

Newsletter, October 19, 2023

Dear Friends,

In between the news of acute warlike events, terrible news from Afghanistan entered the media. In the province of Herat, in the west of Afghanistan, there was and still is a series of severe earthquakes. The area is poorly accessible. You can't yet overlook the damage. But that thousands have perished is unfortunately certain.

Please, do not expect OFARIN, as an aid organization working in Afghanistan, to provide assistance there! Herat is a good 800 km away from Kabul. In practice, that is as far away as from your home. Admittedly, we could travel there with great effort. Then we would be in the way of real helpers there. We have no equipment and no experience. Some professional emergency helpers are there now. If you can't help directly, maybe you could do something for the survivors. One could help to build more earthquake-resistant houses. But that will only help the affected months later at the earliest. Even for such aid, experts are needed, which we don't have.

We had to ignore the disaster in western Afghanistan and concentrate on our tasks. Our main area of work continues to be school education. The attitude of the Afghan state, especially the Ministry of Education, towards education, especially of girls and women, has not changed. OFARIN had signed a partnership agreement with the Ministry of Education in the spring. In the summer, it was verbally decreed that teaching by foreign aid organizations would not be continued for the time being. A written communication announced for this purpose has not been delivered to date. Later, a senior official told us that foreign organizations would only be allowed to continue teaching if they transformed themselves into Afghan organizations. Otherwise, they would have to cancel their contract with the Ministry of Education. The official refused to put these instructions in writing.

In response, OFARIN staff decided to take note only of written communications with official stamps and to continue our classes. By then, the suspension of classes ordered in the summer had caused damage. This was because we had actually stopped teaching in many locations at first. Wages had not been paid. Teaching materials had not been delivered. There were hardly any seminars to prepare teachers for new subjects. Now, operations have started up again. Most of the damage has been repaired.

We do not yet know what the Ministry's position is on this continuation of work. It is possible that it will pretend that its verbal statements never existed. In that case, we will also pretend. However, if the continued work is treated as illegal, all classes at OFARIN have decided to continue working anyway. Any Taliban controllers would then be told that the students' families paid for the classes. In fact, OFARIN would pay for it. Other foreign aid organizations also act in this or similar ways.

The ministry has since had many of our classes visited in Kabul city, even though we were not allowed to teach by verbal order: Officials have written a detailed report on this. They were extremely satisfied and praised what we were doing.

In the Dasht-e-Barchi district, we have twelve girls' classes and one boys' class. The ministerial commission of inquiry there was headed by a Taliban mullah. The commission was received by our female trainer Rahima. According to orthodox Taliban doctrine, this gender mix should not have existed. The mullah was very gruff and rude. He asked many questions, which Rahima answered. At least he listened to the explanations patiently. He became more friendly and mellow. As he left, he told Rahima that 95% of the Taliban were against the restrictions on teaching and education for girls and women. Only 5%, however, who were sitting on top, were preventing proper teaching. Rahima called us immediately and told us about the visit.

We were in Khost. There we want to start classes soon. A teacher and his sister are to start with a boys' and a girls' class. We had given them material about our lessons and methods. They had looked at it and were enthusiastic. Mir Wais had also read our material and was enthusiastic too. Mir Wais is the eldest son of our old friend Khazan Gul, with whom we stayed in Khost. Mir Wais is responsible for some private schools. Private schools charge fees to students. Some students receive scholarships. Private schools have to follow the rules and curriculum of government schools.

Later, we visited the Senaki school on the edge of the mountains in southern Khost, run by a very agile principal. We can imagine that one day they will also teach there according to our concepts. But to spread our methods in Khost as it would be possible, we have to train a lot of staff. Mir Wais offered to set up an Afghan organization to partner OFARIN's program. If the Ministry of Education were to push again for organizations that provide instruction to be Afghan, this design would help. Moreover, such an Afghan organization would be a framework into which a wide variety of interested schools in the province interested in working with OFARIN could fit.

But we were also in Khost because the planting of 20,000 walnut trees is being started there. Each seedling will be planted in a pit 60 cm deep, 60 cm wide and 160 cm long, where rain and melt water can collect. 100 men will work on it for four months. The slope of a high mountain, which was deforested decades ago, will thus be greened. With the walnuts, the inhabitants can supplement their livelihood. The collective economy that is possible here due to the intact tribal structures should interest economists. All decisions are made at tribal assemblies. The implementation is then in the hands of a committee of eight people. Our staff had negotiated with the tribe for a long time until they were sure that the nut trees would be a permanent part of the people's lives.

The schools, the plantings, and also the midwifery program that was reported on in September, all of these programs and their details are largely the result of our staff or the people who will be affected by the activities, Afghans. Once we had agreed on a program, our Afghan friends and colleagues did not let up and pushed for its implementation. We foreigners listen to our friends' proposals and ask questions about them. After all, we have to agree or disagree. To agree, we have to be sure that there is a high probability of success. We always received exhaustive explanations that showed us that the Afghans had thought very carefully about everything before proposing anything.

This is no longer the good old development aid, where we omniscient foreigners told the locals what we had hatched for them with our compatriots. The locals then had to make an effort to do everything the way we thought it should be done. Here, the initiative comes from the locals. They willingly explain to us foreigners how they thought of everything. Maybe this will change some details in the planning. Yes, and then we foreigners think about whether we should participate in the financing.

Admittedly, it is that simple with agricultural projects. But the basic concepts of OFARIN's schooling are not Afghan. They are European. It is about teaching without fear. The independent work of the students is important. As many as possible should understand everything. There is hardly anything of all this in the Afghan school curriculum. But our concepts are quickly understood - and readily adopted - by teachers and trainers. The students like to come. Here, there is no shyness about adopting foreign cultural concepts. Ideologues are welcome to call us colonialists. Our concepts are applied as a matter of course. The Afghans plan the details of the lessons as independently as they plan the planting of nut trees.

In short, we foreigners are needed less and less. Of course, many things cannot be done without our funding. But our colleagues have shown in their own agricultural activities, which we reported on in April (eucalyptus, bluebell tree, devil's claw), that they can finance economically successful projects themselves. In the case of schools, it will take a little longer for meaningful concepts to take hold. Especially in "democratic" times, foreign aid workers have spent a lot of money on schools, but have not intervened in and tried to improve actual Afghan teaching. OFARIN has been doing this for a long time. But our resources have been too modest to have a far-reaching impact. Now, more could succeed.

When I look at the actors who are happily working to move your country forward, I have high hopes. On the other hand, Afghan society is characterized by very different ideas. Many people are very religious. For them, economic success or the further development of living together are unimportant. Very many people live and think within the framework of their family and clan. The fact that it could be important for their future that something changes in the entire country is beyond their horizon. The whole of Afghanistan is simply too big for their imagination.

Above all, Afghanistan is weighed down by a crippling bureaucracy. Corruption and the arrogance of vain administrators prevent self-evident actions, deprive many citizens of their rights, discourage investment, and promote fraud and injustice.

The bad excesses of bureaucracy could be pushed back to a tolerable level by educated, active people. How do you create a critical mass of educated, active citizens large enough to make a difference? Through education. OFARIN's schools can contribute to this. There, students gain self-confidence and decision-making skills. This is how Afghanistan can move forward.

Help us to do so! Support OFARIN!

Kind regards,

Peter Schwittek.