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Rana Deep Islam

Education in Afghanistan

A Requirement for Assuring Security and
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Introduction

Good governance is seen to play an ever increasing role in the Western understanding of sustainable development. It is not only an appropriate tool for improving the development record of depleted countries but also for the successful prevention of crisis and conflict situations on the globe.

Among others, good governance itself describes a country's ability to serve its people basic political and public goods. One of the essential components is education. Afghanistan's performance in this area of public service must give cause for concern. Its education system, especially at primary stage, is in questionable condition.

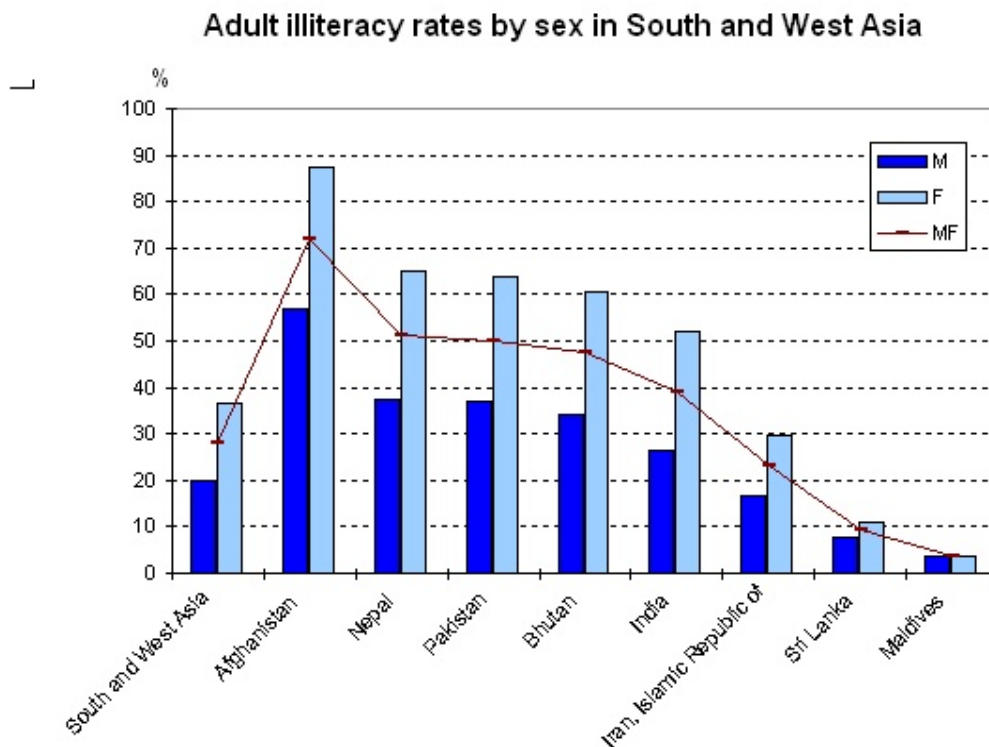
Education and conflict prevention are interlinked and relate closely to each other. The source of the problem cannot be pointed out clearly. This means that a defective education system can affect the dimension of security and conflict prevention and vice versa. However, and this is the crucial point, as long as only an insufficient amount of education criteria is met, serious consequences for the stability of a country must be expected – not only for the country concerned, in our case Afghanistan, but also for our Western hemisphere. World wide conflicts are interconnected to another to an extent that the mere distance of a conflict location does not contradict its immediate danger.

The following article tries to describe the present situation in Afghanistan's education sector and will also formulate concrete recommendations and approaches for its improvement. In a first step I will describe the actual state of educational conditions. Next I will illustrate the efforts which have been undertaken so far by the Afghan government and the international community, including an assessment of their effectiveness and efficiency. A further paragraph then tries to evaluate the overall context of education, security and conflict prevention from a theoretical point of view, followed by a chapter which applies these theoretical ideas to our case study, Afghanistan. Finally concrete policy recommendations shall provide an outlook and possible solutions to bringing the Afghan education system back on track. A conclusion will summarise the results.

