

Afghan notes 3/14/2000

In 1998 I was asked by UNICEF and STC/US to help the development community plan a strategy for long term assistance to Afghan education. I had always wanted to go to Afghanistan and it seemed a perfect opportunity. Today I will talk about the situation of Afghan education and briefly describe the strategies we came up with to address the problems in that unique context. I will end by describing what happened with these strategies after I left. The consultancy of course took place in a somewhat different set of political circumstances than now, but in terms of education the situation remains pretty much the same. Several months before I arrived, the Taliban had banned girls from attending public schools and women from engaging in public employment. This precipitated a crisis among the assistance community who by charter or out of principle felt they couldn't promote education services that were withheld from half the population.

The consultancy started with a meeting in Islamabad of 23 representatives of the major players (out of roughly 40) involved in education assistance to Afghanistan. This meeting was the first of its kind in the education sector--that is bringing the entire community together to coordinate its activities. The purpose was for each of agency to outline their aims, describe their activities and detail how they hoped to proceed in the future. The participants represented international donors (multilateral and bilateral), private voluntary organizations and a number of Afghan NGOs. UNICEF and World Bank participants were particularly interested in developing what they called "Principled Common Programming"--that is a coordination of assistance efforts addressing the educational needs of all children in Afghanistan. After the ban on girls attending public schools, a number of schools were established informally for girls in private homes. The assistance community worried that support for these home schools might indefinitely perpetuate an inferior program for girls. The Taliban were also declaring that girls should not continue their schooling after grade three, and most of these informal schools did not go beyond that point. From the discussions at the meeting it was clear that the agencies were far more interested in political issues and the difficulties of working in the Afghan context than in the education issues, where few attending had any special expertise.

My job then was to assess the situation of international assistance and suggest strategies for long term support of Afghan education. Specifically I was supposed to identify the technical issues that challenge or provide opportunities for assistance, to assess the capacities in the assistance community to implement initiatives, and to identify strategies that would maximize the quality of assistance impacts (no matter what happened in the future). I first made clear that I would address only the technical issues of education, and would not try to second-guess the future of the political situation. I would however try to identify strategies that would not "waste" assistance money no matter what the future held. In the three weeks that followed I interviewed the key players of the organizations individually in Islamabad, Peshawar, Kabul, and Jalabad and met the Taliban Deputy Minister of Education. I visited refugee schools in Pakistan, home schools in Kabul, and "community" and refugee schools in Jalabad, and small schools throughout Konar Province. The recommended "strategies" therefore are a product of these often, long and intense discussions that would usually start by their telling me in great detail what they actually were

doing in term of training, curriculum development, implementation, etc.

Before I left I debriefed an even larger group from the assistance community that convened again in Islamabad. There was no question that interest was very high---the meetings lasted 3 hours and no one left the room even though we provided a tea break to make it convenient for people to leave.

1. Recent political context

1978: Communist invasion

1989: Communist retreat

1992: Communist supported government overthrown

1994: Taliban take control

1996: Girls and women banned from schools

1998: Taliban controlled 2/3s of country or 60% of pop

1998: Major offensive starts ending in control of over 94% of country

2. Education Context

- o Volatile political situation
- o No effective government or institutional structure
- o Local personalized decision-making
- o Modern schooling existed in urban areas
- o Koranic learning in all country
- o Now 5% enrolled inside; 47% in camps outside

The future of the Taliban control over Afghanistan is uncertain. In reality, there is no effective national government in Afghanistan and local personalized decision-making is the norm even in areas controlled by the Taliban--a fact that is especially true in rural areas. The Taliban in effect are a movement not a coherent government. Government civil servants in some cases carry on in their positions from before, albeit without resources or even salaries. Most Taliban are young religiously educated radicals who do not become involved in administrative decisions unless confronted with them. This means education services where they exist go on without official permission or authority, largely supported by local parents or assistance agencies operating in a governmental vacuum. Arbitrary school closings and other interference occur when a Talib decides he does not approve of something, or there are general statements from within the Taliban hierarchy banning specific practices, such as girls' education.

