tdh is already measuring the impact of its action.

Fatima, 17 years old, catheter placed on her hand, tells how much her life has changed thanks to the Bandar Khula health centre. *"Before, we had to walk for two hours to get to the nearest clinic. It was exhausting, and for people who were already ill, their condition got worse."* *"Some even lost their lives on the way,"* insists Dr Safiullah Amarkhel. The young girl was referred to the Tdh centre by a community

 Hajira, aged 10, at home after visiting the Tdh mobile health centre (see her story on the next page).



↑ The road in Nangarhar province leading to the villages where Tdh has set up healthcare centres.

volunteer who was alerted to her worrying condition. *"I was weak, with burning sensations under the soles of my feet, a lot of dizziness and tiredness,"* says Fatima, who was soon diagnosed with moderate anaemia. *"The doctor gave me some medication and explained how to improve my diet. I quickly regained my strength and received my first tetanus vaccination."*



"The doctor gave me some medication and explained how to improve my diet."

Fatima, 17 years old

Before coming to the centre, however, she was anxious, not being used to receiving care. Reassured to be surrounded by other women and children in the waiting room, she immediately took advantage of the initial advice. *"A nurse gave us an information session on hygiene, sanitation, vaccinations and nutrition."* In the health centres, the walls of the

brightly-lit rooms are covered with educational posters teaching good hygiene and nutrition practices. As a large proportion of the population is not literate, attention is therefore attracted through diagrams, drawings and images.

Seeing smiles again

The women listen attentively to the advice given by the Tdh teams. We can see nails painted with flaking varnish, with dark edges from the soil they are working with. During the consultations and meetings, they forget their harsh lives in the fields to worry about their health.

Bandar Khula is not the only village to benefit from this revival. Every day, Tdh vehicles drive through other empty landscapes, in other even more isolated valleys. Kharkanai, in the Deh Bala district, is surrounded by rugged mountains. The village looks like an oasis, with old houses built on top. Here, we meet 10-year-old Hajira, with thick eyebrows, round cheeks and big green eyes. In her daily life, we see her in turn smiling, enigmatic, proud, laughing, shy or diligent. Above all, she is back to being a healthy child. A few months ago, suffering from a fever, she had a severe sore throat, coughed a lot and had difficulty expressing herself, causing concern among her family. It was the arrival of the Tdh mobile clinic in the village that offered them treatment. Halima, the mother, who has already lost a son in combat, finally sees a little light

at the end of the tunnel. *"Support makes all the difference for families like ours who can't afford treatment."*

Meanwhile, Hajira and her younger brothers are busy in the courtyard of the family home. The smiles are radiant and the Tdh team is delighted to witness it. A few years ago, such scenes would have been impossible to capture. This opening of the doors is as much the result of fruitful dialogue with the families as it is recognition of the care given to Hajira. Yet her health could have deteriorated because last March the authorities banned mobile clinics. But in such a remote village, having a mobile rather than a fixed structure means that as many people as possible can be reached. After negotiations, Tdh was able to retain two mobile structures which travel to the most isolated localities to reach families with vital healthcare.



