Afghanistan’s first investment conference “blazes the trail”

“It is already happening” said Omar Zakhilwal, President of the Afghanistan Investment Support Agency (AISA), with a huge smile on his face, just one day after the end of the first ever conference that brought together investors from many different parts of the world at Kabul’s Serena Hotel.

Speaking of a giant multinational food company he said: “They have applied today for registration, they want to set up a plant here.” Mr. Zakhilwal added that Pakistan’s biggest diary product company was following suit on the same day.

“The interest in the conference on the part of participants went much beyond our expectations and we are glad to hear that investors think the same way about the outcome of the conference,” he said proudly. His expression was clearly one of achievement and satisfaction.

It was clear from the very beginning that the first ever gathering of international investors in Afghanistan would be in something of a different class, in both its content and in its appeal. President Karzai inaugurated the conference on May 9, with an unusually frank and straightforward speech, in English, to a packed crowd: “I know you are here for profits” he said. “And I am glad that you are here for profits.” He said he knew that there was red tape and corruption, he acknowledged there were shortcomings in the business environment, nevertheless, he kept on pounding the same message home: “Bring in investments to take out your profits later”.

He said sectors from mining to communications, from energy to agriculture were all full of potential and he tried to ensure potential investors that they would be free to transfer their profits, thanks to all the relevant legislation having been put in place.

The conference and a parallel trade exhibition, organized by AISA, was supported by the UNDP and two German agencies, GTZ, the German Government’s development assistance agency and BDI, the Federation of German Industries. Both events were also sponsored by a number of major private sector entities, including Standard Chartered Bank, Kabul Bank and the Afghanistan International Bank.

Reinhardt Steick, Germany’s Ambassador to Afghanistan, speaking at the opening session of the conference said they believed the private sector would play a major role in Afghanistan’s recovery and development and that they would continue to support the Afghan government’s efforts to open the economy to outside investment.

Mr. Zakhilwal said there was immense interest among the participants and he said many investors had already started to inquire into the possibility of getting involved in the privatization process.

This enthusiastic interpretation of the outcome was not confined to the Afghan side. Dr. Manzur Haque, representing a Pakistani company involved in storage and material handling was speaking as if he was witnessing a miracle. “As we speak I am sending specifications and requesting price quotations. I have been demanded to respond to inquiries by noon,” he said when he was interviewed at the exhibition.
site on the penultimate day of the event. He said he was receiving inquiries and requests for business connections from everywhere: “Herat, Mazar, you name it.”

He admitted that he was a little bit sceptical when he was encouraged by the UNDP to take part in the exhibition. But since the UNDP had agreed to support his participation, he said he had thought that there was nothing to lose. “But my expectations were surpassed way beyond my imagination,” he said with a big smile.

He said there were so many contacts established over the three days of the exhibition that “I will have to be here again within two months at the latest.”

But it was not all smooth sailing. Some investors did complain about the lack of data and information. Joost Heij, a Dutch investor based in Uzbekistan, said he had come to see the opportunities but that he could not find reliable and verifiable economic data. He said he believed there was ample opportunity but that the management of these opportunities left much to be desired.

AISA officials believe that the double-event week of May 9-12 has been a major success in opening Afghanistan to the world business community.

Having come out of decades of war and destruction, and still being threatened by an insurgency in the south, Afghanistan is in a race against time to accomplish its broad development goals against the backdrop of an array of constraints hampering its march towards progress. In the endeavour to achieve developmental objectives, like any other country in the world, Afghanistan has to rely on its human capital as the main resource to ensure that the development potential of the country and its people has been fully realized. Such an approach must inevitably take into account the marginalized and vulnerable groups in the society, because both such groups also have a lot to offer to contribute to the effort and that their involvement in the mainstream social and political spectrum should lay the ground for a mature society in peace with itself, content in the thought that all its elements have been embraced and nurtured.

Mindful of this state of affairs, the Government of Afghanistan, with support from the international community, has embarked on a human rights based approach to include people with disabilities and other traditionally left out sections of the population of Afghanistan in the development and governance of their country.