Education is not new to Afghanistan. Historically modern schools for boys and girls existed mainly in urban areas. Few were located in the countryside outside of the Koranic schools which had been widespread from after the Islamic invasion in the 7th century. Estimates put enrollments at 30% in 1978 and 19% in 1988. Now it is believed that 5% of children inside Afghanistan are being educated and 47% in camps outside. However to encourage repatriation, the assistance community has been cutting back on support for refugees, and when I was there they were

concerned whether they could find support to educate any more children in the camps. Swedish funding for 600 schools continues to be the largest operation inside Afghanistan. Once assistance agencies or the Afghan NGOs that they fund are in the country, they work fairly autonomously within certain known limitations.

3. Personal context

- o Security
- o Travel
- o Clothing
- o Visits to schools
- o Ministry of Education

People often ask me what it was like to be a foreign woman inside Afghanistan. Once you get permission you fly into Kabul on the UN plane that was then allowed to land during a specified time when both sides agree to a ceasefire. The front at the time was only 12 kilometers from Kabul. One of the first things you learn is how to distinguish the difference between the noise of incoming and outgoing rockets. I stayed in the simple but beautiful quarters of STC giving some idea of the aesthetically pleasing way of life that must have once existed in the country. All outside windows are sandbagged. To travel between cities you need two UN vehicles that stay together and keep contact with base. The roads everywhere are poor from the war (the 1 1/2 hours to Jalabad now takes 7 or 8 hours); along the road, areas where landmines have not been cleared are marked, but in any case rest stops are not allowed.

As a woman you wear the local shirwal khamis (baggy pants and dress) which covers everything, and you keep your hair covered--Afghan men accompanying me were always gently pushing my hair out of sight to make me presentable for visits. In public you are always subject to inspection, even in international offices where the Vice Patrol inspects now and then and doesn't like to find what they call euphemistically "impolite" things like uncovered hair. Afghan women are not allowed in foreign cars and foreign women cannot go to Afghan homes, especially awkward when you need to see home schools, and have to wear the local burka in a James Bond type activity of speeding cars, hasty cover-ups, drop-offs, contact people, and disguises--not your usual school visit. In rural areas, so-called Taliban, accompanied me but they were elderly men and politely asked me at lunch time if I wanted to eat alone or with them. They showed me coed schools with no visible sign that it bothered them in any way.

I was told by the Foreign Office I would probably not be received at the Ministry, but a newly arrived Norwegian director of an agency agreed to take me on a courtesy call to the Deputy Minister. By following the Norwegian and his translator with eyes demurely cast to the ground and ignoring the exclamations of outrage by gatekeepers--they didn't dare touch me bodily--all the way into his innersanctum I got to listen to the discussion. He did not recognize my presence, but quickly launched into a discussion of girls' education anyway. He said the Taliban were not against girls' education, but wanted only that it be provided properly according to Islam under segregated conditions. "Nothing is invisible to us;" he said, "if we didn't want girls' education

we would have closed home schools long ago." Several weeks after I left they did close them, but since then I am told they have reopened. I basically accepted the conditions of being allowed in the room--proper dress, sat in the back, didn't say a word, kept both feet politely on the ground, but when they expected me to peel their fruit I passed the knife on to the Norwegian.

An Afghan member of the UN Staff told me "Never confront them or they will have to say no. You can do almost anything by not confronting them," advice some of our officials might well take to heart.

4. Schools in Kabul

o Public schools for boys

- no salaries**
- no materials**
- few teachers**
- little instruction**

o Home schools for girls

- multi- and single grades**
- boys and girls**
- female teachers**
- instructional materials**
- supervision in many**
- usually only to grade 3**

The assistance community wanted to know about the education in the schools and whether the homes schools were providing an inferior education, as well as stopping at grade 3.

