

Talk given to  
Directors of USAID WID  
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## 1. AFGHANISTAN CONSULTANCY

1998 asked by UNICEF and STC/US to plan a strategy for long-term assistance to Afghan education.

Today will talk about Afghan education and briefly describe the strategies we came up with to address the problems

Crisis came for assistance community in 1996 when the Taliban banned girls from attending public schools and women from engaging in public employment. Much of Assistance Community felt they could not promote activities that would be withheld from females.

Consultancy started with a meeting in Islamabad of major players in education (there are roughly 40): International donors (multilateral and bilateral), PVOs, and a number of Afghan NGOs. The meeting was the first of its kind—bringing the entire community together to coordinate activities. The purpose was for each agency to outline its aims, describe its activities, and detail future plans. It was also intended to get me started.

UNICEF and World Bank were interested in achieving a "Common Programming"—coordination of assistance efforts to address the needs of all children. Of particular interest were the home schools for girls. They worried that support for them might mean support for an inferior system. Taliban had also declared that girls shouldn't go beyond grade 3 and most of these schools did not go beyond that point. The crisis was called an "emergency" which seemed to mean they would accept some ad hoc solutions as long as they seemed fair and did not contradict one another.

# Purposes of consultancy

- Overall purpose: to assess international assistance and suggest strategies
- Specific objectives:
  - to identify technical issues
  - to identify capacities
  - to identify strategies

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## 2. PURPOSES OF THE CONSULTANCY

My job was to assess the situation of international assistance and suggest strategies for long term support of Afghan education.

Specifically I was to 1) identify the technical issues that challenge or provide opportunities for assistance, 2) to assess the capacities in the assistance community to implement initiatives and 3) to identify strategies that would maximize the positive impact of assistance no matter what happened in the future.

I started by making clear that I would not try to second-guess the future of the political solution, and would only address the technical issues (in the context of Afghanistan of course). I would try however to identify strategies that would not waste assistance money no matter what the future held.

In the next 3 weeks I interviewed key players in Islamabad, Peshawar, Kabul, and Jalabad, and met the Taliban Deputy Minister of Education. Visited refugee schools in Pakistan, homeschools in Kabul, community and refugee schools in Jalabad, and small schools throughout Konar Province. The strategies are a product of these often, long and intense discussions and of observations. Before I left I debriefed an even larger group from the assistance community that convened again in Islamabad.

# Recent political context

- 1978: Russian invasion
- 1989: Russian retreat
- 1992: Com.-supported gov. overthrown
- 1994: Taliban take control
- 1996: Girls/women banned from school
- 1998: Taliban: 2/3s area; 60% pop.
- 1999: After offensive 90% of country

### 3. RECENT POLITICAL CONTEXT

Just briefly I want to show you some critical recent political events.

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# Education context

- Volatile political situation
- No effective government to work with
- Local personalized decision-making
- Modern schooling existed in cities
- Koranic tradition in rural areas
- Now: 5% enrolled inside; 47% in camps

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## 4. EDUCATION CONTEXT

The future of Taliban control over Afghanistan is uncertain. If they remain it is also uncertain what kind of government they might form or what kind of education system they might promote.

At present there is no effective national government with which the agencies can work. Often they simply continue to operate as they did before. Even in areas supposedly controlled by the Taliban local personalized decision-making is the norm, especially in rural areas. The Taliban are a movement not a coherent government. Most Taliban are young religiously-educated radicals who don't become involved in administrative decisions unless confronted with an issue. This means education services where they exist go on without permission or formal authority—supported by parents or assistance agencies operating in a gov. vacuum. Sometimes civil servants carry on in their previous capacities but usually without resources or salaries. Schools may be closed if a Talib decides for any reason to do so, or if these quasi-civil servants decide to implement edicts from the Taliban hierarchy banning specific practices, such as girls' education.

Education not new to Afghanistan. Most modern schools however were located in urban areas, while most villages had only Koranic schools started after the Islamic invasion in the 7th century.

