

Newsletter, April 18, 2023

Dear friends,

to the report on the fascinating agricultural initiatives of our colleagues, it should be added that newsletter readers have corrected the name of the substance extracted from devil's claw. The foul-smelling stuff is called Asant (Latin: *Asa foetida*). Suggestions on how OFARIN might intervene in this initiative have not yet been made. This shows that the projects have been well thought out. Everything has been taken into account. It is hard for an outside non-expert to think of anything else to say about this.

Naqib reported that in Khost a few brave people are imitating the projects. That's the way it has to be. Regardless, bluebell trees are being grown in a neighboring province. We wish them all success.

Of course, Naqib and his fellow spitters have already thought about whether it might not be worthwhile to grow their plants in other parts of the country. In Paryan in the Pundshir Valley, they tried to persuade OFARIN's project partners to venture such plantings as well. Like almost all Afghans, they took a skeptical view of long-term investments that initially yield nothing. Perhaps they can be convinced by success. There is also considerable antipathy between some families in Paryan. These could quickly jeopardize such projects.

Our colleagues managed to extend our exit-reentry visas by six months - in the month of fasting, when authorities and also OFARIN only work half-time, this is a top performance. Unfortunately, my wife Anne Marie suffers from rather high blood pressure, which we laymen attribute to problems with the altitude (Kabul is 1800 m high). We have decided that she will have this unpleasant phenomenon treated in Germany and fly home on Thursday. On the other hand, I will stay in Afghanistan until shortly before Pentecost. In autumn we want to come to Afghanistan together again.

It was Friday and Ramadan, actually a day off from work. But Hekmat, the door guard, announced a guest: his 15-year-old son Ismail. What does he want?

Hekmat had moved to Arsan Qimat, a western suburb of Kabul, a few years ago. Before that, he and his family had lived in the countryside near Qarabagh - a good 40 km north of Kabul. Then an earthquake made the family's mud house uninhabitable and they had to move out of Qarabagh.

German friends had met Ismail and his eleven-year-old sister Roya in the fall of 2022. They had taken the young people to their hearts and then collected money so that OFARIN could start some classes in Arsan Qimat, which the children of Hekmat would also attend.

But Ismail no longer attended the classes. He had learned to read and write at OFARIN. Already in Qarabagh he could attend classes from us. OFARIN's lessons are only elementary. Ismail had learned everything that can be learned at OFARIN. Ismail is still in the eighth grade at the state high school. But he is not learning anything there. He would like to study subjects like chemistry, which - he had heard - are taught in higher grades in other countries. But in Afghanistan, he says, they don't teach these subjects. Yes, the teachers, if they came to class at all, would only humiliate the students. We should take a look at the school building: Everything is dirty, the plaster is falling off the walls. Isn't that what you hear about German school buildings?

In Kabul, private courses are offered, i.e. for a fee, in which one can supposedly learn something. But both Ismail and we know that you don't learn anything in such courses - nothing that would facilitate access to a satisfying professional activity, nor anything that would be interesting in terms of its content. Ismail had attended an appropriate English course. All those who observe the dominance of English with suspicion would be delighted if they could experience Ismail's English. It is terrible what is being done to this language on its way to the far corners of the world. But what Ismail shared was clear: I want to learn something, but I can't do that in Afghanistan.

Consequently, we should get him a scholarship abroad. He is not the first one who wants something like that from us. Our cook lives in the Shiite Kabul district of Dasht-e-Bartschi. His son was attending a course there to prepare him for the entrance exam to institutions of further education such as the university. Then a terrible attack by the Islamic State on a girls' school took place in the neighborhood. The son called us in Germany: It was dangerous for his life to want to learn something in Afghanistan. If we wanted him to learn something, we would have to arrange for a scholarship abroad.

We have absolutely no way of getting such scholarships. Some Indian universities give out study places and leave the financing up to the student. This is where aid organizations could step in. Apart from the fact that the levels of Indian universities are very different, which cannot be overlooked from the outside; it is not our task.

What does an Afghan learn when he gets a scholarship - be it in India, in Australia, in China or in Germany; be it for academic studies, be it for job-oriented training? Everywhere, the Afghan will only learn something geared toward the host country's job market or research. The Indian university trains students for the working life in India, the Dutch for that in Holland. The universities cannot worry about what a student from Zimbabwe, Yemen or Afghanistan can do with the knowledge he or she has acquired in his or her home country. Students from Lithuania or Korea can usually "implement" what they have learned in Canada or Belgium in their home country with some effort. But what do Afghans do with what they have learned in Austria or New Zealand? When an Afghan comes home from such a country, he does not find the equipment he used during his training, he does not meet colleagues with whom he could discuss the next work step. Often, what one has learned is not needed at all in Afghanistan.