The ultimate goal is to achieve an inclusive, dignified and barrier free society. But to conquer the target, it has to be examined first, and for effective remedies to be developed against social exclusion and discrimination, the essence and dimensions of the phenomenon have to be explored.

Responding to a call for “Action Oriented Case Studies for Inclusive Governance of Marginalized Groups” coming from the UNDP Regional Centre in Bangkok, a research study is being conducted by UNDP Afghanistan and partners. This study, more of an empirical nature rather than statistical, is investigating the propensity, prevalence and causes of the various difficulties that ‘persons with disabilities’ face in voting and political participation.

Preliminary findings of this study, which is called Inclusive Governance of Marginalized Groups: Persons with Disabilities in Afghanistan, suggest that conventional policies that merely address structural barriers are necessary but not enough. Institutional and legal reforms to end institutional and legal discrimination, economic improvement to alleviate poverty related barriers, and/or encouraging greater representation from persons with disabilities to address issues of alienation, etc., are all welcome, but they alone may not be adequate to ensure “functional inclusive governance.” This is because much of the barrier is behavioural and attitudinal and this is the problem that has to be targeted.

The study found, for example, a widely held attitude of resignation and indifference on the part of disabled citizens when it comes to voting and politics, while at the same time it was clearly observed that the isolationist attitudes on both sides of the divide were helping only to reinforce the feeling of “otherness” among the disabled.

It is, therefore, a behavioural change that is required alongside legislative and institutional measures. The study does come out with some tentative recommendations in this regard, including such steps as funding research into latest techniques like network analysis to advance the complex understanding of those kinds of social networks that might facilitate societal trust and activism.

There is clearly much distance to be covered, but initial steps are being taken and the march will go forward.
Afghanistan’s first ever disability centre close to completion

The final touches are being put to Afghanistan’s first ever disability resource centre which will be the first and only building fully accessible to disabled in the country.

The centre will feature state of the art equipment for people with disabilities including a brail printer (never before used in Afghanistan), special equipment for the hearing impaired and internet access.

The US$ 120,000 centre was built by UNDP’s NPAD project (National Programme for Action on Disability) and the Urban Development Group with funding from the French Trust Fund.

Speaking during a tour of the nearly completed facility French Ambassador Regis Koetschet said: “It’s an example which has to succeed. It’s important that this project will be a success and we have to have this place as a lively place. We have to be humble. It is so difficult for the handicapped people here. We have to find a way to help them as much as possible with the government.”

The Kabul centre in District 11 of Khair Khana, will be followed by a further three centres in Jalalabad, Kandahar and Mazar which will be funded by Japan.

The site was checked for mines before worked started in July last year and even today it stands near to a scrapheap of old cars, trucks, busses and other metal.

Inside there are four toilets, a library, four offices and a large multi purpose conference room for meetings, workshops and trainings.

Rudy Rodrigues, UNDP’s advisor to the Ministry of Martyrs and Disabled said: “It will provide a place for people with disabilities to call their own.”

“We’re carrying the torch in Afghanistan, providing the leadership and direction,” he emphasised adding that only the UN is actively involved with disability and that the new centre will be a demonstration to the private and public sector on what can be done to make buildings more accessible.

Mr. Rodrigues also pointed out that following February’s London Donor Conference, disability was included in the Afghanistan Compact: “By end-2010, increased assistance will be provided to meet the special needs of all disabled people, including their integration in society through opportunities for education and gainful employment.”

S.W. Saraj, Advisor to the Minister of Martyrs and Disabled said the centre was going to lead the way across the country: “We don’t want to discriminate against disabled people. We want them to share in the society of Afghanistan. It’s a very good start to move forward from here and into the provinces.”

