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The Future of Modern Education under Taliban 2.0

SYNOPSIS

In the past two decades, Afghanistan achieved monumental milestones in the education sector. However, developments in the education sector have been detrimentally impacted by dependence on donor funded projects. Progress within the education sector has suffered on several fronts, including in the areas of sustainability, quality, flexibility, and accountability. Aid dependency invariably shifted national priorities, as administrators focused on securing funds and appeasing international donors. Too often, they misallocated aid, sidelined the needs of society, and disincentivized local development projects.

With the Taliban takeover, the future of education in Afghanistan is uncertain. The Taliban view most of the progress made in the education sector under the US-backed governments as problematic and un-Islamic, and have vowed to change the education system to conform to Islam. Going forward, reforms in the education system should utilize local and national resources, be more focused on quality over quantity, and bring transparency and accountability. Canada could play a role, as a partner and not as a donor, in these efforts.

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About the Authors



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Mohammad Modaser Islami has completed his master's degree in education at Karlstad University in Sweden, specializing in teacher education. His thesis focused on questioning in the classroom in primary schools of Kabul city. He worked in the education sector of Afghanistan for over five years.

Modaser was born in a refugee camp in Peshawar, Pakistan and completed high school there. He returned to Afghanistan in 2002 and pursued his BA at Kabul University. In 2009, Modaser received a scholarship to do his first master's degree in Sociology from Osmania University in India. He has over a decade work experience in Afghanistan.

Modaser is also a writer and an independent journalist and covered developments in Afghanistan for several national and international media outlets. He is bilingual by birth (Pashto and Dari) and knows Arabic and Urdu at an intermediate level.

Main Problems

1. Quality control

According to the Ministry of Education, in 2021 there were nearly 10 million students – 39% of whom were girls – and 220,000 teachers in Afghanistan.¹ Although exaggerated and politically motivated, the official numbers show great progress in terms of increased access to education, especially when compared to the 2001 statistics, which estimated the number of students to be around one million, with almost no girls in schools. While recent data indicates growth in numbers and quantity, the quality of education was often overlooked by the country's leadership and the international community. According to the latest UNICEF data, children in Afghanistan often receive a lower quality of education as a result of their teachers' academic qualifications, with only 48% of all teachers meeting the minimum certification level (equivalent to an Associate Degree).² In addition to the quality of education available, the unavailability of textbooks, poor educational environment, and socio-cultural factors, result in most students not achieving the learning objectives set for each level of education.

Despite millions of dollars that were spent in the education sector, according to UNICEF, an estimated 4.2 million children are still out-of-school in Afghanistan, including more than 2.2 million girls.³ The ratio of about 45.5 students per one teacher and approximately 18,000 schools indicate that Afghanistan still requires more schools and teachers, particularly female teachers. The above shortcomings are compounded by Afghanistan's highly centralized education system, with one model and curriculum across the country. The one-size-fits-all cannot address the major disparities in levels of education, as well as, access to resources across the country, particularly in rural regions.

2. Sustainability and aid dependence

Over the past two decades, over 50% of Afghanistan's national budget was funded by international donors. This has had negative consequences for the education sector. Although financial support from the international community during the past two decades had been helpful in addressing major challenges in the education system, the lack of a national budget to finance education at all levels meant that developments in the education sector were heavily dependent on the availability of funding from international donors. When these project-based funds became available, they also typically lacked appropriate project coordination, resulting in redundancies and duplication of efforts.

3. Accountability: citizens vs donors

During the last 20 years, the leadership in the Ministry of Education (MoE) focused its efforts on reporting statistics on disenfranchisement to cement continued donor funding, even at the times providing manipulated data in its reporting. In attempting to attract more funds, the MoE prioritized the incorporation of donor priorities into education programming, as opposed to the needs of students and society in general. There was little transparency and accountability towards the Afghan citizenry, as they had little involvement in decision making and monitoring the implementation of education projects.