Facts and Data – Education in Afghanistan

Fifty-seven percent of all Afghan people are aged less than eighteen years.¹ Concerning such a large demographic proportion of young people, the question of education becomes crucial. Twenty-three years of continuous war and domestic conflict had serious effects on all dimensions of education in Afghanistan. Lots of facilities were physically destroyed and the curriculum was used in order to spread Communist or Taliban ideology.² This situation created long term damage which is in need of many years of reconstruction and recovery efforts.

Consequently the country's education indicators belong to the lowest in the world.³ The *Gross Enrolment Rate* (GER) is on a very low level. Only 20.5 percent of Afghan children attend primary school.⁴ Afghanistan furthermore indicates an illiteracy rate of 71.9 percent. Compared to neighbouring countries Afghanistan clearly lays at the bottom of the tables, as it is shown in the following graph.



Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics, September 2006, Available at: http://www.uis.unesco.org/ev.php?ID=4959_201&ID2=DO_TOPIC, date of consultation: 12 April 2007.

¹ Ali A. Jalali, "The Legacy of War and the Challenge of Peace Building", in: Robert Rotberg (ed.), *Building a New Afghan State*, Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press / The World Peace Foundation, 2007, pp. 22-55.

² Asian Development Bank (ADB), *Afghanistan: Comprehensive Needs Assessment in Education, Final Draft Report*, Kabul: ADB, 2002, p. iii.

³ The following numbers and statistics refer to the situation short after the fall of the Taliban regime and do not consider recovery efforts. Updated data are not yet available.

⁴ Anne Evans / Nick Manning / Yasin Osmani and others, *A Guide to Government in Afghanistan*, study report for the World Bank and Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU), Washington / Kabul, 2004, p. 115.

The root causes of this disillusioning record are easy to figure out. All the wars Afghanistan was struggling with in the past caused serious 'brain drain' and a lack of sufficient administrative and financial structures to maintain a working education system.⁵ Many teachers left the country. Those who stayed did not get any training, resulting in completely outdated educational skills. In many cases current teachers do not even have any kind of previous pedagogic knowledge and teach on a self-help and autodidactic basis. Furthermore, wages are on a very low level, meaning that the profession itself is very unattractive and Afghans do not see an incentive for becoming a teacher. The list of problems continues when having a look on the material aspects of education. Many school facilities were destroyed or are in a very problematic condition. Today's classes are often held in tents, mosques, shelters or even outdoors. Schools which have venues at their disposal have to cope with structural damage to the buildings, lacking water, sanitation and electricity. Finally, the whole education system is short of textbooks, blackboards, inventory and other material.⁶

Another serious problem evolves with regard to the gender dimension of the issue. As already seen in the graph above girls are in a much worse situation than boys in terms of their representation and participation in education. Women's illiteracy level of 88 percent is much higher compared to men's with 49 percent. Furthermore only 12 percent of girls get a primary education whereas it is 47 percent of all boys, who enjoy this benefit.⁷ It is obvious that the marginalisation of women in the field of education goes back to the former discriminatory policy of the Taliban regime, e.g. girls were not allowed to attend school when they were eight years old or above.⁸ The political change in 2002 did not bring any major improvement for this gender dimension and the situation continues to be very grave for women. As Taliban terrorists perpetuate their resistance against the settlement of liberal and democratic conditions in Afghanistan it still happens that girls are physically threatened in order to refrain them from attending school.⁹

Finally it has to be added that all indicators of Afghan education vary from region to region and show gaps between urban and remote areas.¹⁰ For instance the problem of girls' education being targeted by Taliban fighters is less crucial in Kabul, where the central government and its level of

⁵ Pia Karlsson / Amir Mansory, *Educational Reforms in the Context of Globalisation and in Afghanistan*, Stockholm: Institute of International Education, 2004, p. 54.

⁶ Evans / Manning / Osmani, *Guide to Government in Afghanistan*, p. iv and pp. 122-126.

