

Case Study: Supporting learners with Disabilities

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Location of program or policy implementation described in the case study: North of Afghanistan (Balkh, Jowzjan and Samangan province)

Background and Context

The war during the last 25 years in Afghanistan has led to over half of the original population being killed or displaced and a collapse of government services in an already poor country during the 1980s and 1990s. In the last nine years since President Karzai succeeded the Taliban regime, there has been some improvement in basic health and educational systems and many refugees have returned home to resettle and rebuild their homes. In this context of overwhelming needs in all sectors - employment, security, infrastructure, agriculture, water and power - Afghans with disabilities have received little support from the government.

The Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS) for 2008-2013 has developed a social protection policy led by MoLSAMD. However actual service provision for persons with disabilities by the government is limited. Otherwise implementation of activities in "the disability sector" has largely been the domain of Non Government Organisations (NGOs) and United Nations (UN) organisations that have been supporting different programmes since the early 1980s, through both centre based and community based services.

According to the National Disability Survey of Afghanistan (NDSA, 2005), there are an estimated 196,000 school-aged children with disabilities in Afghanistan and only 22.4% of them (15% of girls) are attending regular government schools. More than 75% of them have not accessed school for any period of time and the drop-out rate is high. The NDSA report attributes these high drop-out rates to the lack of adapted materials, sensitized teachers and to discrimination or prejudicial behaviour of others.

SCA is running a comprehensive rehabilitation programme called Rehabilitation of Afghans with Disabilities (RAD) in four regions (Ghazni, Jalalabad, Taloqan and Mazar-e-Sharif), meaning 43 districts in 13 provinces. RAD provides comprehensive services for different categories of children and adults with disabilities. When the programme started in the 1990s there were very few services available in Afghanistan for the disabled so physical rehabilitation was given a priority. Over the years other components were added on to the programme so that today the programme consists of six components: Community Mobilisation and Advocacy, Employment Support, Orthopaedic Workshops, Physiotherapy services, Special and Inclusive Education, and Capacity Building.

In this case study we are focusing on our European Commission funded project (started from January 2010) regarding Inclusive Education of children with disabilities in three Northern provinces in Afghanistan; Balkh, Samangan, and Jowzjan, which radiate out from RAD's base in Mazar-e-Sharif.

Description of action on to support learners with disabilities

To improve the access for children with disabilities to quality education in mainstream schools and community based education SCA/RAD is working according the principles of Community Based Rehabilitation, which is a strategy developed “for rehabilitation, equalisation of opportunities, poverty reduction and social inclusion of people with disabilities” (Joint position paper: ILO, UNESCO, WHO, 2004).

CBR workers and community members are identifying children with different disabilities who can benefit from education. There are three possibilities: (1) inclusion in mainstream schools, (2) integration in special classes, and (3) provision of a preparatory programme in centres or through home based education. This is the so-called twin-track approach: inclusion where possible, special if needed.

The provision of a preparatory programme is improving the readiness for inclusion or integration in mainstream settings (government schools, government approved madrasas) and Community Based Education (CBE) settings (CBE classes, village madrasas, RAD centres) of children with disabilities and increases their chances of a successful school career.

Integration in special classes is happening where a group of children with disabilities is identified to attend the same school, but cannot be directly included in the same class as their non-disabled peers. This can be for various reasons, for example lack of school and teacher readiness, inappropriate curricula or severe impairments that result in major delays. The special class will still increase their inclusion in school and the community in general, because the children in the community can interact with both disabled and non-disabled peers.

In March 2010, the beginning of the Afghan school year, 304 children with disabilities has been included in mainstream schools in the Mazar region. These children all received preparatory training in the RAD programme before. For implementing the principles of inclusive education the Inclusive Learning-Friendly Environment (ILFE) Toolkit, a toolkit with 6 booklets and 3 specialized booklets, is being used. This Toolkit has been developed by UNESCO Bangkok and is being used worldwide in developing countries. UNESCO Kabul has initiated to adapt the ILFE Toolkit to the Afghan context and RAD is part of the group working on this task. The RAD staff has been trained in implementing the ILFE Toolkit as well as approximately 150 mainstream school teachers that are teaching children with disabilities in inclusive education settings. Parents, school principals, education directorate staff and the community are also involved in providing a learning-friendly environment for the child.

14 Inclusive Education Resource Persons have been assigned to the task of on-the-job support for mainstream school teachers in adapting the education to the needs of the included children with disabilities. They are regularly visiting the student(s) in their classroom to follow-up on the development and well-being of the children. They are providing supportive learning and teaching tools, such as Braille books, Braille styluses, sign language books, picture cards, mathematics resources, as well as giving advice to the school on how to make the school – and classroom environment more inclusive and accessible for all children. They also train the teacher on the job, for example in sign language, in how to organize group work, peer support, (extra) instruction, and a child-friendly classroom. Most of the included children with disabilities are studying their shift in the mainstream school and come for extra support to the CRDC (Community Rehabilitation and Development Centre), ideally around 3 times a week. Here the children get the chance to practice their lessons and get more detailed instruction. At the same time pre-teaching is done: prepare for the lessons in the mainstream school.

Currently the project has been running for 4 months and the results until now are very promising. The Provincial Education Directorates (PEDs) have committed to the project and after several meetings they have sent letters to the school in this region to support the inclusion of children with disabilities. Capacity building is ongoing and the next step in the project will be more skills training for the PED staff and the mainstream school teachers regarding adapting education to children’s needs.

In order for children with disabilities to be effectively empowered, there are not only activities which promote their independence, but also greater awareness in the government and civil society in order to change negative attitudes and ignorance about disability. Many children with disabilities are denied access to education because of lack of knowledge and skills of teachers, so training and support are provided to enable teachers, school principals, parents, Provincial Education Directorate staff and local communities to implement and support inclusive education activities.

This project is carried out in close cooperation and communication with the PEDs, MoE, UNESCO, UNICEF, European Commission and other NGOs working in the field of education.

Lessons Learned relevant to others working on this issue

- The Inclusive Education Resource Persons are very important in providing support to mainstream schools in implementing inclusive education. The mainstream schools really appreciate the extra support.
- Capacity building in the mainstream schools and raising awareness amongst parents and community members is contributing not only to an inclusive environment in school, but an inclusive environment in the community as a whole.
- Involving of the government (in this case Ministry of Education and Provincial Education Directorate) is of crucial importance in sustainability of implementing inclusive education. Inform and involve them from day 1 of writing the project proposal.
- Acceptance is step one in inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream schools. If you can reach this the rest will come gradually. After acceptance capacity building of the mainstream school teachers is most important.
- The comprehensive approach has led to a successful integration and inclusion of children with disabilities. Because RAD is focusing on supporting existing systems and complementing with extra activities we are able to achieve good results.

Additional Resources and References

- Inclusive Learning-Friendly Environment (ILFE) Toolkit:
<http://www2.unescobkk.org/elib/publications/032revised/index.htm>
- Revised ILFE Toolkit for Afghanistan: to be finalized in May 2010 and available through SCA and/or UNESCO Kabul
- CBR Guidelines, Joint Position Paper ILO, WHO, UNESCO, 2004:
<http://www.who.int/disabilities/publications/cbr/en/index.html>

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