Estimates put enrollment 30% in 1978 and 19% in 1988. Now the estimates are 5% of children inside Afghanistan and 47% in the camps outside. To encourage repatriation assistance has been cut back, and assistance community worried about increasing the support again. Swedes fund 600 schools inside Afg.—the biggest effort, continuing throughout the troubles with only minor problems.

# Personal aspects of context

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

## 5. PERSONAL ASPECTS OF CONTEXT

People often ask what it is like inside Afghanistan.

After you get permission fly into Kabul on UN plane that has a short window to land and take off during a ceasefire. In May 1998 front was 12 kilometers from Kabul. Learn the difference between incoming and outgoing rockets. I stayed in the simple but beautiful quarters of STC—give an idea of the aesthetically pleasing way of life that must have exist before. Outside windows are sandbagged.

Travel between cities requires two UN vehicles in radio contact with one another and with headquarters in Kabul every half hour. Roads are poor from the war (1 ½ hrs now takes 7 or 8 to Jalabad). Areas with landmines marked but still no rest stops allowed.

As a woman, you wear the local shirwal khamis which covers your body, and a scarf over your head—Afghan men accompanying me adjusted my scarf to make me presentable. In public you are always subject to inspection, even in international offices where the Vice patrols drop in and don't like to find what they euphemistically call "impolite" things like uncovered hair.

Afghan women not allowed in foreign cars and foreign women are not supposed to go to Afghan homes—awkward when you need to see home schools, and have to wear the local burka in a James Bond like activity of speeding cars, hasty cover-ups, drop-offs, contact people and disguises—not your usual school visit.

In rural areas so-called Taliban—elderly men, took me to see coed schools with no sign it bothered them, and then at lunch time asked politely if I wanted to eat alone or with them.

The Foreign Office in Kabul said they could not arrange a vist for me on such short visit, but a newly arrived Norwegian director of an agency agreed to take me on his courtesy call to Dep. Minister. I followed behind him and the translator, eyes averted and ignoring the shouts of outrage from the gatekeepers at each level of the Ministry—secure in the knowledge that they wouldn't dare touch me. I finally was allowed to sit in the far corner of the room and when the Minister entered he pretended I didn't exist, but launched into a discussion of girls' education. They were not against education for girls—just wanted to make sure it was in the proper format of separated schools. He added that if the Taliban had been against girls' education they would have closed the home schools. "Nothing is invisible to us." Several weeks later they did close them but many have since reopened. I basically accepted the conditions of being in the room—proper dress, sitting in the back, not saying a word, and keeping my feet politely planted the ground, but when they handed me a knife to peel fruit for them, I passed it on to the Norwegian.

An Afghan member of the UN staff told me, Just don't confront them or they will have to say no. You can do almost anything if you don't confront them.

# Schooling in Kabul

- Public schools for boys
  - few teachers
  - no materials
  - little instruction
- Home schools for girls (and boys)
  - instruction in multi-and single grade classes
  - female teachers; materials, supervision
  - usually stop at grade 3

## 6. SCHOOLING IN KABUL

The assistance community wanted to know about what kinds of education were being offered, whether home schools provided an inferior education and whether the program stopped at grade 3.

In fact I discovered it was the public schools for boys only that were defunct. The government didn't pay salaries or provide materials and most of the teachers who were females were no longer allowed to work. The boys showed up to maintain attendance and then went to girls' home schools for the rest day if they were available.

The Taliban excuse for not supporting the public schools was that all their energies and resources were focused on the war. In any case religious schools that turned out graduates ready to fight for the cause were more practical for them. At issue was what kind of education they would support after the war. Most people believe it would have a largely religious curriculum which for many would mean that an alternative system would still be necessary.

By comparison the home schools were refreshing. The teachers, many of whom had worked earlier in the public system were eager, the students were learning something, materials were usually available, and there was an orderliness that made them feel like proper schools. Most did stop at grade 3, not so much because of the Taliban ban as because grade 4 called for 7 subject specialties which teachers neither had the materials for nor felt they could teach. Some girls simply recycled back through the grades again.

