

No mountain high enough to stop education reaching children

Accelerated Learning Centres in Afghanistan help them catch up on missed schooling

By Abdul Rahman Zaeem



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Kahdija, aged 10, (in brown hijab) reads in her Grade 2 class at the Accelerated Learning Centre (ALC) in Sartapa neighbourhood, Firozkoh city, Ghor province. The ALC is located in a community mosque.

HERAT, Afghanistan, 15 March 2017 - Travel north-west from Afghanistan's capital Kabul and you will find yourself in the rugged province of Ghor. The word 'Ghor' means 'mountain' and the province lies at the end of the formidable Kush mountain range, some 2,500 metres above sea level. Here, the mainly farming community grow wheat, almonds and walnuts and spices, and raise sheep and goats for their wool. In this highland region, ploughing is still done using donkeys and bullocks and less than one per cent of farmers use mechanical tractors.

Formal schools are few and far between in this isolated location. Where they exist, children often have to travel more than 8 kilometres over difficult and sometimes insecure terrain to access them. Distance and, more critically, safety are key deciding factors when parents' debate whether to send their children to school – especially their daughters. Even where formal schools exist in Afghanistan, they typically lack boundary walls and 60 per cent have no sanitation facilities.

For these reasons, 10-year-old Khadija who lives in Sartapa (which means 'top of the hill'), a neighbourhood in Ghor's capital city, Firozkoh, never enrolled in school. "There was no school nearby our house and I didn't feel safe to walk long distances. I was a little kid and it was also difficult for me", said Khadija.

Community-based education

To address such challenges, UNICEF supports the Ministry of Education to provide community-based education as an outreach of the national education system, in hard to reach and sparsely-populated areas like Ghor.

Community-based schools offer students the chance to complete primary grades 1-3 in their own communities, while Accelerated Learning Centres (ALCs) serve children up to the age of 15, who have already missed out on a primary education. ALCs provide them with the opportunity to complete Grades 1 to 6 of primary school within three years in a fast-track education programme, within safe and reasonable walking distance (no more than 3 kilometres) of their homes.

The ALC in Sartapa has given Khadija a second chance to get an education. “I started this class in spring [2016],” said Khadija. “Soon I’ll complete second grade, and then I’ll start third grade.”

In her Grade 2 class, comprising 18 girls and boys, lessons are taught by locally-recruited teacher, Mawlawi Abdul Ghafor, a religious leader and the Iman of Sartapa, who conducts lessons in the community mosque.

Mr. Ghafor is full of praise for ALCs. “These classes give the opportunity to children who were unable to enroll in primary classes. This the best option to accelerate their learning and study two grades in one year,” said Ghafor. “Many boys and girls who have been out of school cannot enroll in the first grade because they are well over the age of six and the classes are not designed for them.”



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In Madan neighbourhood, Hamed, aged 9, attends an ALC where he practices his writing skills. He dreams of becoming a teacher.

Community-support is paramount to the success of ALCs. The community - represented by School Management Shuras (consultative councils) - help to establish and maintain Accelerated Learning Centres by promoting education and school attendance especially for girls, and providing an appropriate safe physical space for learning with toilet facilities and safe drinking water

Children attend classes year-round from Sunday to Thursday for at least 3 hours a day to complete the national primary curriculum which includes Languages (Dari, Pashto and English), mathematics, religious studies, lifeskills, geography, history, social science, and science (biology, physics, and chemistry).

Upon completion of the accelerated programme, students (with at least 85% attendance) who successfully pass their final exams, can enroll in the nearest formal high school (known as a hub school) to continue their education.

Education opportunities for every child

Recognising that education is a basic human right, Afghanistan's Accelerated Learning Centres are providing opportunities for children like Khadija, even in remote regions.

Ghor province now has 131 ALC classes, each led by trained teachers. Science and language lessons are augmented by specialist auxiliary teachers.

In Madan, another Firuzkoh city neighbourhood in Ghor province, attending an ALC has motivated Hamed, aged 9, to dream of becoming a teacher himself. "I'm happy to study here, I have classmates, I have friends and I enjoy it. I'd love to teach other kids," he says enthusiastically. Hamed is one of 19 students at an ALC located in the family home of his teacher, 20-year-old Sabza Gul. Hamed, who is in Grade 2, is pleased that the accelerated programme is helping him to catch up rapidly on his missed education. "In each year, I will be passing two classes, it's great and I will be studying six classes in three years," said Hamed.

With an estimated 3.5 million children out of school in Afghanistan (the majority girls), UNICEF, in partnership with Government and thanks to financial contributions from the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation, is supporting the establishment and maintenance of over 5,000 Community-based schools and Accelerated Learning Centres in hard-to-reach areas across the country. Nationwide, almost 140,000 students are benefiting (over 71,000 of them girls).

Surveying her ALC classroom in the highlands of Ghor province, Hamed's teacher Sabza is happy that, when it comes to education, she is helping to ensure that no child is left behind: "These are part of the deprived generation of our community and it's my pleasure to be their teacher".