The National Programme for Action on Disability (NPAD) is a three-year project formally launched in March 2005 in agreement with the Ministry of Martyrs and Disabled and the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. The primary objective of NPAD is to raise awareness and capacity and to develop government structures for policy development, implementation and coordination of disability focused efforts in Afghanistan. The emphasis of the programme is to ensure the rightful inclusion of disabled people through addressing and breaking down social, political and economic barriers faced by disabled people in Afghanistan.
Discussing the issues

Although the Afghan constitution has some specific clauses recognizing the rights and privileges of people with disabilities, the disabled do feel that their rights continue to be violated regardless of what the constitution says. Given the generic nature of the reference to the rights of the disabled in the constitution, a new, admittedly ambitious, but timely plan is being rolled out, aimed at getting new legislation for Afghans with disabilities. This initiative has been led by the Ministry of Martyrs, Disabled and Social Affairs (MMDSA) with the able facilitation of NPAD/UNDP. The goal is to have a Disability Act that will provide the legal structure for effective implementation, monitoring and enforcement of the three year national policy framework on disability that is awaiting cabinet approval.

According to Senator Hajji Nafisa Sultan, until recently National Chair of the Union of Afghan Women with Disabilities, and herself physically disabled, “legislation for Afghans with disabilities is long overdue. It should clearly outline our rights, privileges, obligations and put in robust monitoring and enforcement mechanisms”. She is convinced that the proposed document will herald a new chapter and bring hope to the disabled population. Ms. Sultan is appealing for support for the new draft law among her fellow senators and parliamentarians, asking for a “yes” vote when its finally brought to the floor of both houses for debate.

Drafting and enacting a law for the disabled is never easy anywhere, it will certainly not be smooth sailing in Afghanistan. It takes a lot of bargaining, tolerance, patience, hard work and commitment from all the relevant stakeholders. A lot of dialogue, engagement, research and regular back and forth consultations go into the process. This is the only way the process and outcome can claim credibility, ownership and legitimacy especially from the primary consumers and owners of the said law.

NPAD/UNDP has just facilitated the first two rounds of consultations with Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and with leaders of the Disabled People’s Organizations (DPOs) to try and build consensus on the basics and design a road map on how to move the process forward. A small task force comprising representatives from CSOs, DPOs and the MMDSA has been elected to first draw their own Terms of Reference and thereafter embark on the long and challenging task of consultations that will reach as many concerned as possible in the various provinces and districts. This task force will be linked to an inter-ministerial task force under the leadership of the MMDSA. The NPAD/UNDP Programme Manager, Shaya Ibrahim, who kick-started the process, stresses the importance of collecting and collating views from the various disability groups, parents and service providers from across the country as forming a formidable basis for drafting the new legislation.

In addition, the task will draw from experiences and best practices from other countries that have gone through a similar exercise and have working laws on the disabled.

Two UNDP projects team up for employment creation

The UNDP Country Office in Afghanistan is currently running the single biggest operation on the issue of disability at the global scale, the National Programme for Action on Disability (NPAD). Another programme pillar is implementing a project, Partnerships for Private Sector Development (PPSD), aimed at building and expanding entrepreneurial capacity.

The two have recently joined forces to create the Afghan Ability (AA) scheme to assist people with disabilities who are willing to work through various means so that they can be employed or develop their own businesses.

In a country where there are no reliable statistics and the number of disabled is estimated anywhere between 800,000 and two million, the value of such an initiative to replace impoverishment with the hope of earning a living by working can hardly be exaggerated.

A small scale survey among people with disabilities helped identify the key issues that need to be addressed for an effective implementation and the achievement of desired outcomes:

- Creation of a job placement service for those willing to be involved in the scheme is a must;
- Establishing income generation models for those who have to work within the confines of their residential units (such as production of envelopes from paper);
- Retail marketing and distribution of goods and services (a very recent example is the Aina production house allowing its publications to be distributed by people with disabilities, giving them a chance to make a living);
- Product and market development (and training) for handicrafts;
- Joint marketing (including by shelf-sharing) of domestically produced goods/commodities.