In effect it was the public schools, now for boys only, that were defunct. The government didn't pay salaries or provide materials and most of the teachers who had been females were banned from working. The boys may show up for a short time to maintain their attendance but where possible many go to girls' home schools the rest of the day. The Taliban excuse for not supporting the public schools is that all their energies and resources are focused on the war. For them religious schools, in any case, were more practical because they produced young men graduates willing to fight for the cause. At issue is what kind of schools they will support after the war. Most people believe they will support a largely religious curriculum.

By comparison the home schools were refreshing. The teachers, many of whom had been banned from the public schools were generally eager, the students--both boys and girls--were learning something, materials were usually present, and there was an orderliness that made them seem like proper schools. Most did stop at grade 3, not so much because of the Taliban ban but because at grade 4 the usual curricula called for 7 subject specialties which teachers neither had materials for nor felt they could teach. Some of the girls simply recycled back through the grades again after graduating. The downside of the home schools was that the program was

characterized by the common problems of the region: rote memory, passive learning, teacher-dependent materials, poor textbooks, and supervision focused on teacher behavior rather than learning. I asked children to read from an unprepared lesson, to write simple sentences, and to do simple math problems, and they usually could not do it. If they succeeded both they and their teachers were surprised. One teacher said, "Oh that's what they're supposed to be doing?"

In rural areas there are a number of types of programs. In larger settlements they vary from 3 to 6 year primary programs in multi-grade or single class formats. There are also accelerated 18 month primary programs and I saw one school that added math and literacy to a basic religious curriculum. These schools operate in a variety of ways and under a number of auspices, but none can be considered normal publicly funded schools.

5. The Assistance Community

- o Coverage**
- o Technical capacities**
- o Curriculum example**

We looked at several dimensions of international assistance.

Coverage: 14 agencies are key to delivery inside and outside Afghanistan. These agencies work in 25 of the 30 provinces but their work is most heavily concentrated in the 4 provinces closest to Pakistan as well as in Kabul and Balkh. Of 670 projects in 1996, half were in these 6 provinces. Western Afghanistan is not being served at all. Most groups specialize regionally in 4 or fewer provinces. Most target both boys and girls, but some focus on one or the other or on special groups, such as adults, widows, blind etc. This means that to reach the whole country requires negotiating with the different agencies having a presence in certain areas and building the capacity in Afghan NGOs to reach the remaining areas--not an insignificant task.

Technical capacities. The emergency situation has meant that many of the foreigners in control of the funding and overseeing projects are young, unmarried or without their families, adventuresome, and usually more administratively than technically competent. They come to administer projects that were often shaped before they arrive. In looking for new opportunities they seek simple solutions like providing bundles of instructional materials, or instructional aids like alphabet charts, pencils and paper etc. They worry and disagree about issues like the sustainability of paying \$5/mo salaries to teachers in the schools they support. Of the main players, many are in teacher training, and many monitor and supervise their programs closely, but few conduct student assessments and even fewer work in curriculum development. The Afghan NGOs who must shoulder the responsibility for bringing most programs inside Afghanistan complain that they are given minimum cost contracts not enough to strengthen their capacities or tide them over between contracts. In times of emergency when assistance is halted they lose their best people.

Curriculum. Curriculum is one of the interesting manifestations of the present state of affairs.

No set of official curriculum objectives exist. There are at least 4 sets of textbooks in use: Univ. of Nebraska, Omaha (UNO), GTZ, Swedish, and a curriculum based on the old pre-communist books of the monarchy. The communist texts seem to have disappeared altogether. Each set of books has major limitations. Taking the UNO books as example: they were based on existing texts at the time and intended for children of the opposition groups. The texts were enlivened with pictures and examples of fighting and guns. They are now modified to remove these examples (for Western sensibilities) and all pictures of human beings (for Taliban sensibilities). The system of instruction is incompatible with children's learning needs--they memorize the alphabet beginning with "A" because the Koran starts that way, learn words that illustrate that the letter "S stands for school" though without showing that the name of the letter is different from the sound and then they leap to memorizing paragraphs of words--memorization is the only method possible in such cases where children have not learned to decode words. If teacher training is provided at all it relies on sets of behaviors that are drilled into teachers without understanding. Where there is follow-up, supervisors check off lists of the demonstrated behaviors. Example horizontal and vertical addition.