⁷ Yasushi Katsuma, "Education as an Approach to Human Security, A Case of Afghanistan", in: Hideaki Shinoda (ed.), *Conflict and Human Security, A Search for New Approaches of Peace Building*, Hiroshima: Institute for Peace Science, 2004, pp. 197-206, here: p. 203.

⁸ Carol Tell, "The Women of Afghanistan", *Social Education*, vol. 66, no. 1, 2002, pp. 8-12, here: p 11.

⁹ The World Bank, *In Afghanistan, Out of Conflict and Into School*. Available at: <http://web.worldbank.org>, 11 November 2004.

¹⁰ Karlsson / Mansory, *Educational Reforms*, p. 52.

security deliverance are stronger than in rural areas.¹¹ GER and illiteracy are also much more distinct outside of big cities like Kabul, Kandahar or Bamyan.

Efforts of Improvement

After having shown how serious Afghanistan's problems of education are it is now time to ask which countermeasures the international community and the Afghan government have undertaken. This discussion shall also reveal to what extent these actions have been successful or not. The most significant asset on which international actors can rely is the willingness of Afghan parents to send their children to school. Even under the Taliban regime and in spite of severe fines, many parents organised self-run secret home-based schools in order to educate their children. Particular attention was given to daughters who were not allowed to go to school. UNICEF estimates that roughly 60,000 pupils, most of them girls, attended this kind of schooling.¹² Nowadays this desire to pursue education still persists and offers great opportunities for reconstruction efforts.

After the Bonn Agreement, where donor countries decided on a road map for Afghan reconstruction, a lot of money was devoted to education projects.¹³ The very first one was a 'Back-to-School' campaign launched by UNICEF in 2002, which became the biggest project of the organisation's history.¹⁴ According to Keiko Miwa, an education specialist working for the World Bank in Kabul, the programme was a great success:

"More than 3 million students enrolled in grades one to 12 in 2002, when only 1.7 million students were expected to enrol. In March 2003, the enrolment surpassed 4 million."¹⁵

By 2004 there were 200 percent more school buildings and 500 percent more teachers than two years before.¹⁶

However, one set-back was the lack of new textbooks and syllabi. In many cases the curriculum was just a replication of old learning materials which were used in Afghan refugee camps in Paki-

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Shon Campbell, *Lost Chances: The Changing Situation of Children in Afghanistan 1990-2000*, New York: UNICEF, 2001, pp. 87-88.

¹³ Leigh Nolan, *Afghanistan, Education, and the Formation of The Taliban*, Boston: The Fletcher School / Tufts University, 2006, unpublished Master Thesis, pp. 54-55, available at: <http://fletcher.tufts.edu/research/2006/Nolan.pdf>.

¹⁴ Conducted as a joint venture programme with the *United States Agency for International Development (USAID)*.

¹⁵ The World Bank, *Out of Conflict and Into School*.

¹⁶ Karlsson / Mansory, *Educational Reforms*, p. 54.

stan during the 1980's. These books were influenced by the Cold War ideology and call for an anti Communist holy war.¹⁷

As a consequence UNICEF and the *Teachers College of Columbia University* tried to reform the content of the textbooks. These amendments led to a deletion of religious passages which was harshly criticised by the former Minister for Education Yunous Qanooni who rejected the changes and did not want an Afghan curricula defined by 'foreigners', respectively external institutions. Unfortunately there has not been any headway in resolving the contentious issue of the Afghan education curricula.¹⁸

Finally it has to be said that in spite of huge financial undertakings by the international community, the allocation of aid to education was short-lived. In 2004 and 2005 financial means were cut tremendously. For instance, one major UN agency working on education in Afghanistan handled a budget of 10 million US dollars in 2005, whereas three years before the agency had the luxury to manage nine times that figure.¹⁹

Basically the efforts so far cannot be measured as exclusively good or bad. Growing numbers of school buildings and enrolment rates are definitely a promising sign for future perspectives. However compared to the assessment of the Asian Development Bank in 2002 which called for 13,851 more school buildings and 43,500 more teachers,²⁰ Afghanistan is still in tremendous need of educational reform. Since the financial situation is worsening and mismanagement occurs in the implementation process, efforts to improve the Afghan education system must continue.

