

The Current Situation of Basic Education in Afghanistan

Torpekai Sultani

Representative of Kibou no Gakko, Japan

Twenty-three years of civil war devastated the political, economic, social, and cultural dimensions of living in Afghanistan. The civil war in Afghanistan started in 1979 when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. Later on, from 1992-96, this war changed into a power struggle among religious leaders, the well-known Mujahidden guerillas. From 1996 to 2001, the conflict was between the Taliban, the Islamic Fundamentalists, and the Northern Alliance, the so-called Mujahidden guerillas.

As a result of this terrible period of conflict, millions of people lost their lives. Fully 95-98% of the country, dwellings, schools, government buildings, factories, and even nature, were destroyed. More than 5 million people, fully 1/5 of the population, fled and took refuge abroad, mostly in the neighboring countries of Pakistan and Iran. Around 4 million Afghans are displaced within Afghanistan. More than 1.6 million people are currently getting help from various world food projects. About 2 million people will run out of food by the end of this year in the Northern provinces. Another 4 million people are just managing to live by depending on someone else. Approximately 6.1 million Afghans are vulnerable to disease and sickness due to the lack of basic food items, safe drinking water, adequate medical care, etc. The mortality rate among children and pregnant women has increased. Nearly 15,000 women die every year from effects related to pregnancy. The maternal mortality rate is estimated at 1,700 per 100,000 women. Four out of ten children die from very simple diseases like diarrhea and acute respiratory infections. The mortality rate for children under 5 years of age is 257/1,000 (UNICEF, 1999). Twenty-one percent of children die from diseases for which vaccines exist (UNICEF, 2001). More than 800,000 people are disabled, a quarter of whom by land mines. Worst of all, Afghanistan has become, as a result of this war, one of the poorest countries in the world, with a very low literacy rate of 29% for adults, and 22% for women.

A Short History of Education and a Literacy Campaign in Afghanistan

From 1919-29, just after the Third Anglo-Afghan War which resulted in Afghanistan's independence, King Amanullah, as a component of an overall modernization program, introduced formal educational reform for children and a literacy campaign among adults, both men and women. Government employees were urged to take an active part in this literacy campaign as instructors.

Even the King himself conducted such classes.

The curriculum for this campaign was developed so that an illiterate person could learn to read and write in 40 days. Asmat, the first formal school for girls, was established in Kabul at this time. By 1928 approximately 2000 female students attended the school, most of whom came from the families of state employees. Female students were sent abroad, usually to Turkey, to get higher education. The veil (chaderi, now known as the buruka) was abolished, and women participated in the Loya Jirga, Afghanistan's Grand Assembly. Unfortunately, the idea of nationwide education was eliminated after a revolt in 1929.

After the reign of King Amanullah, schools for girls were closed and the veil was re-imposed. In the early 1950s, as social and economic development gradually progressed, education evolved as well, especially for female students. The constitution of 1964 made education compulsory, though this provision was never realized. Primary schools were established in cities with a population greater than 3,000. The total number of students in 1969 in the entire country numbered 600,000, about 10-20% of the entire population. At this time, women could attend school only in some major cities. In addition, there were no measures taken to educate the children of nomads, whose population is now about 2 million. Education since its inception has been and still is free in Afghanistan. The government supplies textbooks and some other required materials. In addition, a number of institutions in Kabul and elsewhere trains teachers.

In 1968, the first office of the literacy campaign was opened under the guidance of the Ministry of Education. The literacy campaign was supervised by Pashto Tolena (The Afghan Academy) and was assisted by UNESCO. At that time, the literacy rate was 25% among men and 5% among women. Due to some negligence in both public education and adult education, the progress and achievement of the literacy campaign was modest. The number of students in primary schools was 546,000. The population of the country was about 20 million. The number of primary schools nationwide numbered 1,517.

