Young Afghan legislature takes democracy education for youth seriously

While it is a daunting task in any transition country to instill the culture of democracy in the hearts and minds of the young generations; difficulties surrounding the task assume gigantic proportions if you are in Afghanistan, where the devastation of decades of war and destruction has left deep scars in the psyche of the people and confidence in governance structures is just being restored.

The Public Relations Department of the National Assembly, led by Tahera Shairzay, has taken the bull by the horn and launched a scheme to familiarize the young generation with the functions and procedures of the country’s law-making organ.

For the past six weeks now, groups of 10-15 students, 10th to 12th grade, from various secondary schools of the capital have been paying half day visits to the National Assembly to see at work the representatives, elected by their parents or uncles or aunts.

Ahmad Jawid Payab, the Public Awareness Officer working under Ms. Shairzay, said the “parliamentary tour” of the students included all main components of the National Assembly, even the specialized committees.

The “itinerary” prepared for the students includes a half-hour visit to the Wolesi Jirga (the lower house) plenary hall where they sit and watch the proceedings at the section reserved for guests, followed by a similar observation at the Meshrano Jirga (the upper house), then the students take a look at the legislature’s library which has been recently inaugurated. In the course of their tour, the students also get the chance to see how the Assembly’s specialized committees and commissions deliberate on draft legislation paragraph by paragraph, sentence by sentence. During the visit, if circumstances allow, they can also briefly ask questions to legislators, even to Speakers of the two houses or their deputies.

Gulhassan, the 12th grade student from the Ansari secondary school, confidently said “This is the meeting of the public and the State”, when asked about what his visit to the Assembly meant for him. “I believe our Assembly will help solve the problems of our
Jalalabad Gets its VCCT Center

Mindful of the danger posed by the ever-present possibility of the spread of HIV/AIDS in Afghanistan, Ministry of Public Health has been taking quite serious the task of putting in place preventive measures in a timely fashion.

Supported in this endeavor by the UNDP Country Office in Afghanistan, the Ministry has recently inaugurated another one of the Voluntary Counseling and Confidential Treatment (VCCT) centers, this time in Jalalabad.

The Center, renovated by Urban Development Group, another UNDP project, was completed in 82 days and cost some US $50,000, including lab testing materials, all funded by UNDP.

UNDP Staff Also Visit the Assembly

On the day the Ansari secondary school students were at the Assembly, the staff of the UNDP Country Office in Afghanistan also had the chance to visit the country’s first legislative body.

Thanks to the efforts of the SEAL team, the visit allowed the UNDP staff to see and feel pride of their contribution to the establishment of Afghanistan’s first law-making body after three decades of war and destruction.
regarded as a particularly important contribution to the struggle against the spread of the HIV/AIDS in Afghanistan. Located at a key position close to Afghanistan’s border as the main urban center attracting many travelers, the VCCT in the city can play a vital role in early diagnosis of HIV infections, thereby allowing for necessary measures to be taken quickly to stem the spread of the infection.

Being a post-conflict country with very low literacy and high poverty rates, Afghanistan is prone to be seriously affected by the epidemic. Although official figures say that there are only a total of 55 individuals in the country with HIV infection, senior officials admit that the real figure is likely to be somewhere close to 2000 or a little above that.

Health officials say that, given the lack of knowledge about the disease among the population, even the most unlikely instances of life, for example a slight cut in the barber shop during a shave may be a source of infection for anybody.

Nurses and other health workers in Jalalabad have already been given some training on the possible causes of infection among the local population.

### RISE Gives Hope to Refugees and Ex-Combatants

RISE, gives hope to refugees and ex-combatants.

Having returned to Jalalabad from Pakistan with his family after 20 years as refugees, Samandar is happy to be able to support his eight-member household, thanks to the employment opportunity created under the Regional Initiative for Sustainable Economy (RISE) Programme. This project is funded by the Government of Japan and implemented by UNDP’s Urban Development Group under the framework of UNDP’s Promotion of Sustainable Livelihoods. He has been working in the construction sector, namely as a painter, in the renovation work of a building previously accommodating UNDP’s Urban Development Group in the city. “I am very happy to have this job opportunity, because I am not only able to make money to support my family, but also learning a new skill that can help me find employment in the future” he said with a big smile. A younger counterpart, 22-year-old Muhammad Naem is equally happy: “I was with an armed group for three years”, he says. “After deciding to be part of the ANBP’s (UNDP’s Afghanistan New Beginning’s Programme) Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) process, I have taken courses in construction work and now I can find construction jobs in the market” Naem said. The implementation process has to be all embracing: In addition to addressing the main concerns of reconstruction and job creation, it also has to try to be as inclusive as possible, that is to incorporate the vulnerable or marginalized sections of the population into the process. Engineer Haider Ali of UNDP’s Urban Development Group (UDG) says there has been a broad understanding on the issue and that UNHCR (UN High Commission for Refugees) office in the area has been helping in identifying workers from refugee families for skill acquisition courses and employment opportunities while the DDR programme officials are doing the same to enable former fighters to start to earn their living through peaceful means.
Any country that has suffered as much as Afghanistan from the decades of war and destruction will certainly need all its human resources in the reconstruction effort. As the efforts to normalize the situation in the country continues and the process of development gathers pace, more and more individuals feel the dire need to be able to find employment and stick to it.

Afghanistan New Beginnings Programme (ANBP) has been addressing the need for employment creation over the last few years with a heavy emphasis on skills acquisition on the part of population in a way that could contribute to the development of the country in a meaningful way.