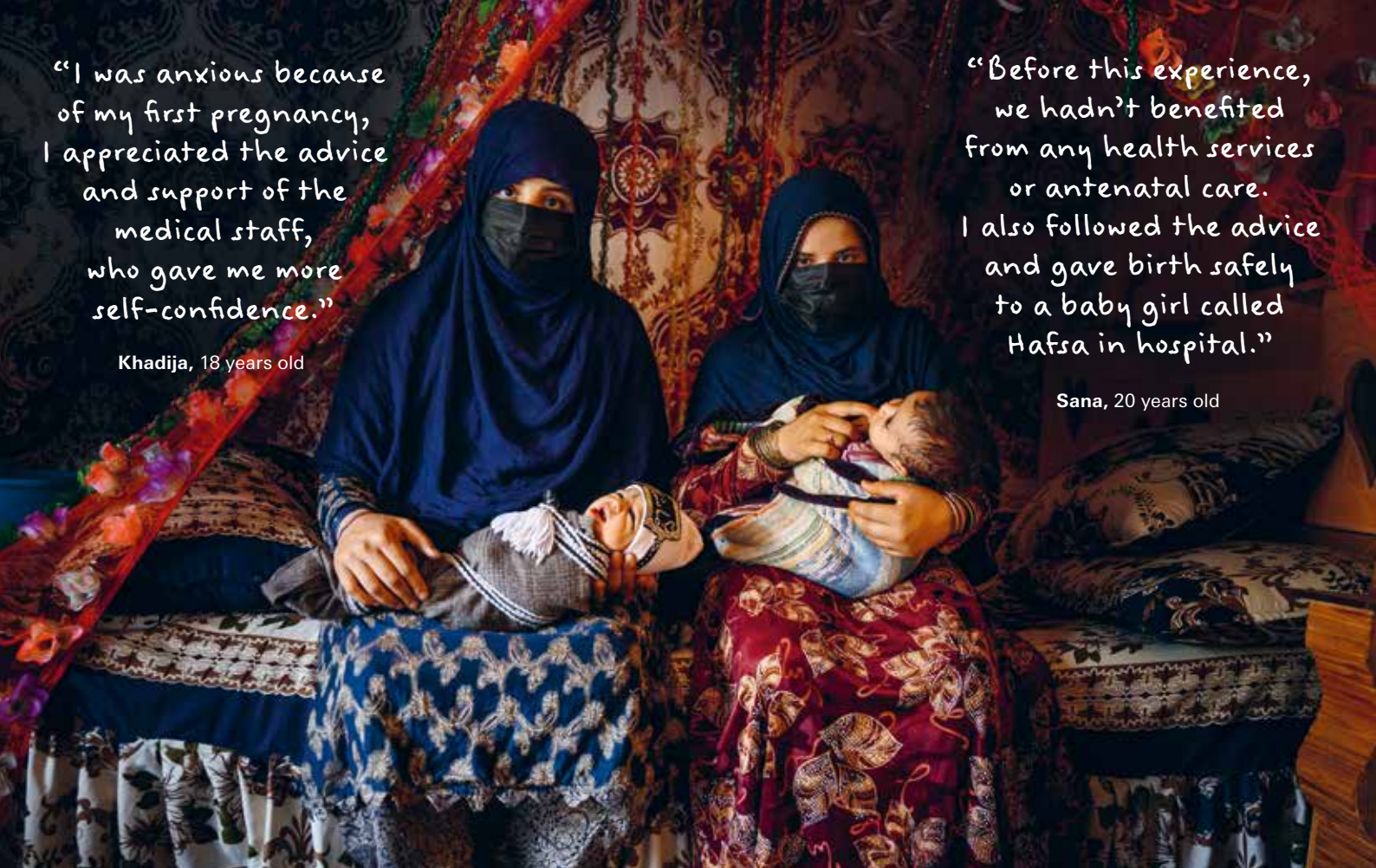
↑ A child is screened for signs of malnutrition in one of our mobile health clinics.

"I was anxious because of my first pregnancy, I appreciated the advice and support of the medical staff, who gave me more self-confidence."

Khadija, 18 years old

"Before this experience, we hadn't benefited from any health services or antenatal care. I also followed the advice and gave birth safely to a baby girl called Hafsa in hospital."

Sana, 20 years old



When two sisters-in-law give birth at the same time

These mobile clinics are set up each day by the teams in buildings lent by the community. Curtains are used to create islands of privacy. Sometimes, discussions between patients and medical

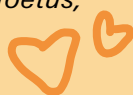
staff take place outside, in the shade, on plastic chairs. In front of the building, all the medicines are carefully lined up on a table before being distributed. All the registers are kept by hand. It is on one of these large notebooks that the

medical details of Sana, 20, and Khadija, 18, who are consulting midwife Kalsima Maroof for a post-natal check-up, are recorded. The two young mothers, who are also sisters-in-law, had given birth two weeks apart. The intervention of Tdh was decisive: they were anaemic and had planned to have their children born at home, despite the risks. Sana and Khadija were weak, tired and had no appetite, but they received treatment and support for the end of their pregnancy, as Khadija recounts: "We received soap and a mosquito net, and as I was anxious because of my first pregnancy, I appreciated the advice and support of the medical staff, who gave me more self-confidence. Thanks to this help, I was able to give birth to a little boy called Ilham, and I'm deeply grateful." Sana adds: "Before this experience, we hadn't benefited from any health services or antenatal care. I also followed the advice and gave birth safely to a baby girl called Hafsa in hospital." "I reassured and comforted them through dialogue, awareness-raising and advice,"

How do Tdh health centres work?



Kalsima details Tdh's activities for pregnant women: "On a daily basis, we register pregnant and lactating women, screen them for malnutrition and then provide antenatal or postnatal care, physical examinations, health education and family planning education. In the case of Khadija and Sana, for example, we monitored the heart rate of each foetus, took blood pressure and pulse, and measured height and weight."



