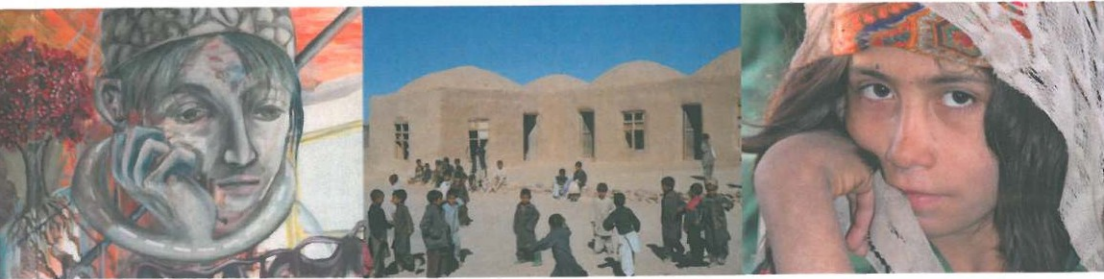


Uwe H. Bittlingmayer, Anne-Marie Grundmeier,
Reinhart Köbler, Diana Sahrai, Fereshta Sahrai (eds.)



Education and Development in Afghanistan

Challenges and Prospects

More Schools for Afghanistan

LAILA NOOR

As daughter of the last freely elected mayor of Kabul, I hastily left Afghanistan together with my family after the occupation of the Soviet Union in 1979. Today I live both in Germany and in Afghanistan and I am chairwoman of the Independent Afghan Women Association (IAWA), based in Bremen, Germany.

In retrospect, the period between 1933 and 1973, the reign of Mohammed Zahir Shah, which I have witnessed in part, is referred to as the golden era in which Afghanistan opened up to the west. This modernization was initiated by King Amanullah Khan and his wife Soraya Tarzi, who made a trip to Europe in 1928, which took them to Germany. Supported by his wife, Amanullah was very much in favor of establishing education in his ten-year reign until 1929. To this day, Soraya Tarzi is still regarded as one of the politically most important women of Afghanistan who pleaded for equality, education and employment of women and against polygamy. She also turned against wearing the veil in public and made her attitude clear by wearing European clothing.

In 1978, the journalist and publicist Peter Scholl-Latour travelled to Kabul to interview my father in his political functions among other things as mayor of Kabul. This was, however, no longer possible because he had been put under arrest before the official Russian invasion as there was a strong communist influence from the Afghan side which started in April 1978 and was supported by the Russians. Scholl-Latour's intention was to draw the Europeans' attention to the political and economic significance of our country – also for other countries – in particular to the strategic significance of the geographical situation in the heart of Asia. He identified the endangered situation of my family and advised us to leave Afghanistan. After my arrival in Germany, I could see that hardly anyone had an idea of what was really going on in my country. The Afghans who had studied in the West or belonged to the old regime were arrested, killed or they

just disappeared like my father and my brother under the Russian occupying force.

For each of my lectures I put on colourful Afghan clothing so that people would look at me and ask where I was from and what happened to my country. Then I started to design clothes and, together with a befriended artist, organized my first fashion show. With my fashion, I try to build a bridge between Afghanistan, the Orient and Europe because my clothes can not only be worn by European but also by Afghan women. Afghan embroideries and oriental fabrics made of cashmere and silk, as well as velvet, are cut and used according to European patterns. Furthermore, I work with patchwork patterns due to the fact that the traditional Afghan clothing is very colorful. To this day, I regularly organize fashion shows and support the building of schools in Afghanistan with the revenues.

From my point of view the world public has slowly lost interest in Afghanistan during the time of the Taliban regime until the Buddha statues in Bamiyan Valley – a Unesco World Heritage Site – were destroyed by the Taliban in 2001. With the destruction of these and other cultural assets in Afghanistan, the public's interest increased again, however, it has only gained significant concern after the terrorist attacks in the United States on 11th September 2001. In the following year, six German ministers invited various women nationwide to help the people of Afghanistan, especially women and children. I was one of the invited women. When in Berlin I saw that there were dedicated women standing up for my country, I proposed to set up an association to be able to achieve more together. After the foundation of the IAWA in October 2002, I travelled as chairwoman of this association and, upon the invitation of the Federal Government of Germany, back to my home country for the first time. In my memories it was the Afghanistan of 1979 when the Russian invasion was only at the beginning and the country and the people were still intact. After my arrival in Kabul, however, I came across a completely destroyed city. There was no tree left, only skeletons of houses, one could see thousands of bullet impacts and blood on the walls. Under these painful impressions, I started immediately with first aid actions.

Firstly, I went to families that lived poorly clothed in tents on the bare ground in winter with temperatures below zero. Thereupon, I distributed clothes and then started to visit schools. By this I do not mean a school building but at the first school I visited, one part of the pupils was accommodated in a tent, the others were studying outdoors. As soon as it rained or snowed, the children had to go home. It was fascinating for me to see that they were able to concentrate despite the cold, the few clothes they were wearing and the poor nutrition that they had. It also showed me what it meant to these kids to be able to go to school

at all. This key experience has encouraged me to mainly work with the IAWA for the construction of school buildings in Afghanistan.

The major task of the IAWA (2017) is to help build educational structures in Afghanistan. Above all, girls and women should be enabled to have access to school and university education and thus to social life as they were forbidden during the Taliban regime to go to school and vocational training. In the meantime, the association has more than 100 members who, regardless of religious and political beliefs, volunteer and help in the pursuit of the following goals: advancing the education and training of Afghan girls and women, awareness training, building and developing schools with unlimited access for boys and girls, promoting the education and training for widows and disabled girls and women. In Europe, the association's function is to provide information on the current situation in Afghanistan and impart Afghan culture. Despite the difficult political situation we have been able to provide access to education through the schools we are building for over 12.000 children and about 150 women. Meanwhile, more than 600 of our former pupils attend universities. We are grateful and proud that in this way we have done something for the future of Afghanistan with the support of many friends and sponsors, as well as of the BMZ in Germany.

In Afghanistan, the construction of a school building always requires a wall of the school grounds to protect children and teachers from intruders. The wall costs as much as a school building and makes it difficult to finance schools. The construction time of a school takes between seven to nine months according to the specifications of the Afghan Ministry of Education. The interior is of course not comparable to a school in Europe but compared to what the pupils had before, it is a big step. In the meantime, we also set up daycare at large schools that we need for the teachers' children when they teach the whole day. For this reason we have built one high school, in which 6000 male students are taught. The nearest high school, a girls only school, is four minutes away. Thus, the teachers of both high schools can bring their children to the daycare center. Each increase and expansion of the school buildings saves the children and teachers from outdoor lessons in heat or cold. In addition, with a higher number of classrooms there is the possibility of not having to go to school in three time shifts but only in two, which means that the lessons end in the afternoon and not in the evening. The students are divided into these shifts because the buildings are not large enough to teach all children at the same time.

As the number of pupils still increases, there is an urgent need for action. The first school which I opened had 500 students in 2007, today there are over 3000. The school buildings and their management have a key role for education in Afghanistan. Unfortunately, there are still not enough school houses and many

children in Afghanistan remain outdoors or in tents and are exposed to extreme climatic differences between 15 degrees below zero in winter and approximately 40 degrees of heat in summer. In addition, the children are confronted with long walks to school that can take several hours. Another concern is that the schools are closed for three months in winter time because there is not enough money for the heating.

In my opinion, there are about 4 million children still waiting for access to schools and about 2000 school buildings have not been provided yet. Therefore, my association and I still have our work cut out for us, but I will not give up hope.

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