Establishing a Generation of Promise in Afghanistan

Afghanistan
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This project was designed to conduct an Act-Forum on “Infrastructure and Sustainability” in Kunar, Afghanistan with the overarching objective to provide talented young Afghans with: (1) the opportunity to express their thoughts and ideas on the subject, and (2) resources to design, and later implement, their own grass-roots projects in local communities. Portions of the grant were intended to fund a student-led community development project (CDP) and a documentary on the Afghan Youth Initiative (AYI).

A generous gift from Berkshire School (Sheffield, Mass.) supplemented our budget for the project. AYI also received a significant donation from the Peter M. Goodrich Memorial Foundation to launch our “In-Country Scholarship Program” to help fund the education of talented young Afghans at private colleges, thereby also strengthening educational institutions in Afghanistan. Four finalists were selected from a pool of 35 applicants for the scholarship program.

It is wise to have an alternative project-plan in a country with ongoing conflicts and deteriorating security. Although I had planned to carry out my project in Kunar, when it turned out that travel outside of Kabul was dangerous, I immediately started arranging for an Act-Forum on “Youth Activism & Community Development” in Kabul.

I also faced a great deal of challenge in recruiting the number of participants we wanted for the project. I am grateful for the volunteers who helped me in the process and for the support of the Afghanistan Youth Union. After thorough communication with schools and interviews with potential candidates for the Act-Forum, I recruited 60 students—an equal number of male and female—from different public and private high schools and universities based on academic performance and motivation. The Act-Forum started on June 26, 2011, and thereafter met every other day for four days.

I had hoped to rent an auditorium at the American University of Afghanistan for a week, but the university could not do so under its set guidelines. An alternative was to find another hall and hire a cook for a week to prepare lunches. Unfortunately, I was unable to find an appropriate and secure location. I finally decided to hold the Act-Forum at the International Club, Kabul; it is one of the most secure and most fitting places for conferences and act-forums. Had we rented another place, most of our participants would not have showed up for security concerns. So it all worked out fine.

In addition, Tucker Walsh, who had initially agreed to come with me to Afghanistan to take footage for a fundraising documentary, could no longer accompany me for family reasons. I hired a freelance videographer based in Kabul to record the Act-Forum and to interview our CDP and In-Country Scholarship winners. We also interviewed two members of the Afghan parliament, the USIP Chief of Party, and the Director of Center for Conflict and Peace Studies (CAPS) on multiple topics, including “Opportunities for Young Afghans.” Tucker is currently working on editing the footage and will have a documentary prepared by the end of October. In addition to fundraising, the documentary will be used to create discussions that will lead to tangible changes in both Afghan mindsets and opportunities.

The goal of the Act-Forum was to encourage young Afghans to communicate with their elders, share ideas with peers, and find the courage to help those in need in their communities. I truly believe we triumphed in our mission. Throughout the program, we asked our participants not merely to share ideas with each other but to work together to find ways to turn their ideas into practical initiatives.
Participants were given the opportunity to discuss the problems that existed in their communities. They were asked to design, in consultation with their community elders, proposals for community development projects either independently or in collaboration with other Act-Forum participants. Knowing that our participants had never written a project-proposal, I prepared a set of guidelines on how to write a proposal and prepare a budget. Pamphlets were distributed at the end of the second day.

In a society where youth does not have much of a voice nor decision-making power, it was a moment of realization and appreciation of the potential of the young Afghans when each of our participants answered the following questions during the presentation of the project-proposals: Why is the project important? Where would the project be executed and what is the significance of that location? Who will oversee the progress of the project? Would local labor be required for the project? Who would be the direct and indirect beneficiaries of the project? What is the total estimated cost to implement the project? Was the project-proposal prepared in collaboration with the community elders?

Young Afghans don’t often get the opportunity to listen to and engage in informal conversations with elected government officials, prominent individuals from think tanks, councils and other non-profit organizations. We had the honor of hosting the Speaker of the Senate, the Chief Executive of the General Council of Eastern Provinces, the Director of the Center for Conflict and Peace Studies (CAPS), and a parliament member from Kunduz on a panel discussion. We also invited a renowned Afghan poet to conclude the Act-Forum with his poem, “Unity.” Afghan national television channels broadcast our program, helping us send out a message of peace. A total of 16 project-proposals were submitted and were judged on the criteria of budget feasibility and sustainability of the proposed project. This year’s winners are three female high school graduates. These girls, who could not pursue a college education for financial reasons, had learned how to make decorative bedspreads and bed sheets. The CDP winners argued in their presentation, and subsequently in their project-proposal, that there were many illiterate women in their community who would like to make a living in order to support their families, but that they did not have the skills to find jobs or launch small-scale businesses. The three participants proposed to open a handicraft center where they would teach sewing and tailoring techniques to illiterate women for three months in Khair Kahana, Kabul.

The handicraft center was inaugurated on August 13, 2011. The CDP winners recruited 20 women for a three-month long training program. Each woman trainee was given training materials. All goods that are made during the three months will be sold in the market to give each trainee additional materials so that they can launch their own home-run, small-scale businesses.

Marketing finished products is, however, a big challenge for our trainees. Fortunately, AYI’s pro-bono executive director will be teaching our CDP winners marketing tools over the course of the project period, and they will, in return, guide the trainees. AYI is also helping CDP winners in networking with possible markets outside Afghanistan. In addition, for evaluation and monitoring purposes, the AYI executive director and the outreach coordinator will visit the center at least four times every month.

Kathryn W. Davis said: “My challenge to you is to bring about a mind-set of preparing for peace, instead of preparing for war.” I firmly believe that our project was a step in that direction, encouraging young Afghans not to be afraid of voicing and sharing their ideas, and to find ways to help those in need. The most important aspect of our project is that it instilled in the participants a sense of empowerment and accomplishment. This year’s Act-Forum enabled 60 young men and women to have a voice in their communities. They learned how to communicate clearly and effectively with community elders and government and city officials and how to prepare a course of action to reach project goals. In addition, this year’s CDP enabled 20 illiterate women to gain the ability to make a living in order to support their families. We challenged young Afghans to prepare for peace by helping their communities.

In the process, I learned that the biggest accomplishment is to be able to look into your countrymen’s eyes and be confident that you have brought a positive change to their lives.
On the left are a member of the Afghan Parliament and the Speaker of the Afghan Senate; on the right are the director of the Center for Conflict and Peace Studies and the chief executive of the General Council of the Eastern Provinces.

The last day of the Act-Forum.

An Act-Forum participant presents a proposal for a community development project.

Women working in the handicraft center, learning to make beds linens.