Other patients receive standard consultations and are referred to specialists if necessary. Health centres can also identify protection needs. "Some patients who come for health consultations also know that we have protection activities," explains Hassan. "If we detect a problem or they ask us for help, they meet one of our advisers. Others find out about our services when they arrive at the health centre, and our social workers take the time to describe our activities to them and show them how their family could benefit from taking part."

reveals Kalsima, who convinced them to give birth in a health facility. Back in their sober family home, with its exposed beams and walls decorated with white sheets with floral motifs, the two young women lie in a bedroom where thick blankets offer them a semblance of comfort. The other members of the family occupy beds made of wood and rope, with carpets on top for lack of mattresses.

Holding her 18-day-old baby in her arms, Sana describes the post-natal care offered by Tdh. *"Besides checking on my baby's health, the midwife provides information on family planning, breastfeeding and hygiene."* Kalsima is happy with the outcome for her two patients. *"Thanks to our efforts, we are transforming lives by ensuring that mothers like Khadija and Sana have access to the healthcare they need for safe pregnancies and a healthy future for their children."* Exhausted on their beds, their looks mixed with tiredness and gratitude, the two sisters-in-law express as much relief as weariness. They know that as soon as they have regained their strength, they will return to work in the home or in the fields.

The journey of Khudba: from anger to dreams

Offering children other prospects and a better place in society by protecting them is one of the other challenges for Tdh in this region. After Deh Bala, we change valleys again to reach a village in the Nazyan district. We head for a building that houses a safe space for children. It's a place of refuge where they can play and learn, even though there are no schools in the vicinity.

Srozara, the mother of 10-year-old Khudba, reveals that her daughter was *"very angry"* before she joined the centre. Yet it's hard to associate Khudba with anger when you look at her today. Her round, laughing eyes never cease to accompany her dazzling smile. She tells us all about herself while playing with dolls.

"I felt uncomfortable, but the volunteer treated us with kindness and took good care of us."

Khudba, 10 years old



"Before, I used to spend my days with the goats and sheep, taking them out to graze. I collected grass and wood, and sometimes wandered aimlessly when I wanted to play or study. But the nearest school was too far away for me to get there." Anxious, Khudba lived her daily life with a sense of isolation.

Her mother recalls this difficult period. *"She was carrying heavy things because we weren't aware of the dangers. And because she was so angry, she found it hard to communicate with the other children. The social workers and volunteers gave us information about children's rights, and since then we've become aware of what is good and what is not."* At first, Khudba went through a period of adjustment. *"I felt uncomfortable, but the volunteer treated us with kindness and took good care of us."* A mental health and psychosocial support counsellor spoke with the little girl, who for the first time in her life found a space where her voice could be heard. Encouraged, she discovered teaching. *"Maths, the alphabet, spelling, drawing, handicrafts, prayers..."* explains Khudba, who is also learning to have fun in a group. She has been introduced to thoke and chendro, games played outdoors with small stones.



Did you know?

23.7 million

people in Afghanistan are in humanitarian need in 2024, this is more than one in two of the population

Khudba is happy to say: *"Now I have friends"*. When you see her laughing and frolicking in the middle of a green garden, surrounded by all her playful friends, you can see the transformation of this girl who was isolated and without aspirations. Her new routine, which includes three hours at the centre to study and play, has inspired her to pursue a dream: *"to become a teacher to educate the girls in my village. I hope that in the future, all the girls will be able to go*

Modaser, a child who went from work to school

Tdh social workers had to convince the family of Modaser, 8 years old, for him to join a Tdh safe space. Before, his father used to take him to work every day in his spare parts workshop. *"When I came home, I was so tired that I went to bed without washing"*, says Modaser. Introduced to painting, drawing and cricket, the little boy was transformed. *"He quickly showed his potential, and his behaviour and attitude improved,"* says Zafar Khan, his volunteer teacher. Cricket, a popular sport in Afghanistan that requires few resources, has helped the child to progress as part of a group while revealing his dexterity, just as drawing has highlighted his capacity for application. Modaser now attends a local school because the reintegration work begun at the Tdh centre has paid off. *"I can dream big"*, smiles Modaser, who has discovered the right to imagine a future.