The down-side of 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 student learning. I asked children in each class 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 is that what they're supposed to do?"

Rural programs vary even more. They range from 3 to 6 year primary programs, and in one dreary school I saw math and local languages were added to what was mostly a religious curriculum. There were also accelerated 18 month programs. The schools operated in a variety of ways and under a number of auspices, but none could be considered a normal publicly funded school.

# Assistance Community

- Coverage
- Technical capacities
- Curriculum example

## 7. ASSISTANCE COMMUNITY

One task was to report several dimensions of assistance to Afghan education.

**Coverage.** 14 agencies are key to delivery inside and outside Afghanistan. They work in 25 of the 30 provinces but their work is mainly concentrated in the provinces easily accessible from Pakistan (Paktia, Nangarhar, Logar, and Ghazni), as well as Kabul and Balkh. Of 670 projects in 1996, half were in these 6 provinces, and none were in Western Afghanistan. Most groups specialize regionally in 4 or fewer provinces. Most target both boys and girls, but some focus on one or the other or special groups such as adults, widows, the blind, etc. This means that to reach the whole country would require negotiating with the different agencies having a presence in certain areas, and building the capacity of Afghan NGOs to reach the remaining areas—not an insignificant task.

**Technical capacities.** The emergency situation has caused many of the foreign agencies to staff their organizations with young people, unmarried or without children anyway, adventuresome, and more administratively than technically experienced. They often implement projects that were designed before they arrived, and if looking for new opportunities seek simple solutions like bundles of instructional materials, training workshops, or instructional aids like alphabet charts, pencils and paper, etc. They worry about such issues as the sustainability of providing the \$5/mo salary of teachers in the schools they support. Many operate at a distance from their projects and do not know on a daily basis how their projects are implemented on the ground. I found many deeply distrustful of Afghan NGOs abilities to deliver education, although it is inevitable that they do so. The foreign staff turns over every year or two and there is little institutional memory.

Most of the main players are in teacher training and many monitor and supervise programs closely although it seems that little is done with the data collected. Few conduct student assessments and even fewer work in curriculum development. Afghan NGOs that take programs inside Afghanistan complain that they are given minimum cost contracts by agencies that are 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. It is clear that though some NGOs are very good, others are not.

**Curriculum** is one of the interesting examples of how complex the situation is. No official set of curriculum objectives exist. There are at least 4 sets of books in use: University of Neb., Omaha (UNO), GTZ, Swedish, and a curriculum based on the old pre-communist books of the monarchy. The communist books have disappeared all together. Each set has major limitations.

Take for example the UNO books which are the most widely used. They were based on existing texts at the time and were intended largely for children of the opposition. The texts were enlivened with examples and pictures of fighting and guns. They are now modified by removing the guns (for Western sensibilities) and picture of humans (for Taliban sensibilities). The system of instruction is basically incompatible with children's learning needs. They begin by memorizing the alphabet and learning words that exemplify the sound (S is for school). They start with A because it is the first letter of the Koran. Then they shift to paragraphs of writing without going through the transition of decoding words and sentences. Memorization is the only way to deal with this gulf.

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 observe teachers and check off lists of demonstrated behaviors. (Horizontal and vertical addition)

# Technical needs

- To expand access: flexible delivery systems
- To improve quality: focus on outcomes
- To increase capacity
  - of assistance community to support
  - of Afghan NGOs to develop and implement

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## 8. TECHNICAL NEEDS

From these discussions and observations, the technical needs boiled down to the usual three: access, quality, and capacity.

For access, what was needed was flexible delivery methods and models that could serve the needs of children in a variety of contexts and circumstances: urban, rural, refugee, now, later, for younger and older, boys, girls.

To improve quality required a systematic provision of education services with focus on learning outcomes.

To increase capacity required strengthening the assistance community's ability to support improved education programs in the field, and for Afghan NGOs to become more involved in developing and implementing local programs.

All this had to happen in the unique environment which characterizes Afghan's education context. To do less than this is really to abandon a whole generation of Afghans to almost no education at all.

