

Strategy for Afghan Primary Education

Summary of Progress from 1998 – 2000, and Suggested Next Steps

A Strategy for Afghan Education was formulated in July 1998 at the request of the assistance community¹. This summary paper documents progress in implementing the Strategy during the two years since its publication². This task is important for at least four reasons:

- to show that significant progress has been made on a coordinated programme for Afghan education;
- to describe how the Strategy has been evolving;
- to clarify the rationales for the activities that have taken place and, finally,
- to provide a model that may prove useful in other contexts with similar conditions.

In spring 1998, supported by Save the Children USA, UNICEF and the Royal Netherlands Embassy, representatives of the international and Afghan assistance community convened to review their on-going education activities and express concern for the impact unsettled political conditions might have on future Afghan programming. An Education Policy Consultant continued the consultative process begun in these meetings with visits to individual organisations and to primary programmes inside and outside of Afghanistan. From these consultations, three pressing technical issues emerged. The need to find innovative ways to:

- increase access to education opportunities for Afghan children and find the means by which education services could be delivered under the variety of circumstances that exist for Afghan children
- improve the quality of learning results and to achieve these results with a minimum of teacher training, supervision and other teacher supports that are difficult to provide in the context of Afghan education
- strengthen capacity, especially among Afghan groups, to develop and deliver programmes that meet the needs of Afghan children

Although the assistance community was implementing initiatives at the time to improve access, quality and capacity, all had limitations that prevented them from providing the broad-based education services considered necessary for Afghans. Furthermore many of the initiatives did not enjoy wide support from Afghans wanting better education programmes for their country.

The core strategy that emerged to deal with these needs had three main elements.

- **To increase access:** the development of a simple, self-evident, and transportable primary programme, organised around instructional materials and requiring little field support
- **To improve quality:** the establishment of basic learning standards for the primary grades and an alignment of all education components to achieve these learning results
- **To increase capacity:** the strengthening of skills in the assistance community to develop and maintain an effective primary programme

The strategy envisaged Afghans at the center of efforts to identify basic standards for primary education, to develop instructional materials for the easily transportable programme, and ultimately to work out and maintain the mechanisms for delivering the programme to a broad group of Afghan children. The international community's role was to provide organisational leadership, technical assistance, and financial support to get the programme underway.

The international agencies set three requirements for their assistance: the strategy should be one that 1) allows for common programming where the efforts of the various agencies would reinforce and complement one another; 2) uses a principled approach where services could be offered equitably and without qualification to all segments of the population; and 3) allows for cost-effective investments in education that would serve Afghans in the future regardless of the political or social circumstances that prevailed. The watchwords of the new strategy therefore became "common programming," "a principled approach," and "sound investment."

¹ For a full overview see: "Education for Afghans, A Strategy Paper", Save the Children USA, UNICEF Afghanistan, July 1998

The Strategy has evolved since it was introduced in 1998. Originally, it provided a range of implementation options that, while contributing to the central effort, could be developed as separate components if organisations wished to make independent contributions. When it came to actual implementation, however, the agencies coordinated their activities to develop the core elements of the transportable programme. The Strategy also shifted during this time from one with a main concern for the needs of children inside Afghanistan, to one that recognised the equal importance of improving programme quality in refugee schools outside the country.

Over these two years UNICEF and Save the Children USA in close collaboration with others have provided leadership in coordinating implementation activities. Save the Children USA has organised important inter-agency material development workshops with UNICEF while many other assistance agencies have contributed organisational support and staff time. The ACBAR Education Sub-Committee was instrumental in setting initial priorities, and members of the Sub-Committee served on taskforces to plan implementation activities and provide technical advice informed by Afghan needs and perspectives. The two years have seen four main accomplishments:

- The aims of the 1998 Strategy have been incorporated into the institutional plans and arrangements of key assistance agencies, and limited financial support has been obtained to pursue some of the core activities.
- Major components have been developed for the transportable education programme, including a set of Basic Competencies for the primary grades in math and language, and supplementary math materials for the entire primary cycle. The development of language materials will begin in fall 2000.
- The new Basic Competencies have been integrated into the programmes of individual agencies to improve education quality.
- Capacity has been strengthened through the involvement of Afghan educators in developing Basic Competencies and supplementary instructional materials, through a baseline assessment of math achievement using Basic Competencies as a standard, and through consultative meetings of the assistance community to share ideas, products and resources useful in Afghan programmes.

Some of the activities envisioned to support Strategy objectives in the near future include:

- Continuing to incorporate innovations as they become ready into existing education programs, e.g. as assessment tools, subject-content training modules, and as resource allocation instruments.
- Pilot testing new materials in a variety of conditions similar to those where they will be used, and testing the effectiveness of minimal support systems for teachers.
- Identifying mechanisms and conduits for delivery of the programme package in Afghanistan and in refugee villages.
- Finalising instructional packages and institutionalising a dissemination system that can be maintained at low cost.
- Preparing additional self-instructional materials to expand and enrich the program beyond the core subject materials developed up until now, and recognising the special conditions in which children (especially girls) may have to study.

In short, the Strategy's aim is to produce a quality education programme organized around supportive instructional materials and well-defined standards. These standards -- the Basic Competencies -- make it possible for all those involved in the education sector to work toward the same agreed-upon math and language results. Sets of instructional materials -- textbooks and guides -- provide the means to achieve the objectives. Educators use verifiable measures to assess programme effectiveness based on clearly defined expectations for results.

Quality is an on-going process that cannot be achieved with a single initiative. It is more likely to be achieved, however, if a clear set of expectations is defined, if a continuous process for reflection on results and their improvement has been institutionalised, and if local capacity has been developed to maintain these processes.