Some developed countries make no secret of the fact that they do not train students from developing countries to return home. The best scholarship holders should stay in Germany after their training. We urgently need them for our labor market. Is that fair if we fish away the best from poor countries? - If we buy the nurse from the hospital in Belgrade, who works there for a few hundred euros a month? We should think in particular about specialists who go abroad and bring with them a certain education from their home country, who then specialize abroad and are integrated there. Take a doctor from Morocco! He is really good. He comes to Germany, becomes a specialized ophthalmologist and then stays in Germany. You can say that Germany steals his training as a doctor, which Morocco has financed. If a Norwegian specializes in Germany and stays here, it is not a problem, because there are also Germans who take their local education to Norway and stay there.

But back to Ismail! Let's imagine that he gets a scholarship to study food technology in Switzerland. He does respectably, finally gets a degree and returns to Afghanistan. He has a title and has seen a lot of things he didn't know back home. His compatriots are happy that he is finally coming and can work on the development of their country. They have rolled out a red carpet, stand guard and applaud as Ismail steps onto home soil. - Not at all!

Perhaps this is what Ismail expected. Yes, his family is proud of him. But fellow citizens don't care, at best, about what Ismail has learned. Some are envious. He went abroad and got a scholarship. That's a lot more money than a teacher earns in Afghanistan. He lived well and safely abroad.

So now Ismail is back and wants to work. He introduces himself to companies where he could get a job that matches his education. He is a certified food technician. He approaches a company that operates a fruit juice factory in the province. Ismail never really wanted to move to this foreign province. Nor does it come to that. The company only hires personnel who belong to a certain tribe. He has no chance.

It's difficult on the private job market. But in Afghanistan, the state is an overwhelmingly large employer. Ismail is employed in an office that tests food for contamination to prevent disease. There are already eight food technicians working there, who were trained in different countries. All of them make a resigned impression. They hardly have anything to do. Two of them rarely show up for work anymore. They still get their salaries. Actually, they would have to check the apple juice produced by a company in Wardak every year, among other things. The Americans have provided the office with a well-equipped laboratory. But to decide whether the company gets the stamp that its apple juice is safe, you don't need a laboratory. The stamp is a matter of negotiation. An official named Karim haggles with the company over the amount of the bribe. It is then distributed among Karim and some colleagues according to the pecking order in the authority. Ismail, as a newcomer, gets nothing.

He is gladly told that he was abroad and that he was much better off there than his colleagues back home, where there was war and robberies. He earned a lot of money there. Now he should be happy that he got one of the coveted positions in the government. Ismail kept nothing of his scholarship abroad. He only transferred 50 € per month to his parents.

Oh, this Karim is an important person in the office. He started by making tea for his colleagues when he was sixteen. He is not stupid and soon knew his way around. He knows some personal things about the colleagues. He knows the regulations of the administration well. The head of the authority often consults with Karim, but never with any of the studied professionals. When a company needs a stamp, there is always more for Karim than for the professionals.

This was all speculation. After all, Ismail doesn't have a scholarship. He wants one. OFARIN can't get him one with the best will in the world, even if he doesn't believe it. Question for you: What would you do if you were able to get Ismail a scholarship? Of course, he would prefer to go to Germany. Cross your heart! What would you do?

He doesn't get a scholarship from OFARIN, first because OFARIN doesn't have one and second because OFARIN wouldn't give a scholarship for anything. Any scholarship abroad would do neither Ismail nor Afghanistan any favors. Yes, if for Ismail an education abroad were linked to being prepared to work in a program where he could constructively contribute to the development of his homeland, then we would heartily welcome such a scholarship. But unfortunately we do not have such a scholarship.

I could imagine Ismail working with us as a teacher and teaching his students exactly what he himself has just learned with us. Many people who teach have the experience that they master the material they teach themselves afterwards. Ismail's employment as a teacher enabled OFARIN to pilot mass literacy in the native language (plus basic arithmetic). In this way, one could teach the elementary cultural techniques to many people in a snowball system. The newly literate, are immediately employed as teachers and their students become teachers again. Of course, this raises loud question of quality assurance, to which we would have to come up with answers. But mass literacy would be helpful in Afghanistan. It could give Taliban warriors a chance for a successful civilian life. What OFARIN teaches - namely, written proficiency in the native language and basic arithmetic - are the basis of any job. Perhaps something more should be taught, such as fractions and decimal fractions. But actually our program is sufficient as a basis for professional work. What is necessary for the individual beyond that, he can then work out additionally.

The question is whether Ibrahim is not already too absorbed in the dream of going abroad. I have seen young people who only dreamed this dream and were no longer at home in their daily lives where concrete work was involved.

Now I had fallen into dreaming myself. Finally, let's talk about something real! My phone number in Kabul from outside Afghanistan is 0093-790911631 (from Afghanistan: 0790911631). If you have WhatsApp installed in your cell phone, you can use this number for WhatsApp contacts. This is expedient if the quality is enough, because the good times when you could make very cheap calls from Afghanistan are over. People have quintupled the charges. For WhatsApp contacts with me, you will need patience in the beginning. I have not yet mastered the possibilities of this technology. I promise quick improvement.

Best regards,

Peter Schwittek.