6. Technical needs

Flexible delivery methods and models to serve the needs of urban and rural children

Systematic provision of education services with stronger focus on learning outcomes

Strengthened capacity in development community to manage quality programs

Strengthened capacity within the local education structures and NGOs

The apparent needs of the current education program are:.....

In other words the needs in the Afghan context are ones that are found in many places:

To expand access

To improve program quality

To increase capacities

What differed was the importance of fitting solutions to the unique features of the working environment in Afghanistan.

7. Strategies to improve access

Packaged transportable programs

Low cost supplementary materials

Flexible alternative delivery systems

Action research

Transportable programs that include the basic elements for instruction (materials with lesson plans, teacher instructions and assessment built in)

Low cost supplementary materials to fill gaps in existing programs, including the gaps in grades 4 to 6 materials.

Flexible alternative delivery systems, through NGOs, communities, roving teachers, radio and other means

Action research supporting experiments in cost-effective ways to scale up education opportunities.

Short-term goal is to develop and test efficient, effective transportable program models suitable for a variety of Afghan contexts, inside and outside, with or without Taliban, private or public, urban or rural. The testing would start in refugee schools. It should be a program that a minimally trained teacher can take to students anywhere.

8. Strategies to improve program quality

- Develop expectations for learning**
- Assess quality of existing programs**
- Develop supplementary materials to fill gaps**
- Improve supervision**
- Develop student assessment system**
- Develop capacity to reflect**
- Share instructional aids**

To focus everyone's efforts the first thing needed is a set of basic competencies by grade and subject. Next is a assessment of the gaps, and a program to fill them. Next is to realign supervision practices to an emphasis of student learning and to use supervisory practices to model what is expected from the teacher. Existing monitoring systems need to add a mechanism whereby incoming data are used to improve programs. Final groups need to share the instructional products they already have.

9. Capacity Strengthening within local NGO agencies

NGOs need to:

- Hire capable staff**
- Train staff members in community processes**
- Use coordinating body to lift standards**

International agencies need to:

- Clarify responsibilities**
- Rely more on NGOs for planning local delivery**
- Support NGO coordinating agencies with training opportunities**
- Help NGOs develop capacity**
- Support Afghan women's NGOs**

10. What has happened since:

Strategy accepted with stress on quality

Afghans convene to develop basic competencies

Afghans test existing programs using competencies

Afghans prepare supplementary materials

Meeting to share existing instructional aids, ideas

1. Major players accepted the strategy as the basis for their principled common programming and in particular decided to focus on improving quality.

2. 60 Afghans from various assistance and local organizations convened under the auspices of UNICEF and STC and the supervision of Mona Habib to develop basic competencies by grade and subject for math and language for the six years of primary school. Each competency has examples to ensure the reader's understanding. This is the focusing mechanism around which programs, training, materials, etc will be organized. Two members of the Ministry in Kabul participated. Though not an official group it nonetheless has a broad enough representation to serve in the present situation as "authoritative".

3. Using these competencies, the Swedish group began revising their textbooks and training methods (they are the largest provider). And members of the Afghan development group have taken the competencies to schools to determine how well current programs teach them.

4. Next month the Afghan group (or what is left of it) will begin developing supplementary materials to address these competencies. There are three aims to these materials: 1. to teach the identified competencies 2. to provide relevant life skills content (health, nutrition, first aid, science, basic social studies etc. 3. to be supportive of teachers with simple instructions on each page and a structure that models interactive learning approaches that fit within the context of Afghan classes. The materials at present are called supplementary materials, but they are "stand-alone" in terms of the competencies and can be used as a core primary learning program.