In 1978 the government changed. The new government instituted educational reforms influenced by communist ideas. Some textbooks were changed to include the occupational needs and age-related interests of participants in the literacy campaign. Literacy courses for both youth and adults, male and female, were established in the capital and in the provinces. Every year, 18,000 persons learned to read and write. Literacy truly became a nationwide campaign. On the occasion of World Literacy Day in 1986, Afghanistan was awarded a medal and a diploma by UNESCO for its success in raising levels of literacy among the general population. In 1989 an estimated 2 million people became

literate. In addition, several kinds of literacy courses and vocational schools were built in different parts of the country. To implement these developments effectively, the government relied upon two major pillars: teacher-training and publicity.

During the fierce civil war, especially from 1990-2001, the infrastructure of the educational system was effectively destroyed. However, UNICEF and other international NGO's played a big role outside Afghanistan in educating Afghan children. Within the country, primary school enrollment was 39% for boys and 3% for girls, a situation that was strictly enforced under the Taliban regime. For the most part, students were enrolled in religious schools. In most of the provinces, schools for women were closed down. The young generation, especially females, was deprived of education within the country. Those displaced by war who re-settled abroad may have received an education, but they emerged with a limited understanding of the people, culture, and social structure of Afghanistan.

Thus, when the present government came to power in 2001, it placed basic education prominently on its agenda. The present government understands quite well that a nationwide campaign to improve education is key to advancing the re-construction and development of Afghanistan.

The New School Year: “Back to School” for 1.7 million Afghan children

Acting upon the vital link between education and national re-construction, UNICEF and the Ministry of Education of Afghanistan started a “Back-to-School” campaign with the assistance of international NGOs and aid agencies.

New Year's Day falls on March 21 in Afghanistan. It also is the day on which the Afghan people inaugurated the new school year. Currently, about 2,744 schools are active in 20 (out of 32) provinces.

According to a July, 2002 edition of “Paishraft” (Progress), 1.7 million children currently are enrolled in primary school, grades 1-6. This total is 60% higher than initially expected and points to the considerable enthusiasm of the children for learning. A survey conducted by UNICEF and the Ministry of Education shows that girls constitute more than 90% of the unexpected increase in enrollment. The ratio between girls and boys is relatively the same across the country.

Even in Kandahar, where girls were not allowed to enroll during the Taliban era, girls now account for 10% of the student population. The survey indicates that across the 20 provinces, there are over

27,000 teachers, 36% of whom are women. In Kabul itself, female teachers outnumber the men.

Due to the continuous return of refugees from abroad, especially Iran and Pakistan, the number of enrolled children increases daily. In some schools, as many as 10 new students show up daily for class, most of whom are in grade 1, UNICEF reports.

Despite this enthusiasm for learning, some groups in Afghan society remain ambivalent about educating children and especially females. Afghanistan consists of different tribes, and each has its own view with respect to education. Because Afghanistan is a patriarchal society, fathers usually make decisions regarding their children's education. Approximately 80% of the Afghan people live in rural areas. Limited economic development reduces the incentive and seeming relevance of getting an education.

The traditional view in rural areas usually leads fathers to be in favor of at least minimally educating the sons prior to having them return to help in farming. This same view is generally opposed to educating the daughters. Sending one's daughter to school is viewed as humiliating for the family. However, a father's view with respect to educating his daughters is influenced by the background of the father. Those fathers with higher social and occupational status and level of education tend to be more strongly in favor of educating their daughters. Making primary level education compulsory would strongly encourage even reluctant fathers to educate their children.

To make the "Back-to-School" campaign more effective, UNICEF delivered more than 7,000 tons of learning materials to every school in Afghanistan. Nearly all of these materials were available on the first day of class. The supplies included textbooks, notebooks, pencils, blackboards, chalk, school bags, tents to be used as classrooms, and other teaching and learning materials.

According to another survey conducted by the US State Department International Programs Section, four million textbooks, enough for each student to have his/her own textbook, were distributed across Afghanistan. At present, nearly 9 million textbooks have been distributed. By the end of the current school year, nearly 11 million textbooks will have been printed and distributed.

These textbooks in both the Dari (Afghanistan Persian) and Pashto languages cover the spectrum of school subjects for grades 1-12. These subjects include math, algebra, geometry, language instruction, science, health, social studies, civics, geography, physics, chemistry, geology, and biology.