to school and not stop studying." As we leave Khudba, we take in the many smiles in the garden. Near a well, the girls play with a skipping rope, taking a breather from the dark questions about their future and their future place in Afghan society. Hajira, Khudba, Fatima, Sana and Khadija need to know that new things are possible. Receiving care, learning and taking part in games

and activities will help them feel proud: having goals is at least as important as being in good health. Community volunteer Shaima insists. *"It's so rewarding to witness children's development. Khudba's story illustrates the impact of our activities. With our support, she has not only regained her childhood but also hope for a better future."* Hope for a better future, a prospect that Fatima is

delighted to see taking shape: *"Thanks to the help we have received, not only is our health improving, but above all we are regaining hope. It restores dignity to our lives."*

Marc Nouaux

With your donation, we can, for example



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help a pregnant woman receive the necessary post-natal and ante-natal care

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By making a donation, you will contribute to our children's aid projects worldwide, with one of the options described on page 2.

Word to

Hassan Khan Maroof, *Terre des hommes* regional programme coordinator in Jalalabad, Nangarhar province

Hassan, from the province of Nangarhar, has been working for Terre des hommes (Tdh) for sixteen years. He talks about his life, which has been punctuated by crises and conflicts for forty years. He also explains his fight for improving the daily lives of women and children alike in Afghan society.



“Medical staff, social workers,
community volunteers...
We all need to give ourselves
strength. We can't do anything
on our own.”



As an Afghan, you have known almost nothing but conflict or war in your country since you were born: how can you never be discouraged?

I started working in the humanitarian sector when I myself was a refugee in Pakistan. I became a teacher in a camp, so I was a refugee teaching refugees [smiles]. I came back to Afghanistan in 2005 as an aid worker and since then I've been very happy when I help people. When they receive food or money to buy things they need, I see them smile and that makes me feel really good. It's not difficult to get motivated because there's so much to do in this country. For example, in the Achin district, Tdh helps with health and protection, but there are also huge needs in terms of housing, sanitation, education, etc. As soon as we spot a gap, we do our utmost to provide an appropriate response, either ourselves or through our partners.

So solidarity is one of the keys to rebuilding the country?

I'll give you an example: if you hold a glass of water in one hand, you'll be able to do it for a quarter of an hour without any problem, but if you hold it on your own for two or three hours, your hand will eventually become paralysed. And even if you have the strength to hold that glass of water for twenty-four hours, you won't be able to move your hand after that. So we put the glass on a table and ask everyone to hold it for a while.

Medical staff, social workers, community volunteers... We all need to give ourselves strength by holding that glass of water. We can't do anything on our own.

How is the situation of women and their access to care?

It's true that women in these districts are very isolated. For example, there are still far too many home births, and this is very worrying for their health. They can't make the slightest decision, and to leave the house they have to get permission from the men in the family. So when a member of our team provides patients with information about complications related to pregnancy or home births, he must also talk to the men. Giving information only to women may have no effect. On the other hand, if men are aware of all the dangers, they will accept the changes more easily and women will have greater access to health services. They will anticipate childbirth by arranging transport to hospital, for example. We give them contacts for places they can go so they know exactly what to do on the big day.

Dialogue with men is therefore a key factor in improving the daily lives of women and children alike...

You have to think ahead with them when you talk about progress and the future. For example, when we talk to men in a poor, very isolated village, we ask them

how they see the place in twenty years' time: do they want to let their children work at a very young age and receive no care or education? If so, in twenty years' time these children will be in the same situation as their parents today and nothing will change. We tell them that they have the means to initiate change right now by talking to those around them about the need to care for children and send them to school, including girls. Its important that children are aware of their rights and their needs. They will build the future. Then, other things will be possible, other services will exist thanks to the education they will have received.

What are your hopes for the future of your country?

For forty years, governments have changed, regulations have come and gone. Government after government, there have been wars and conflicts, and at the end of the day, 'normal' people are at home. Many have lost their jobs, they've been through so many hard times... They wonder what's going to happen next. Psychologically, they are very affected. We ask ourselves how we can support them when we ourselves, as Afghans, are so affected. But the people give us the strength to carry on. We don't have the right to give up, ever.

Interview by Marc Nouaux

↪ **Tdh midwives play an important role in the care of pregnant and breastfeeding women. Here, 18-year-old Khadija visits Kalsima Maroof with her four-day-old baby boy at the Tdh mobile health centre.**





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Every child in the world has the right to a childhood. It's that simple.

We aspire to a world where children's rights, as defined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, are always respected. A world where children can grow up safe from harm, and become the agents of change they wish to see in their lives.

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