A Theoretical Approach to Education and Conflict Prevention

After the fall of the Soviet Union the international system and its concept of security are in the midst of change. Security is no longer understood exclusively in military terms. Rather, new aspects complement and enhance the old narrow-minded approach. In this regard the idea of human security is of crucial importance. In 1994 the UNDP first stated that security should also include economic, social, food, environmental and political factors. In other words: security is people's freedom from fear and freedom from need.²¹

In this context education plays a significant role. Brand Hayes and Jeffrey Sands clearly point out:

¹⁷ Jeaniene Spink, "Education and Politics in Afghanistan: The Importance of an Education System in Peacebuilding and Reconstruction", *Journal of Peace Education*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2005, pp: 195-207.

¹⁸ Nolan, *Afghanistan, Education*, pp. 55-56.

¹⁹ Spink, *Education and Politics*, pp. 195-207.

²⁰ ADB, *Comprehensive Needs Assessment in Education*, p. iv.

²¹ United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Human Development Report 1994*, New York / Oxford: UNDP / Oxford University Press, pp. 22-24.

“One (...) security area is education. Opening schools and getting children (...) of the streets reduces one source of potential instability, and frees their parents to go to work. School attendance also gives children hope for the future and provides them an alternative to joining factional militias.”²²

So what is the exact nature of education as a contributing factor to security and development? If it is conducted properly education definitely represents a huge source for understanding between societies, nations, and cultures. By granting access to education to formerly marginalised people, for instance through affirmative action, social tensions can be eliminated. A common education system facilitates the interaction of people as it can lead to a deconstruction of stereotypes and negative perspectives of the ‘other’. Furthermore classes can help to develop a mentality of non-violent conflict settlement. Pupils learn how to interact peacefully by discussion and debate. Finally education gives young people a prospect for future perspectives, such as getting a job and reaching a certain standard of welfare. This consequently makes pupils less vulnerable to fundamental and extremist ideas.²³

Nevertheless, education itself is not automatically a panacea. Much depends on its implementation. On the negative side it can push conflict to its peak. For instance education can serve as a tool for cultural repression and maintaining inequality. Especially in ethnic and social heterogeneous countries education can impose language, ideology, norms and values of the ethnic majority or the social dominating class by preaching stereotypes and prejudices. Course syllabi often are used as an instrument to imbed such ideas in the minds of the people and last for decades or even centuries.²⁴

International actors have meanwhile understood the far reaching importance of education in conflict prevention. The *US National Security Strategy* (NSS) from 2002, for the first time ever, does recognize this new thinking. It emphasises defence less in its traditional sense and puts a new emphasis on prevention respectively pre-emption.²⁵ The call for better education programmes in developing countries continues in this same spirit as the NSS even goes so far as to increase US education assistance by 20 percent.²⁶

After having evaluated the connection between education on the one side and security respectively conflict prevention on the other, it is now time to look at how the situation has evolved in Afghanistan.

²² Brand Hayes / Jeffrey Sands, “Non-traditional Military Responses to End Wars: Considerations for Policymakers”, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, vol. 26, no. 3, 1997, pp. 819-844, here p. 827.

²³ Kenneth D. Bush / Diana Saltarelli, *The two Faces of Education in Ethnic Conflict, Towards a Peacebuilding Education for Children*, Florence: Unicef Innocenti Insight, 2000, pp. 16-21.

²⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 10-16.

²⁵ Wayne Nelles, *Comparative Education, Terrorism, and Human Security: From Critical Pedagogy to Peace building?*, New York: Pelgrave Macmillan, 2003, p. 16.

²⁶ The President of the United States, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, Washington D.C.: The White House, September, 2002, p. 23.

The Case of Afghanistan – How Security and Education Affect Each Other

At the moment the Afghan education system faces problems which are either caused or aggravated by the lack of security in the country.