1 <https://pajhwok.com/2021/05/05/ghani-sees-threat-to-afghanistans-education-system/>

2 <https://www.unicef.org/afghanistan/education>

3 <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/statement-unicef-executive-director-henrietta-fore-children-afghanistan>

4. Taliban's view of modern education

a. Liberal/secular traits

The Taliban consider most of the progress made in the education sector under the US-backed governments in Afghanistan to be problematic. The Taliban largely viewed the schooling system under the Republic as un-Islamic, and targeted schools and students during their fight against the US-backed regimes. Promptly following the Taliban's seizure of power, they announced a series of reforms to make the current curriculum in greater alignment with Islamic teachings. Due to major funding by the international community, the education curriculum in Afghanistan underwent fundamental changes to meet so called "international standards". For these reasons, the Taliban consider this new curriculum to be secular and foreign. Furthermore, the Taliban interpret co-education as largely un-Islamic, and believe in gender segregation in schools, universities, and other public places.

b. Girls' education

While the Taliban allowed the reopening of universities for men and women in March of this year – after a brief break and after they caved in to internal and external pressure – they did not reopen secondary schools for girls in most of the provinces. The Taliban's viewpoint about girls' education stems from their interpretation of the rulings of Islam about women. The Taliban believe that women above the age of adolescence should be prohibited from leaving their homes, with the exception of those excursions which may be religiously justified. Modern education or the current form of schooling in Afghanistan does not fall within the scope of the latter. Their understanding is that girls are obligated to receive religious education, which should be sought only at home or at madrasas (Islamic religious schools).

Meanwhile, there is pressure from more moderate members of the Taliban that girls' education is a critical investment towards the production of certain, much-needed female professionals, such as teachers and doctors.⁴ Lack of female teachers across Afghanistan's provinces, especially in remote districts and villages, has been a challenge and one of the main reasons for lower enrollment rates for girls. Gender segregation of the education system will further narrow opportunities. The precedent set by the reopening of universities for women implies that secondary schools may also reopen after changes are made to satisfy the gendered mandate set by the Taliban. However, there are signs of internal divisions within the Taliban with respect to their approach to girls' education, and the future is therefore uncertain.

Solutions

An education system that does not depend on foreign aid is critical to long-term sustainability and accountability. Rather than reliance on foreign aid, funding for education should come from the national budget. This would further incentivize actors in the education sector to increase transparency and encourage accountability to the citizenry on how its funds are being distributed. Utilizing local resources would also reduce reliance on international donors and experts. Afghanistan has education professionals (men and women) in religious and secular fields who can contribute to building a stronger education system that reflects its national values and collective goals. Furthermore,

⁴ <https://bit.ly/Afghanistansecretgirlsschool>

participation of local and national experts will contribute positively towards culturally-sensitive development. To that end, it would be critical to involve experts from a range of backgrounds that represent different regions of the country to understand the many challenges, as well as, opportunities that exist.

To address the problem of ghost schools and quality issues, accountability mechanisms must be put into place to monitor schools. At the local level, schools can be more open to community involvement, sharing progress and challenges with families and students. At the national level, the Ministry of Education must do a better job of monitoring schools and quality assurance by working with provincial and district partners. Furthermore, investment in teacher training is needed across the country, especially in rural areas, to ensure that children not only attend school, but also can make progress and realize their goals.

Ways Forward

1. Focus on long-term solutions in education

While Afghanistan faces many challenges and lacks resources in the short-term, a long-term view asks: What is the goal of education in Afghanistan? What kind of investments do we need to make today to build the future we envision? A forward-thinking approach invests a part of the national budget on quality teacher training, recruiting more female teachers, building safer school environments, creating curricula that fosters important skills and mindsets, building curricula that reflect the diversity of the country, and working towards national reconciliation and conflict prevention.

2. Partnership instead of donorship

While Afghanistan must work towards sustainable systems, it can benefit from the expertise of international partners. Rather than a donor-recipient relationship that destabilizes and weakens national systems, a relationship of partnership can enable national education actors to benefit from international expertise and resources. International partners like Canada can advise Afghan policymakers on ways to build sustainability over time, create opportunities for Afghan students to study abroad, and assist the country in technical fields (e.g., STEM education, medicine, etc.). Canada could also help by establishing resource (model) schools in every district of Afghanistan, which would subsequently provide necessary support to surrounding schools on a regular basis, including resources, coaching, and supervision.

3. Transparency in funding education

To remedy years of corruption and mismanagement of funds in the education sector, building systems that record funding and expenditures is critical. These records must also be made available to the public and international partners. These records should be part of a comprehensive oversight mechanism that involves monitoring, auditing, and evaluating developments in the education sector both at the local and national level, with the goal of increasing transparency, accountability, and anti-corruption.