The AA scheme is seen as something to be applied in all the provinces of Afghanistan with a particular appeal to all targeted disabled individuals and groups. The project staff say the AA needs to be and will be developed as a brand so that it will be a flagship campaign not only to consolidate income generation for the disabled, but for an inclusive society caring for the marginalized.
Now, how about this for a challenge: In Afghanistan, a country torn apart by almost three decades of war and destruction, a country where traditional Islam has been the dominant cultural value governing patterns of behaviour, you are required to come up with one (or two, at most) gesture of fingers and hands which should signify the complex notion of democracy. That is a challenge Ab Ghaffar, President of the Afghanistan National Association of the Deaf (ANOD), has been tackling for more than eight years and still he shows no sign of exhaustion.

In a three, sometimes four way interview, Mr. Ghaffar told his story of involvement in the development of sign language with the help of Maliha, the sign language teacher of UNDP’s National Programme for Action on Disability (NPAD) and with Dr. Zia, NPAD’s technical advisor frequently assisting with English translation.

Mr. Ghaffar said his determination to develop a sign language for the hearing impaired in Afghanistan was the direct result of his impressions from a visit to Britain, where he was surprised to see many individuals with hearing impairment were employed in the civil service and public sector.

Mr. Ghaffar says he led the efforts to establish a Sign Language Development Committee in 1998. Between 1998 and 2000 the committee developed a sign language alphabet for about 2000 words, the most simple and basic of them.

Following the launch of the UNDP’s NPAD programme, Mr. Ghaffar and his colleagues submitted a new project proposal to develop yet another 2000 “words” in sign language and received the approval for funding. Currently, development of sign language versions of some 1800 new words has been completed over the last year or so and work is going on for the remaining 200.

The project currently employs a national advisor, an international adviser and a design artist who develops the gestures for the expression of words.

Mr. Ghaffar, and his wife, who is also hearing impaired and works for ANOD, are very clear in their determination that they will go as far as they can on the path they set for themselves to achieve their goal: Making this new sign language available for all the estimated 10,000 or so hearing impaired living in Afghanistan, but more importantly to enable all children with hearing disabilities to complete their secondary education by developing a full-fledged sign language, complete with its grammar, tenses and conjugation.

Currently ANOD runs a three-grade school for children and another NGO, HIFA, runs a school up to eleventh grade. Although the students learn a broad range of subjects from mathematics to history and from geography to chemistry, the sign language for effective student-teacher interaction is not there and the education is more reliant on books than interaction.

Asked what other efforts he would like to see undertaken for the hearing impaired, Mr. Ghaffar said first and foremost he would like to have much more international experience brought into Afghanistan regarding the education, employment and involvement in society of hearing impaired people in other countries. He went on to indicate that he would very much like to have children with hearing inabilities educated in the schools with other kids so that they will be able to prepare themselves better for their future, without having the feeling of being isolated from the mainstream community.

New sign language for Afghans in the process of development

Saying it in sign language from left to right: Maliha, sign language teacher, Dr. Zia, NPAD’s technical advisor, Mustafa Eric from UNDP, Ab Ghaffar, President of the Afghanistan National Association of the Deaf and his wife Rahima.
The governments of Australia and Afghanistan have signed a US$ 7.3 million Record of Understanding (RoU) for an 18 month, two phase project to construct a settlement and to provide sustainable livelihood support for refugee Afghan returnees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in the Barikab region in the vicinity of Kabul, with the UNDP Country Office in Afghanistan being assigned by the two governments to implement the project.

The agreements on the project, the first phase (US$ 4.6 million) being on the construction of a settlement for landless returnees in Barikab and the second (AU$ 3.5 million, approx US$ 2.7 million) on supporting livelihood activities for the target group, was signed by Amand Vanstone, Minister of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs on behalf of the Australian Government and by Mohammad Yousuf Pashtun, Minister of Urban Development, on behalf of Afghanistan.