Human Rights Watch states that since January 2005 204 attacks on school facilities and teachers have been committed, mainly by radical Taliban fighters.²⁷ Due to NATO's scarce military presence,²⁸ it is not surprising that school buildings are very difficult to protect especially in rural areas. They are therefore an easy target for the Taliban who strive to destabilise the government by concentrating their violence against civilian targets. However these attacks are also motivated by ideology. A working school system reaffirms a commitment toward liberal values like tolerance, human rights and equal gender opportunities – such values completely oppose the Taliban's understanding. That is also the reason why they try to target girls and female teachers in order to refrain them from going to school.²⁹

Another sensitive issue is the reintegration of marginalised groups into society. Since the regime change in 2002 over 3.1 million Afghan refugees from Pakistan have tried to get resettled in Afghanistan. Only 45 percent of refugee children have attended some kind of school education. Their incorporation into the weak Afghan education system, which itself is still in a process of rehabilitation, poses a serious threat to and additional burden for the social well being of the country.³⁰

A similar case refers to former Afghan child soldiers. Thousands still have to be reintegrated into social and civilian structures.³¹ The problem is that these children are traumatised by their prior war experiences and therefore need special psychological treatment, which can hardly be delivered by current school facilities. If Afghan authorities and the international community fail in their endeavour to reintegrate these traumatised children, they could easily become a target for Taliban and warlord recruitment efforts.

²⁷ Human Rights Watch, *Afghanistan: Bombs and Threats shut down Schools*. Available at: <http://www.hrw.org/english/docs/2006/07/06/afghan13700.htm>, 11 July 2006

²⁸ Recently US Defence Minister Robert Gates called for 2000 additional NATO soldiers in Afghanistan. See also: Le Monde.fr, *L'OTAN réclame des troupes supplémentaires pour l'Afghanistan, l'Europe tergiversé*. Available at: <http://www.lemonde.fr/web/article/0,1-0@2-3216,36-865436,0.html?xtor=RSS-3208>, 9 February 2007.

²⁹ Antonio Fabrizio, *The War on Education in Afghanistan*. Available at: <http://www.worldpress.org/Asia/2500.cfm>, 22 September 2006. See also: Zama Coursen-Neff, "The Taliban's War on Education, Schoolgirls are still under Fire in Afghanistan", *LA Times*, 31.07.2006.

³⁰ Nolan, *Afghanistan, Education, and the Formation of The Taliban*, p. 54.

³¹ There are no reliable data concerning the exact number of child soldiers. While the above cited *Report on Comprehensive Needs Assessment in Education* talks about 25,000 to 30,000 ex child soldiers alone in Kandahar, an UNICEF report calculates with 8,000 in the whole country. See also: Junko Mitani, *Afghanistan's former child soldiers are eager to embrace the future*. Available at: http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/afghanistan_23051.html, 16 August 2004.

Former teacher qualification is a further problem for conflict prevention in Afghanistan. The vast majority of today's teachers have gotten their own education in so called madrassas, Muslim schools with a very conservative-oriented religious curriculum.³² These facilities can play an important role for granting basic social needs,³³ but in many cases they also foster fundamentalist ideology and anti-liberal thinking. Consequently it is very likely that Afghan teachers who were trained and socialised by these madrassas teach their pupils accordingly. If no counter regulations are taken, this can lead to a spread and strengthening of radical ideas, contributing to a further destabilisation of the country.

As already mentioned the government's education authority is limited to Kabul and the surrounding regions. As a result radical forces are still able to exert strong influence on school curricula in rural areas, which are often controlled by local warlords or Taliban fighters. This also can foster or further advance fundamentalist views in the country.

Regarding the dissatisfactory condition of Afghan education facilities and indicators on the one hand and its serious consequences for the dimension of security and conflict prevention on the other hand, the outlook on possible solutions and further improvement efforts becomes crucial. The following chapter will show, that a variety of different proposals exist, which, if conducted properly, might have a positive effect on the education system itself and finally on the state of security in general.

Policy Recommendations – Building Peoples' Minds

Political and economic security is a prerequisite to the improvement of a country's education system. The coalition forces have to continue their struggle against Taliban fighters, especially in the Southern part of the country. It must be NATO's objective to foster the government's authority outside Kabul. In terms of education this will then lead to a decrease of influence by local warlords and Taliban on school curricula in rural regions. A better security situation can also end terrorist attacks against school facilities, teachers, and pupils.

