Promoting Peace Through Street Kitchens
Afghanistan
Hood College
Obaidullah Rahim – UWC Dilijan

Project Goals:

b. The primary goal of my project is alleviating poverty in Afghanistan; although this is huge, but as the Afghan proverb translates to ‘Small drops make a river.’ With unemployment at an all-time high, law abiding citizens who would otherwise turn to illegal means and join extremist groups in order to support their families, are given an opportunity in the shape of a ready-made cart to cook and sell street food to earn a daily and honest living--resulting in a safer community and society.

Additional Fund-Raising and Contribution:

c. The primary funding source for the project was the Davis Projects for Peace grant, and there were no other financial contributions.

Project Details:

d. I’ve lived most of my life in a war-torn country where security and peace are considered very utopian. Like most people in Afghanistan, I am deeply concerned for my family, friends and relatives due to the conflicts and instability. One of my prime wishes is to see a peaceful and stable Afghanistan. The idea of what could bring an end to this conflict has always been in the back of my mind. Knowing that there isn’t a straightforward solution to end this decades long complex conflict, I started out with alleviating poverty which catalyzes the conflict throughout the country. My first thought was bringing peace through education, but due to budget limitation the project wouldn’t have been even nearly realized. Hence, I focused on the impact and started thinking what if I needed money to support my family. Where and what would I start? While brainstorming my ideas out loud for hours, I got hungry and realize that food is essential, and everyone is dependent on it. That was my eureka moment! In Afghanistan, street food is a giant industry due to poverty that’s what they can afford, tasty but cheap street food.

e. From colonial to other foreign interventions, Afghanistan has been through decades long conflict. Afghanistan has a politically and geographically strategic location for the neighboring countries. In addition, Afghanistan has immensely rich and rarely-found minerals, however, the government does not have resources to excavate these minerals. Hence, the geographical location for political influence expansion and rich minerals like uranium and etc. are some of the main reasons for conflict. This conflict has created lack of security, which has impacted the economy that cannot thrive. Therefore, over 60% of the population lives below poverty line.

f. I chose Afghanistan as the host site for my project. Afghanistan is my homeland; as an Afghan and a concerned citizen I feel obliged to do my part in helping my community, society, my country. I believe that every country has its concerned citizens that play their parts, and when they do, understanding and peace will prevail. Therefore, being an Afghan I felt obliged to play my role as a good Afghan and global citizen.

g. Having Afghanistan as my host country, I felt very comfortable. I knew my way around the city, and both the spoken and written languages. I was raised in Kabul, hence I understood the culture and way of life, therefore not only was it easier for me to navigate and do what needed to get done in such short period of time, but I felt a joy in carrying out a responsibility that I am doing my part to help my community. On a different perspective, it was very hard to complete this project in Afghanistan. Knowing that the security has been deteriorating for the past couple of year, the fear of a bomb blast, kidnapping, or even getting mugged was huge. Having lived outside of Afghanistan for three consecutive years, even I, who was raised here, sometimes felt like an outsider. As I had lived in a place where there was peace, no
news of terror, blood, dead bodies, suicide attack, coming back to Kabul and being more involved in the society and hearing that and people’s stories on how they lost their breadwinners was melting me down. I cried on few occasions when I heard people’s stories and saw them crying. I had seen the other side of the world, the other side where there is peace, resources, food, jobs, no bloodshed, it was extremely hard to take it in. For days I felt like I had lost my emotional balance as I hadn’t been that deeply involved in a project to hear out how wives, daughters and sons lost their parents and how they live.

h. I had my concerns about the completion of the project, due to the rising insecurity and holy month of Ramadan. But I was excited to travel back home to complete this project, so I prepared well and scheduled all my activities in a timely manner, keeping the holidays and festivals in mind, to avoid any surprises that might impact my project implementation. I started my communication before I travel to keeping things running smoothly, but always had the thought in my mind that it is Ramadan and people work less than normal, hence giving me an extremely tight schedule with a very small margin for mistakes. Another event that made me question the success of my project was when original collaborating organization told me that they would not be able to help. This was a massive obstacle but fortunately I overcame it by working with another organization.

i. One of the obstacles was when I tried to document the process through taking photos. I borrowed a DSLR camera from a friend to photograph. It was big and had a lens and when people saw me taking out that camera, I could sense their fear and intimidation. Due to this my target area’s Imam, religious leader, changed his mind about working together with me because I was going to record to write about it. Another problem for using DSLR was the police stopping and questioning my friend and I for about 20 minutes because we were carrying the camera and its tripod. According to them carrying that sort of a camera, requires a license from Ministry of Culture. We had to explain for 30 minutes the difference between students and licensed filmmakers. At the end we asked if we can have a “selfie” with him and he refused. If I was carrying my phone and photography, I might not have solicited as much attention and caused an intimidation as much as the DSLR camera did, but I had to maintain the requirements of photograph quality. These people are not to be blamed as insurgents in the past have used such tools multiple times to document venues and its security protocol before attacking an area. Alas, I learned people did not feel comfortable being recorded or taken pictures of, even if it was for a good cause. Convincing people of the reason to photograph was very time consuming and we had to use either imam or someone else to mediate for us to get the pictures.

Another challenge I faced, which was also one of the reasons that made me doubt my projects success was that my first collaborating organization was unable to help during that period due to shortage of staff. This was an unpredicted obstacle. I needed an organization with humanitarian activities to keep the project going after summer break. I kept on with my project activities to avoid any delay and simultaneously was contacting friends about other organizations and thankfully I did find another organization, SHARQ, to collaborate the project with.

j. For me peace is not just the absence of war, but the presence of justice, equality, stability, economic resources and jobs for all, healthcare for all and having a strong government presence in the community and society. Peace in Afghanistan is just a fantasy. Instead of striving to thrive, people in Afghanistan are merely trying to survive. The standard of life is extremely low, and the unstable security has torn families apart.

k. My project helps bring peace in Afghanistan by tackling terrorism and poverty, both of which are the two prime causes for instability in Afghanistan. In the short term, my project helps the individuals who are given the food cart. This allows them to start their own food cart business and provide for themselves and their families. In the long term, as my project grows, the number of individuals who will be given an opportunity via food carts will increase. This will decrease unemployment, and individuals will not resort to joining the insurgent groups because they pay “salary” or food money for their family. This will significantly decrease extremist group recruitment, especially since I am targeting the same group of people as the extremist groups—poor and needy individuals who want to support their families.
I. This project has taught me many important lessons. The most important one is always being grateful. We usually take things for granted. I always thank Allah for giving me what I have, but after working closely with the people who were chosen for the food carts, I saw something different. Farid, whose pictures are below, was one of those people who really impacted my view. While talking to him, he told me he only worked 80 Afs shining shoes yesterday, and he was extremely grateful for that. Who would be grateful for working the whole day for just over a dollar! He had to provide for his whole family, and still thanked God for his situation. Comparing my situation with his, I got tears in my eyes thinking how foolish of us for not being as thankful as him for having exponentially more. Another thing the project taught me is understanding the diversity even in my own city. Before doing this project, I only knew about the difference of life in Afghanistan, but after the project I actually understood to what extent. This actually helped me develop a different level of respect for people who I didn’t respect as much due to my lack of understanding.

m. Opportunities are extremely rare luxuries in Afghanistan, and I had the honor of providing a couple of families with an opportunity to earn an honest living and not resorting to joining the insurgents. My project might not change the world, but it changed the world for people like Farid.