

## Newsletter, April 6, 2023

Dear friends,

there are surprises, real surprises. We, Anne Marie and I, are now in Kabul for the second week. There is nothing to complain about in the OFARIN office. The weather is getting more pleasant. Yesterday it was raining heavily, even hailing, this morning the sky is blue and the Paghman mountains in the west of Kabul are shining white.

Last week I visited the department of the Ministry of Education, which is responsible for cooperation with us. Our partner ministry is now the Ministry of Education. The officials there have very similar concerns about education, especially education for girls and women, as we do at OFARIN. Together with these officials, it should be possible to find solutions to some difficulties.

Before the partnership agreement was signed, our staff visited this department again and again. They were asked about several details: OFARIN pays its teachers only 3000 Afghani per month, the ministry pays 5000 Afghani. Yes, OFARIN's teachers work only 90 minutes a day. The ministry saw this and approved our salaries. So, it went point by point. They wanted to know many things and had many things explained to them. But good arguments were accepted by the officials of the ministry and at some point they agreed.

The officials were delighted with OFARIN's modest remuneration of the office staff. They talked indignantly about the dream salaries that the Agha Khan Foundation or UNICEF pay their administrative mandarins. My start with the new partner was decidedly amicable.

Yesterday, Naqib, our office manager, sat down with us. He showed us a forest of eucalyptus trees on his cell phone. He had planted it in his home province of Khost. Another picture shows Naqib driving a tractor through a desolate wasteland, pushing away a pile of stones. This is how he had prepared the ground for the forest three years ago. 13,500 trees were then planted.

Khost lies on the edge of the vast Indus Valley and gets some of the monsoon. That's why Khost used to have forests of trees with high-quality wood. These were cut and sold as firewood. This is desperately needed in Kabul. In most parts of Afghanistan, there is no forest.

Ten seedlings with setting cost € 1.5. Naqib has hired a man to look after the forest. A house was built for him with a water connection and a solar system. The man earns 70 € per month. The trees can easily be irrigated through pipes. The effort for the care of the forest is therefore modest. The trees are to be felled in two years. Then one receives a good 300 kg of wood per tree. Thus, a tree brings at least 30 €. Trees that have been felled will grow again.

For the funding, Naqib, Abdul Hussain, Tooba and Nassiba have pooled, each € 2,500. The two women and two men sat in a room at the OFARIN office until the Taliban invaded. Naqib is Pashtun, Abdul Hussain Hazara. Tooba is Tajik, Nassiba Uzbek.

Naqib is always a friendly person who gets along with all his colleagues. When there are manual problems (plumbing, generator, power supply), he knows what to do. Now, as a

project manager, he has to deal with the intricacies of Afghan bureaucracy - and he does so with patience and an understanding of every detail. Those of you who have read Ethno crime novels know that Naqib protected me from a nasty threat that could easily have cost me my life. But now he surprised us with abilities we never expected in him. This was our huge surprise.

He reported that he had been thinking about the possibilities of other cultivation in agriculture for eight years. He had gathered such possibilities from the Internet. The eucalyptus trees were planted three years ago. He must have talked about it with his partners for a long time. We didn't know about any of this.

Well, we had made it clear that OFARIN would concentrate on its core competencies in teaching. But of course, we had been following the international community's efforts to develop economic alternatives to drug cultivation for farmers. Arable land in Afghanistan is used to grow wheat or corn. If you grow poppies instead, you can earn ten times as much on the same area.

The German Agro Action (Welthungerhilfe) had roses cultivated. Farmers who joined this project had to plant roses. Welthungerhilfe had to finance these partners for three years. Then the roses formed blossoms and the farmers had to deliver their rose blossoms to a factory according to precise plans. There, very expensive rose oil was produced for the world market and rose water for Afghan needs. If everything worked out, the products brought about the same profit per area as the cultivation of poppies. But the interaction of very many players was fragile. If there was a hitch somewhere, there were high losses. When everything worked, Welthungerhilfe made money. But as an aid organization, it was not allowed to do that. It therefore transferred the project to the Afghan project manager, who continued to run it as a private individual. He then had great difficulty in protecting his project from the attacks of corrupt officials and other criminals who brazenly threatened the unstable construct.

Excellent saffron is now being grown in the Herat area. Here, too, good soil is needed, which fails for other cultivation and produces nothing during a start-up period. After that, the labor input is high.

In contrast, Naqib produces fast-growing, greasy firewood, which is urgently needed, on wasteland that no one else can use and that he could lease for almost nothing. Naqib and his henchmen do not violate any religious or government laws as they do when growing poppies for heroin. However, a five-year lead time is required, during which Naqib must invest without earning anything. But then Naqib's ingenious concept is rewarded with handsome profits.

Naqib's entrepreneurial thinking, this farsightedness, this courage to invest money and wait until the calculated profit materializes - that surprised and inspired us. This attitude is completely foreign to most Afghans. The Afghan farmer has always grown wheat or corn, even his grandfather and his ancestors. He has never given a thought to what else he could grow. But corn ... ? Have you ever eaten corn bread? If so, you had dutifully praised the stuff because it's something exotic. Naqib has been eating cornbread for as long as he can

remember. Naqib's family's dog consistently spurned it. Naqib ate it. No one thought of growing anything else.