The problematic situation of teacher's wages, school inventory and equipment is mainly a question of a lack of funds. International financial efforts are essential but not enough for substantial progress. It might therefore be helpful to set up a system of twinning programmes. Schools in Western and industrialised countries could adopt Afghan schools and organise fund raising projects with local companies for the benefit of their Afghan counterpart. Exchange visits can also

³² Nolan, *Afghanistan, Education, and the Formation of The Taliban*, p. 56.

³³ Alexander Evans, "Understanding Madrassas, How Threatening are They?", in: *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 85, no. 1, 2006, pp. 9-16.

foster mutual understanding and perhaps contribute to fledgling liberal and democratic values in Afghanistan.

With regard to marginalised groups like refugees and child soldiers, it is of key importance to provide them with special psychological treatment. A possible solution could be that international organisations either support the education of Afghan psychologists or they provide themselves experts, which are specialised on trauma therapy. Psychologists from Dubai, UAE or other moderate Islamic countries could be of crucial help in this context, as they show a certain sense of cultural sensitivity.

As has been demonstrated above, many Afghan teachers have only low levels of education. Therefore it is vital to upgrade their pedagogical skills. This could be done by offering seminars and workshops in order to teach them new education and current presentation techniques. This could help, introducing an education system based on secularism and minimising the presence of Cold War and fundamentalist ideologies of Afghan teachers who were mostly educated in conservative and religious madrassas.

The latter issue represents a continuous challenge for any kind of improvement effort. Lots of girls and boys still attend school in these madrassas. However, as Alexander Evans recently pointed out, this form of schooling can also have a very positive function in serving basic social needs. Madrassas are not *a priori* a bad thing, but it is important to ensure that they do not teach a radical interpretation of Islam. Therefore it is essential to introduce a central madrassa registration procedure in order to control their curricula.³⁴ In Pakistan for instance the so called *Pakistan Madrassa Education Board* started a secular approach towards education by introducing subjects like Mathematics, Computer Science, Economics, Political Science etc. – a policy which might be helpful for controlling Afghan madrassas as well.³⁵

Last but not least we have seen that the literacy rate of girls persists to be a reason for concern. A marginalised role of women can seriously affect the overall wellbeing of a society. This is the reason why the international community must have a substantial interest in opening education to Afghan girls. Since parents often hesitate to let their daughters attending class, being not convinced by the positive outcomes of gender-equal education, incentives must be given for instance by financial aid if they agree sending their daughters to school.

³⁴ Evans, *Understanding Madrassas*, pp. 9-16.

³⁵ Tariq Rahman, *The Madrassa and the State of Pakistan, Religion, poverty and the potential for violence in Pakistan*. Available at: <http://www.himalmag.com/2004/february/essay.htm>, February 2004.

Conclusion

The essay's aim was to evaluate the condition of the Afghan education system and to understand the implications on conflict prevention and security.

It is clear that the country's education indicators and the counter measures funded by the international community are not nearly sufficient. On the one hand Afghanistan suffers from a lack of teachers, school venues, equipment and demonstrates a huge disparity between urban and rural areas. Efforts by the international community are only a drop in the ocean. On the other hand it was shown that education cannot be seen as an isolated issue on its own. Instead it is closely related to factors of stability and security. That does not mean, that a non-existent education system necessarily and inevitably leads to conflict, but it makes its emergence more likely.

This context also relates to our case of Afghanistan. It became clear that its education structures face problems which are either caused or aggravated by the bad security situation in the country and vice versa: Bad education indicators themselves also feed conflicts and contribute to their emergence.

It is therefore vital to break this vicious circle by prioritising the issue of education on Afghanistan's recovery agenda. Education makes the foundation of a society's future. The more education a country has, the more developed it is and consequently crisis situations can be dealt with more easily in a peaceful manner. The above mentioned policy recommendations could have a positive impact on Afghanistan's development as they offer a structural approach towards improving the education and security sector.

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