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ARNOLD BERGSTRAESSER INSTITUT

Teacher Education in Afghanistan Challenges and Prospects

Freiburg, 16–17 October 2015

Afghanistan has been in newspaper and TV headlines for years. The public's attention is drawn to Afghanistan when topics such as war, violence, terrorism and, most recently, refugees in Europe are discussed. When education and schools in Afghanistan are picked out as central themes, the reports are equally negative due to the attacks on the Afghan educational system.

On 16 and 17 October 2015, a conference took place at the University of Education in Freiburg. It approached the topic education and schools in Afghanistan from a different perspective. The main goal of the conference "Teacher Education in Afghanistan. Challenges and Prospects" was to discuss this topic, despite extremely challenging conditions, with guests from Afghanistan.The conference was organized by the University of Education, Freiburg, the University of Applied Sciences and Arts Northwestern Switzerland and the Arnold Bergstraesser Institute for Socio-cultural Research at the University of Freiburg. The Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) provided significant financial support for the conference. Further partners were the Schweizerische Direktion für Entwicklung und Zusammenarbeit (DEZA), the University of Basel, the Galtung Institute for Peace Theory and Peace Practice and the Deutsch-Afghanische Initiative e.V. (DAI) in Freiburg. With up to 180 participants, the conference was better attended than expected for such a special topic.

During the conference, teacher education was discussed in a rather general context of education (for everybody) as well as peace and development. The first day concentrated on an exemplary and at times controversial presentation of the situation of schools and teacher education in Afghanistan. Craig Naumann, who held the first keynote, published his dissertation "Books, Bullets and Burqas. Educational Development, Society and the State of Afghanistan" in 2012. Naumann also worked for the Afghan government as well as various NGOs in Afghanistan until 2009. In his contribution, he first criticized official data still used as the basis for UNESCO policy documents and Oxfam papers to this day. In his analysis of the overall educational situation in Afghanistan Naumann pointed out that we need to use the notion of a continuous improvement of school enrolment rates of boys and girls with care, although this perception is widespread in political discussions. He criticized that the so-called ghost students, i.e. students who dropped out of school a long time ago, remain in statistical data.

This is not considered in those political discussions. He argues that in the meantime we can also read of whole ghost schools.

Susan Wardak, senior advisor of the Afghan Ministry of Education, is also responsible for the Teacher Training Colleges (TTC's) throughout the country. She presented a very positive and promising view of the development of Afghan schools, school enrolment rates and teacher education, even in the southern provinces of Afghanistan, which are considered dangerous. Supported by the GIZ among others, the Afghan Ministry of Education initiated large-scale programmes to strengthen girls' education. According to Wardak, even in rural areas the acceptance of girls' education has considerably increased, because inhabitants of small villages have begun to realize the value of schooling and higher education for their personal future prospects. Afterwards, Asadullah Jawid portrayed the Gawharshad Institute of Higher Education in Kabul, which had been founded by Sima Samar. It is a private university which is not directly connected to teacher education (it offers B.A. and M.A. degree programmes in economics, civil engineering and political science). However, it is interesting in a general context of education, peace and development, since all Gawharshad University students are required to take two courses in peace education. Amannullah Hamidzai, president of the Kabul Education University of Rabbani (known as Kabul Education University until 2012) outlined the structures of his university, which covers high school teacher education. According to the current enrolment data, one third of the 8,300 enrolled students are female.

In the second session, the focus shifted to the Afghan province of Herat. The session started with a presentation by Mohammad Joma Hanif, who introduced the Faculty of Education of Herat University. What makes this faculty remarkable is that more than half of the students as well as 44 per cent of the instructors are female. Heidi Kässer continued the series of presentations about Herat with a report on her project, which she conducts with students in and around the city. Since 2008, the DAI in Freiburg has been promoting mainly female students from poor backgrounds under her tutelage. She was and is in direct contact with 30 students and quoted from students' letters in order to illustrate their situation before and after their studies. In addition, using statistical data for Herat University, she showed that the number of female as well as male graduates has increased. However, the percentage of unemployed former students has also risen continuously. As Naumann had already emphasized in the morning, Kässer, too, pointed out the need to establish a job-related school system, in Afghanistan. This is necessary in order to open up new perspectives for graduates who cannot enrol at universities.

On Friday afternoon and Saturday morning, a total of ten workshop sessions offered a relatively broad spectrum from the promotion of life-skills to deeper insights into the work of the Afghan Ministry of Education to the analysis of the Taliban movement and even a project with nomads in Afghanistan. A core theme of many workshops was peace and human rights education as well as political education.

The human rights activist and Right Livelihood Awardee Sima Samar gave a lecture on the situation in Afghanistan regarding human rights and education on Friday evening. She raised concerns over various difficulties in Afghan education: from the qualification of teachers to the increasing closure of schools in areas threatened by the Taliban to corruption and even the lack of school buildings. Sima Samar strongly suggested giving education the same priority as security. She argued that the need to maintain education and educational institutions is similar to the need to maintain law and order. If education took a subordinate role to security interests, this would cause further harm to the country.

On Saturday after the workshop sessions, the conference continued with two further keynotes that placed education, development and peace in a general context again. Jochen Hippler, Afghanistan expert and advisor of the Federal German Foreign Office, pointed out that there is no general primary correlation between education and peace. Instead, other factors such as well-functioning labor markets act as central bonding agents. He stressed that from the Afghan population's perspective it would not always be evident whether the Taliban rebels or corrupt parts of the government were the lesser of two evils. Narkow Grant-Hayford, who represented the Galtung Institute, emphasized on the other hand that dialogue with all conflicting parties was the only chance to establish more peaceful conditions. He argued that especially the intervening Western powers were supposed to agree on setting up supporting conditions to promote a process of dialogue as the precondition for the chance to pursue overall conflict transformation. He made a strong argument for the introduction of peace education at all system levels. In doing so, Narkow Grant-Hayford directly supported Susan Wardak, who already integrated modules on peace education in teacher education, and Sima Samar and Asadulla Jawid, who have already introduced peace education as mandatory courses for all university students.

The synopsis of the conference revealed both progress in teacher education in Afghanistan and various unsolved problems. It was clear that teacher education in Afghanistan cannot be seen as a continuous success story, despite tremendous efforts on the part of the Afghan government and a vast number of NGOs and private initiatives. The difficulties are too evident regarding the quality of learning opportunities, the drop-outs, and the

increasingly problematic security situation. Nevertheless, education in Afghanistan does not stand still. This conclusion is based on enrolment and student rates, and still holds even if we halve the official figures. There was a surprising level of agreement among the conference participants concerning the appreciation and establishment of peace and human rights education in the context of university education in Afghanistan. One of the goals of this conference was to investigate to what extent co-operations are feasible and possible between the conference organizers and stakeholders of the educational landscape in Afghanistan. All participants are certain that these co-operations will occur; at least in this respect the conference was a complete success. There is hope that through these and similar co-operations as well as through the establishment of peace education programs the trend towards improvement will continue in Afghanistan. However, almost all participants, including organizers, lecturers, workshop leaders and attendees, agreed that efforts to promote stability and peace education in Afghanistan will not have any impact if the rise of militaristic tendencies in Western societies is not curbed at the same time.

Anne-Marie Grundmeier / Diana Sahrai / Fereschta Sahrai