This unwillingness to try new things has bugged me in other colleagues. One family has some land north of Kabul on which a few hundred vines grow in the traditional way. To do this, the ground is deeply furrowed. The vines lie on the piled-up soil. A French aid organization offered the farmers the opportunity to pull up the vines, as is customary in Europe. The farmers were able to purchase concrete pillars. Wires were stretched between them. The vines could be attached to these and pulled up. This, of course, gave very different yields. It cost something, but the prices for the pillars and the wire were moderate. I suggested to the colleague that he set aside \$ 50 each month from his salary. At that time, OFARIN did not pay emergency salaries. He could easily spare \$ 50. If he did, we personally wanted to add \$ 20 each. After less than two years he would then have money enough to pull up all the vines. He preferred not to do that. The idea of saving money to profit from it later was alien to him. If we had advanced him the costs and he might (or might not) have had to pay them back, he probably would have joined in immediately.

Naqib would not have been able to pursue his entrepreneurship everywhere in Afghanistan the way he does. In Khost, the tribal laws of the Pashtuns living there are firmly anchored. The basis is the willingness of all to fight for their laws - if need be, even to exercise blood vengeance. In long meetings of the clans and the tribes, many things concerning the community are discussed. This has resulted in rules of coexistence, a legal system that everyone knows, respects and upholds. It is called Pashtunwali. Some of the laws are quite detailed. All people in the area know that Naqib has leased the wasteland for 15 years. None of Naqib's contractors have ever lived in Khost. They are all non-Pashtun. But the people of Khost know that these strangers are bound by contract to their fellow citizen Naqib. Therefore, they have the same rights to the eucalyptus forest as he does. The Pashtunwali legal system provides the necessary legal security for the contracts. Without it, the eucalyptus forest project would not be possible. In other provinces, this legal security is lacking. Tribal rights do not exist or are much weaker. State laws are also detailed, but most citizens hardly know them and do not respect them. Judges and prosecutors ignore laws in exchange for bribes. Everywhere, regardless of the law, the strongest prevails – not so in Khost.

Naqib's entrepreneurial nature cannot be tamed by one project. Two years ago, he started another project. This time, he and his cousin Hewad, the head of OFARIN's finance office, are working together as project managers. Six other acquaintances from Khost are involved with shares. This time it is about the devil's claw. We hope that with "devil's claw" we have found the correct name for the project plant.

Devil's claw, or more precisely its resin, asant (?), is used as a strong spice that gives dishes the flavor of onions and garlic. Above all, however, asant plays an important role as a remedy in India and Western Asia. There it is used by the population in veterinary medicine but also for plant protection (against worms and insects). In humans, it lowers blood pressure and reduces flatulence. Asant is also processed in the pharmaceutical industry of India and China. Traders from these countries buy asant in Afghanistan at good prices.

From the seed of devil's claw after one year develop cuttings, which you plant. After another three years, a small bush is formed with a root that grows to 80 cm in depth. If you cut a thin slice off the surface of the root, a white sap comes out that gums up. This is the asant. This can be harvested the next day. So, every two days for the six summer months, you get about six grams of asant from each root. Indian and Chinese traders pay \$350 for a kilogram of asant, local traders \$ 150 and up. After 15 years, the root no longer secretes asant. The devil's claw becomes a tall bush. This one forms flowers from which devil's claw seed is obtained.

The marketing of devil's claw and asant is versatile. One can sell the seed. One can sell the seedlings that one obtains from the seed after one year. One can lease fields of devil's claw to companies for harvesting. You can also sell the asant. It is easy to store, but it smells intensely. Naqib and Hawed planted 20,000 bushes of devil's claw two years ago. In one year, the harvest will begin.

Naqib and Hewad are just starting a project with the bluebell tree (?). It provides light, flexible, but strong wood. It has large protein-rich leaves that are good to use in livestock. And it forms beautiful large flowers that bloom six months a year, which honeybees love to fly to. The long blooming season is a big advantage for beekeepers. Most flowers that bees fly to bloom for only two months. Therefore, many Afghan beekeepers change locations several times a year or feed sugar to the bees, which is detrimental to the quality of the honey.

The seed of the bluebell tree is expensive. After a year, the tiny seedlings have to be singled out with tweezers. The eight entrepreneurs around Naqib and Hewad have prepared 50,000 seedlings and plan to plant them this year. From this, wood production is to develop. They do not plan to set up their own apiary. But other beekeepers could set up shop.

Naqib and Hewad have to run their projects as "part-time farmers" from Kabul. They therefore keep staffing levels in Khost low. Therefore, they themselves do not give "work and bread" to many people in Khost. This is done by other companies, e.g. those who cut down the eucalyptus trees and transport them away or those who lease the fields with the devil's claw and harvest asant every day. Naqib and Hewad pay taxes for their profits and they create products that are needed by the population - in fact, in the case of the wood from the eucalyptus trees, very much needed.

We did not intend this report to prepare you for the fact that we intend to transform OFARIN from an organization that provides instruction into an agricultural corporation. OFARIN is continuing its teaching program without restriction and will expand it as much as possible. The money involved in the projects presented in Khost is private money from Afghans, even though some of them earned this money from their work at OFARIN.

But the attitude with which Naqib, Hewad, and others, are putting economic progress on track has us so excited that we had to tell you. If you or friends of yours feel that people like this need to be supported, we are happy to make that happen through OFARIN. But this must not be at the expense of the teaching program.

We ourselves do not yet see what we can do to help Naqib, Hewad and their friends. They don't need us for what they are doing right now. But maybe some of you have ideas how the potential of these colleagues, of which we had no idea until now, can be used even better and how this could be stimulated from the outside.

If you don't come up with something right away, join us in being excited about what's inside our colleagues! If they or we think of something, you will know about it.

Happy Easter to all of you!

Best wishes,

*Peter Schwittek.*