Despite the cultural context in Afghanistan where employment for women is not seen as the ideal choice for earning a living, 26 young women have been enrolled in a programme aimed at training of teachers for elementary and secondary schools. The trainees come from the families of ex-combatants, a choice that reflects the determination of the programme to ensure that those who drop their arms should never take them up again.

Ferishta Wahdat, 25 says: “Although I graduated from high school, I was living in uncertainty as to what my destiny would be.” She says her cousin was disarmed and enrolled in another skills acquisition project. “As soon as I heard about this course, I came to DDR regional office to apply and thanks very, very much to those who have arranged this program in order to enable us to serve our country in the future,” she added.

Humayun Wafa, Regional Program Officer of DDR (Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration) says there are a lot of opportunities for those who want to give up their arms and start to earn a living through legal means, including by serving in the army or with the police force. “They just need to come forward and express their interest, we will introduce them to relevant offices” he says.

Reyaz, 30, is one of those who made a choice in favor of a livelihood away from guns and ammunition and he is now happy with his small tire repair enterprise: When he applied for the programme, he was enrolled in a six-month course, during which he was paid $100 per month to support his family and at the end he was given not only a certificate but a number of tools and equipment to act as a start-up capital for his small shop.

The hopes are high that as Afghanistan advances on the path of reconstruction, the ANBP will be expanding under various project names or abbreviations to continue to enhance choices for the people of the country.

UNDP Civil Service Commission Training project requested UNDP Anti Corruption and transparency (ACT) team early April 2006 to give a presentation about Anti-corruption to government Senior Civil Servants at the leadership training programme. The training is basically contracted to INwENT, Training providing agency in the venue of FCCS Kabul city.

They provide leadership training in the framework of Civil Service Commission’s Training component. UNDP ACT team, in response, accepted the request and prepared a draft presentation the content of which was very much in line with the need of the participants given their knowledge, responsibilities, positions and role in the fight against the phenomenon of
Quick Update on
Anti-corruption Presentation to the Senior Civil Servants at the Leadership Training Programme

corruption in their respective administrations.

The team gave the first presentation on 12th April 06 for a total of 30 Senior Civil Servants which was well appreciated by the participants as well as training organizers. The contents of the presentation provided sufficient information about corruption as well as main duties and responsibilities of civil servants in fight against it. Given its significance to the leadership training, a second request emerged that the ACT team should provide another presentation for second round of Civil Servants a bit more in detail.

Their full participation and sharing comments and questions was ensured by providing enough time to each civil servant. They were provided brief information on existing legal framework and legitimacy for the fight against corruption in Afghanistan from the constitutional point of view as well as international conventions that Afghanistan has signed.

Enough copies of Anti-corruption law were also distributed to the participants.

Following are some of the suggestions and messages produced during the workshop in their language about corruption and ways how to eradicate it:

Messages from the Participants:

- Corruption is like a virus that spreads easily and infects the entire society and environment
- Corruption is the source of all disasters and misfortunes
- Corruption hinders all development activities and defame our administration and culture
- Corruption is considered bad from our religious as well as traditional perspective
- Security is the key underlying factor in bringing corruption as well as in fighting against it
- Drug trafficking is also a contributing factor to corruption that also corrupts the police

Suggestions:

- Since very relative information are available to the public, they suggested that this awareness activity should be expanded to schools and universities because they are our young generation, and they should be raised on a sound and honest way
- We have many LAWS everywhere but the problem is that they are not implemented and remain only on papers. There is a need for strong enforcement mechanisms.
- Poverty should be alleviated so that corruption can no longer exist.
- All mechanisms and methodology for fight against corruption should be community driven and made by our people, not imported from abroad.
UNDP-Private Sector Cooperation Opens New Avenues for New Beginnings

ANBP is one of UNDP’s most comprehensive programmes under implementation in Afghanistan. It stands for: Afghanistan New Beginnings Programme, new beginnings for all, ex-combatants, disabled, marginalized, vulnerable, educated and uneducated...

Now, true to the spirit of the concept, ANBP and Roshan, one of Afghanistan’s most successful enterprises in the area of mobile phone services, have joined forces to enable women to take their future to their own hands and dive into the market to earn a living.

The first group of 21 women selected for the pilot phase of the programme comes from the families of former combatants who have already shed their arms in favor of a peaceful and legitimate lifestyle. The purpose is not to let the families of the ex-combatants slip back to the “old ways”.

Under the first implementation modality of the project, Roshan takes the lead and initiates the establishment of a “Women’s Public Call Office” (WPCO), which is to be entirely owned and operated by women; Roshan will also underwrite the initial subsidies the enterprise will enjoy. In the course of the first year of the project, First Micro Finance Bank will lend out $200 to each woman with the flexible pay-back options running up to 10 installments. The loans will have a two-month grace period.

The second modality requires a little more aggressive marketing skills: In this option, women will be provided the chance to sell SIM cards loaned to them, but only to women. Each woman will be given a package of SIM cards worth $450 but they will be required to pay back only $410, keeping the $40 as income.

The participants, identified by the ANBP have been undergoing intense training during the month of May and they will taste their first business practices in June.

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.
Calendar of Events for June 2006

June 1  Takhar  DIAG Launch
June 3-5  SEAL: Conference on Legislative-Executive Relations
June 5  World Environment Day
June 5  UDG: Public Toilets handover
June 9-10  UNV Retreat
June 20  NPAD Steering Committee restructuring Meeting
June 20-29  NPAD Sign Language Seminar
June 20-22  NPAD International Workshop on Disability Statistics in Bangkok
Mazar June 30  DDR Programme Completion Ceremony

Images of Afghanistan

by: Hamed A. Eqbal