Under the agreements, the Afghan government undertakes the provision of land for the purposes of the project while the funding will be allocated to the construction of the housing units, in traditional mud-brick style but with earthquake-resistant design, by the targeted beneficiaries themselves. The scheme will help the returnees acquire new skills while building their own houses. The number of houses to be constructed will be determined through talks between the Afghan Ministry of Urban Development and the UNDP.

The text of the agreement refers to objective of the project as contributing “broadly towards the shared objectives of the [two governments] of supporting peace and stability in Afghanistan by promoting sustainable return and reintegration processes, meeting the humanitarian needs of Afghan nationals and building capacities in relevant Afghan Government agencies.”

The intergovernmental agreements were accompanied by a cost-sharing agreement signed between the Australian Government and the UNDP by Andrew Metcalfe, Secretary DIMA and Mohammad Younus Payab, Assistant Country Director, UNDP Afghanistan for the parties, respectively.

As yet another step in the process of capacity building, the Afghan Ministry of Communications will be able to design and print any type of map of the country thanks to the inauguration of a Geographical Information System (GIS) centre within its premises.

This is the first time that Afghan experts are designing and printing maps of cities, villages, highways and those featuring other national data, based on inputs provided via satellite. Until now most of such maps have been printed by private companies, and often not without mistakes.

Speaking at the inauguration ceremony, Amirzai Sangin, Minister of Communications said: “The project that we inaugurated today is a very important one and I thank AIMS for providing computers, a printer and other equipment and for conducting English language, computer and GIS training for our staff.”

Currently, there are more than 120 trainees in basic English and computer courses, seven trainees in the Geographical Information System (GIS), 20 field survey staff in Global Positioning System (GPS), two staff in advance Arc GIS 9.x (the most advanced GIS software) and ten staff in database management taking courses at the AIMS training centre. In addition at the ministry another group of 80 staff members will be provided with advanced training in these fields at a later stage.

This scheme is part of project for Building Information Management Capacity at Afghan government institutions. The total cost of this project, which started some 18 months ago, is US$ 800,000 with UNDP, the European Union and USAID contributing to the funding.
Although the situation in Afghanistan has improved considerably from a media freedom standpoint in comparison to five years ago, there is still much room for improvement.

While TVs and video tapes were once hung on trees and people were jailed for listening to radio stations run by people other than the Taliban, now May 3 can be marked as World Press Freedom Day in Afghanistan.

Said Makhdoom Raheen, acting Minister of Information, Culture and Youth was very appreciative of the current state of affairs when he addressed the gathering organized to celebrate World Press Freedom Day: “Many thanks to God that today we are able to celebrate this day,” he said. But he was also mindful of the fact that the media law had been one of the most talked about documents over the last five years and that it had already been modified or rewritten three times.

Among the issues discussed were self-censorship exercised by some reporters, a habit inherited from another era of Afghan history and the issues of division within the media establishment along ethnic, religious and tribal lines.

Carlotta Gall of the New York Times gave her advice for good journalism: “The best protection for journalists facing dangers and control from the government is sheer hard work. If it’s dangerous, don’t be a hero, but find another way to report the story. Don’t risk your life but find a way to get to the truth” she said.

The graphic design of publications at Afghanistan’s Ministry of Women’s Affairs has been improved thanks to the skill and efforts of UN Volunteer Abdul Rahim.

Mr. Rahim, who’s 29 years old, has been with the volunteers since July 2005, working on the ministry’s publications such as posters, greetings cards, diaries, calendars and magazines like Irshad-e-Niswan (Voice of Women) and the monthly magazine Maremen (The Lady).

The Minister for Women’s Affairs Masooda Jalal awarded Mr. Rahim a Certificate of Excellence for his work in the ministry and the 500 pages report he designed and composed entitled MOWA from the inception of the Islamic Republic until the Parliamentary Elections.

UNV helps Women’s Ministry in graphic design

Mr. Rahim returned to Afghanistan, following the fall of the Taliban regime, after he’d spent some time in exile in Iran and Pakistan where he studied computer graphic design.