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# Strategies to improve access

- Packaged transportable programs
- Low-cost supplementary materials
- Flexible alternative delivery systems
- Action research in scaling up delivery

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## 9. STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE ACCESS

You see here the specific strategies to improve access.

The transportable program includes the basic elements for instruction (textbooks in a lesson plan format with teacher instructions, practice and assessment built in). The materials are self-evident. Simple training in the use of the materials is helpful but not necessary.

Low-cost supplementary materials would fill gaps in the existing curriculum where specific kinds of access are a problem, as in the difficulty of girls continuing past grade 3. In such cases, materials might be self-instructional.

Flexible alternative delivery systems probably need to be considered first before formal schools, at least for the time being. NGOs, communities, roving teachers, radio, etc.

Finally action research is proposed to support experiments in scaling up opportunities in cost-effective ways. One Afghan NGO has a fairly good program underway but it takes costly support to start and maintain. We hoped to see if they could package their program and convey it to other group to see if they can get the same good results.

# Strategies to improve quality

- Set expectations for learning
- Assess existing programs
- Fill gaps with supplementary materials
- Use supervision to model outcomes
- Develop continuous assessment systems
- Develop capacity to reflect and improve
- Share existing instructional aids

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## 10. STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE QUALITY

To focus the efforts of all groups the first thing needed was an agreed upon set of basic competencies for the primary grades. Next, using the competencies is an assessment of existing programs to discover the gaps, and then supplementary materials to strengthen these areas. Next is to realign supervisory practices away from specific teacher behaviors and toward an emphasis on student learning. The aim is to use supervision to model what is expected of teachers. Finally monitoring systems need to add a mechanism to convert incoming data into improvements in the programs. Finally groups need to share the instructional products they already have. (In one case two groups were duplicating the development of materials for an 18 month short primary course).

# Strategies to strengthen capacities

- NGOs need to:
  - Hire capable staff
  - Train staff members in community work
  - Use NGO body to lift standards
- International agencies need to:
  - Seek technical advice
  - Rely more on NGOs for design/delivery
  - Support NGOs in developing capacity
  - Support Afghan women's NGOs

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## 11. STRATEGIES TO STRENGTHEN CAPACITIES

In brief, the strategies for increasing capacities were as you see here. The situation is more complicated than these strategies suggest. Part of the problem is the unstable situation—well-qualified Afghans immigrate and staff turnover is constant. Foreign agencies have confidence in only a small number of NGOs. It's a considerable risk for Afghans to try to start an NGO because of the uncertainty.

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# Update

- Strategy accepted with stress on quality
- Afghans develop basic competencies
- Afghans test existing math program
- Afghans prepare supplementary materials
- Meeting to share existing aids, ideas
- Trials of materials in refugee camps

## 12. UPDATE

The major players have accepted the strategy, in particular the stress on quality.

Last year 60 Afghans from various organizations including the Ministry of Education in Kabul came together with support from UNICEF and STC to develop a set of competencies for math and language arts for each grade of the primary level. Mona Habib supervised the workshop. The competencies are described in a very simple way with examples for each to make sure they are clear. They constitute a focusing mechanism around which programs, training, materials, etc. will be organized. Several Afghans took the math competencies and tested existing programs to see if they were teaching them.

Next month they will develop supplementary materials to teach these competencies. The materials at the same time will give children reading practice, provide support for the teacher by modeling lessons as described before, and will include content in life skills (health, nutrition, first aid, science, social studies, etc) to make schooling more relevant to the children. The materials are called supplementary but are actually 'stand-alone' in terms of the competencies, and can be used as a core primary learning program. It is in fact the transportable package that can be delivered easily to Afghan children in almost any situation. When the materials are ready (and also during development) they will be tested in nearby refugee camps.

The Swede (as the largest provider) have also taken the competencies and begun revising their textbooks and training methods. And next month, the assistance agencies are getting together to share the instructional materials they have already developed.

Though not official the Afghans who developed the competencies come from a varied enough group of organizations to serve in the present situation as 'authoritative'. It puts them at the heart of the process to develop their own curriculum.