The textbooks were printed with a US \$6.5 million grant to the University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO), from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). UNICEF handled distribution. The textbooks which were used during the preceding 20 years in Afghanistan were revised to reflect the new political situation in Afghanistan, the USDSIIP says. For the last two years, a group of Afghan educators, UNICEF, and NGOs worked together to develop a new curriculum on a range of subjects and new textbooks in the Dari and Pashto languages for grades 1-6. Because of the sudden defeat of the Taliban and the rapid establishment of the new government, schools were re-opened urgently. Consequently, there was a great demand for textbooks. The Ministry of Education decided to use the UNO curriculum for the current school year. Afghan educators participated in a thorough review of the textbooks, removing all war-related references. A survey by JICA and the Ministry of Education reveals that violent expressions are replaced by narratives that are both in favor of peace and human rights, and that are against terrorism and the production and distribution of narcotics. The textbooks were printed in Pakistan under UNO auspices. Because of the increased enrollment of new students, more texts, stationery, teachers, and support, is needed, UNICEF claims. UNICEF is appealing for an additional US \$10 million in aid to schools. This follows an initial appeal for US \$47 million in education aid. UNICEF wants to equip properly all students and teachers nationwide.

A single school building covers either grades 1-9 or grades 1-12. Boys and girls' schools are separated. However, boys study with girls until the 3rd grade in some girls' schools. There are few students at the senior high school level, grades 10-12. Most schools have 5-20 classes, with the largest number of classes being offered in the 1st grade.

With the destruction of thousands of school buildings throughout Afghanistan, the country lacks schools. For this reason, schools often hold two or three sessions per day. Normal school hours are from 7:30 until 17:30. For those schools holding two sessions daily, the morning session for students in grades 1-3 are from 7:30-10:40. The afternoon session is held from 12:15-16:45 for students in grades 4-12.

For schools holding three sessions, only 1st graders (coed) and female 2nd graders attend from 7:00 to 9:30. From 10:00 -13:40, a session is held for female students in grades 3-12; the final session of the day is held from 14:00-17:30 for boys in grades 2-9.

Requests

Since basic education has just started in the new era in Afghanistan, and people have shown that they

are eager to study, fundamental changes in education must occur in order to yield effective results and to maintain public enthusiasm for education.

1. Most school buildings are damaged or destroyed. Schools need to be built or repaired. In some schools only a few classrooms remain. Different grades use the same room at the same time. It is not uncommon to find students holding class while sitting in the school yard on an old sheet or on the ground. There are no desks or chairs for more than half of the student population. Blackboards are too small. Students do not have enough stationery, even enough textbooks, and schools are unable to provide them.
2. Teachers are the most important component of a successful educational system. Afghanistan currently has few qualified teachers. Many were killed in the war, and others fled abroad. Of those remaining, many were replaced. Still others are not interested in educating children; they fail to show up to school regularly, are not held accountable, and continue in the position only to have a job.

Teachers require training in order to be qualified to teach. Centers and institutes for teacher training are necessary. CRICED would do well to take active steps to assure the adequate training and assessment of teachers in Afghanistan.

3. Regrettably, Afghanistan has many disabled children. Both the war and land mines in particular have taken their toll both physically and mentally. Many disabled children have lost their legs, hands, or have become blind, deaf, and/or mute. One cannot ignore the special educational needs of these children. Many are unable to attend regular public schools. The teachers themselves who work with these children require special training. Centers with staff and facilities for training those teachers who work with disabled children are urgently needed. Since Japan is among the few countries in the world with experience in dealing with disabled individuals, Japan is uniquely qualified to address this need.
4. War and social upheaval have created a group called "Street Children", whose rising numbers are estimated presently at 60,000. Street Children are those youth who, because of the war, have no nurturing adult to provide direction and sustenance. The adult may be dead or otherwise unable to earn enough to provide the child with the means to survive. Conversely, Street Children work on the streets in order to support their families. They may collect firewood on the outskirts of the city, perhaps encountering unexploded ordinance and land mines. They may collect paper rubbish, shine shoes, work as porters, wash cars, burn incense, beg, sell small

items, collect metal, etc. An estimated 30% of Street Children are girls. Most Street Children are from 7-16 years old. Most have grown up on the street and have no family. There presently are few opportunities for these children to get educated or otherwise to acquire skills for an honest livelihood. They are easy targets for drug and sexual abuse.