He joined the Constitutional Commission and the Grand Assembly Commission where he supported the media unit in designing the logos for the commissions. He’s also worked with an internet service provider.
Administrator discusses programme issues with UNDP Afghanistan staff

UNDP Administrator Kemal Dervis said the UNDP Country Office (CO) in Afghanistan should be positioned to both act as the leader of the recovery cluster and plan and implement long-term development and capacity building for sustainable progress in Afghanistan.

In the first of what is to become a series of video conferences linking UNDP HQ in New York and key country offices around the world, Mr. Dervis and a team of his close advisors, discussed various issues surrounding UNDP’s programme delivery with the senior management and staff of the CO in Afghanistan.

Describing the Afghan CO as “one of the two to three flagship offices” of UNDP operations around the globe, Mr. Dervis was particularly interested to know about the status of economic recovery and project implementation procedures in the country.

Ameerah Haq, Deputy SRSG at UNAMA, UNDP Resident Representative and Resident UN Coordinator in Afghanistan explained in the course of the discussions that Afghanistan was at an interesting juncture. Having successfully completed the Bonn process and established the mechanisms for democratic governance, Ms. Haq said the Afghanistan Compact, agreed with the international community at the London conference in early February this year, had set the benchmarks of development for the next years and all efforts were geared to achieving the goals listed in the Compact.

Responding to a query from Mr. Dervis, Ms. Haq said the security situation had severely hampered the realization of hopes that were nourished on the thinking that Afghanistan could serve as an effective land bridge for increasing regional trade and that now the best hope for economic recovery was the agro-business sector.

Anita Nirody, the acting Country Director, UNDP CO in Afghanistan, told Mr. Dervis and his team that UNDP had reactivated its operations in Afghanistan in 2002 after the years of war and that the CO was steadily moving from small scale projects to a long-term, comprehensive programmatic approach to development in Afghanistan.

Sitara, Assistant Country Director, UNDP CO Afghanistan, listed the challenges in project implementation, including a lack of capacity on the part of the implementing partners and the issue of gender discrimination, which she described as a possible impediment to Afghanistan’s realization of its development potential.

Mr. Dervis was also briefed by Raz Mohammad Sadiq, Programme Management Analyst, on the state of the funding of projects and on relations with donors.

SEAL arranges financial training for Afghan National Assembly secretariat

10 members of the Afghan National Assembly secretariat have attended financial training in London funded by the UK’s Foreign and Commonwealth Office and hosted by Westminster Explained, an organization which trains civil service personnel and others in the public sector.

The training was all part of the continuing capacity building developments of the UNDP’s SEAL project (Support to the Establishment of the Afghan Legislature) which is supporting the staff and parliamentarians of the two houses of the Afghan National Assembly, the Meshrano and Wolesi Jirgas (upper and lower houses), on various aspects within the areas of capacity building, legislative affairs, public outreach and information, communications and technology (ICT).

As the work of the assembly takes shape and progresses the secretariat of the budget, finance, public accounts and banking affairs departments of the two houses needs qualified staff to assist the parliamentarians on relevant committees, such as for the approval of the budget and exercising parliamentary oversight of the state budget.

The training in London was designed for a small group of professional secretariat staff, who went through a competitive process, including a final test, with the best and most qualified for the training being selected.

The training focused on classic budget, finance and public accounts committees jobs (eg: roles of parliamentarians in the state budget approval and oversight, the parliamentary budget, public accounts, the role of the audit office and treasury department) plus some modules for preparing the ground for the future (eg: gender budgeting, performance budgeting, the Millennium Development Goals).

The delegates also visited the British Parliament and attended the Public Accounts Committee and heard sessions on the British political system.

Some 150 members of the Afghan National Assembly have attended study tours abroad as part of the SEAL project with the London training being the first in a series of specialized trainings abroad for selected parliamentary staff.
UNDP is the UN’s global development network, advocating for change and connecting countries to knowledge, experience and resources to help people build a better life.

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An Image of Afghanistan  

Photo: archive