In order to become productive, contributing members of society, Street Children need guidance, education, and training. Because they need to work during the day, Street Children may not be able to attend regular public schools. Most appear eager to take whatever steps that might improve their life prospects. Some still harbor conventional career goals, such as becoming a doctor or a teacher. The re-construction of Afghan society needs to provide these children with a reason to hope.

5. According to research by JICA, 8-9 million people were deprived of the chance to become educated because of the war, especially since 1990. These people, called the “Lost Generation”, range in age from 12-30, and are predominantly female. Many of them are war widows. Educating these people will require 40,000 new teachers.

Because of the pivotal role that education plays in national development, steps taken to provide both regular students and specific social niche groups with targeted, high-quality educational opportunities will yield generous dividends in the future. Adult females in Afghanistan crave education. They want to be able to read and write. They are tired of being marginalized, especially with respect to education. Local traditions and customs that encouraged discrimination against women need to be exposed for the sham that they are, for the religion of Islam accords an equal status for women with respect to education, learning, and employment. The Koran states that “Men as well as women shall be rewarded for their labors.” (Women ‘Al Nisa’, “The Koran”, 1980).

I wish to direct the attention of the Japanese people to the importance of educating Afghan women. All women suffer terribly in a war. They are forced to earn their living somehow. Many beg on the streets while holding their children; they search through the garbage for food. They bear psychological scars.

I ask the Japanese people to build centers and schools to help the women of Afghanistan. With proper education, women can acquire literacy and vocational training that makes subsequent employment possible. Jobs enable women to help support their families.

Personally, I believe that any successful re-construction of Afghanistan needs to take into account

the respective needs of both men and women for education and employment. As a historically marginalized group, women require particular attention and assistance. For that reason, I started the volunteer group named “Kibou no gakko; School of Hope”. I feel that “What is good for the people of Afghanistan might lead to happiness for people elsewhere in the world.”

NGO Kibou (Kibou no Gakko)

NGO Kibou is a non-governmental, non-political, non-profit organization which aims to educate Afghan women over 16 years of age who have been deprived of the chance to be educated. NGO Kibou was established in Japan in April, 2002, and was registered in Kabul, Afghanistan, in September, 2002.

The Main Goals of NGO Kibou

1. To help Afghan women become literate and to train them for a vocation in various fields so that they might lead financially independent lives in a society free of discrimination.
2. To help Afghan women realize their social and economic rights.
3. To create a job environment for Afghan women, especially those who are responsible for supporting their family.

The Main Plans and Activities in Afghanistan

1. To establish classes for reading and writing (Dari and/or Pashto) languages, teaching arithmetic, teaching Japanese language (for the purpose of communicating with Japanese staff). Offering psychological counseling and teaching sports would assist Afghan women in their recovery.
2. To prepare facilities for job training concerning design, cutting, sewing, embroidery, Japanese Flower Arrangement (Ikebana), painting, carving, etc.
3. To provide a day-care center for the children whose mothers study at the school. The day-care center would contain all the facilities needed to educate and care for pre-school children.
4. To build a health-care center for the students of the school.
5. To equip the school with all the facilities needed for the activities. To get started, NGO Kibou needs 12 million yen, as estimated by UNICEF. The figure may vary depending on the situation in Afghanistan.

Conclusion

Public education is key to any comprehensive plan for national development, and devoting special attention to educating the women of Afghanistan will enhance the pace and caliber of local and national development. Japan's own success in developing the knowledge, skills, and abilities of the Japanese people places Japan in a unique position to help the women of Afghanistan realize their potential.

Acknowledgments

In conclusion, I would like to offer my sincere thanks to CRICED for giving me a chance to speak on the topic of the current situation of basic education in Afghanistan. I hope that both the Japanese people and the Japanese government will offer material and spiritual support to realize the dreams of NGO Kibou. Thank you very much.

Please contact: Secretariat of Kibou no Gakko

E-mail: kibosakurai@msn.com

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