

Alexandra Gast  
Nevada High School  
Nevada, Missouri  
Afghanistan, Education

### **Afghanistan: Bridging the gap between rural population and accessible education**

In the semi-arid climate of Afghanistan, there is a girl who lives on a small poppy farm about ten miles away from the nearest city. She attends a small school, in a house that belongs to a woman in her small, rural community. It takes her forty-five minutes every day to walk to her neighbor's house with her sister and three brothers. The knowledge that she has access to, as a thirteen-year-old, is an education compared to that of a second grader in America. She would have access to a much more enriched education if she had transportation to and from the schoolhouse in town.

In Afghanistan, the average family is composed of seven people; all living in a house made of mud, timber, and clay. Their home life is simple and there are clearly defined gender roles within the home. The Afghan family is a patriarchal entity, as it is in other countries in the region. That means that as a general rule, a male family member decides over a women's life; whether she gets to go to school as a girl, whom she marries and even whether or not a pregnant woman is allowed to seek professional medical help. The women take care of the affairs in the home; she washes dishes, does laundry in the nearby stream or river, watches over the children and prepares meals. Meals consisting of a protein, harvested vegetables bought from open-air markets and a grain, usually rice or a type of noodle. The patriarch of the family works on the family farm, tending to the crops and livestock. He does his best every day to create a sustainable food source or produce something that has a high trade value in order to feed his family and have surplus income for incidental costs. If the average Afghan male is not working on a farm of his own, he likely works in a factory. Life is not easy and jobs are few in numbers. Even with all his efforts, the average citizen only takes home \$410 US dollars annually(5).

Afghanistan's landlocked geography makes it very unique, but also extremely difficult to get information and imports into and out of the country. Its geography alone drives the prices of imports up significantly. (3) With the cost of customs fees and the struggle with shipping monopolies, the average Afghan farmer struggles to break even at the end of the fiscal year; let alone make enough money to send their children into the local school.

Agriculture is a way of life. Just like the whole world is dependent upon it, agriculture is the most influential industry in Afghanistan. Over 58% of all land area,

within the country, is used to produce agriculture products or sustain agricultural life(5). It has never been more crucial to keep building and focusing on the industry that is single-handedly driving the growth and restructuring of this country. Afghanistan's largest export is poppy, or opium, followed by pistachios, almonds, pomegranate, and cherries(1). All of these products that can be transported across the land-locked borders by way of truck or used in the development of value-added products.

One of the largest and most detrimental challenges in developing countries is insufficient access to education in rural communities. We, as Americans, are not extremely mindful of this problem because we have access to free and outstanding education for thirteen years of our lives no matter where we live. In Afghanistan, only 38.2% of the population, over the age of fifteen, know how to read and write. (5) As the Afghan population falls behind in education, the country falls behind on any advancement that could be made within Agriculture in the next 5 years and many years to come.

According to UNICEF, established on 11 December 1946 by the United Nations to meet the emergency needs of children in post-war Europe and China, many efforts have been made to improve the situations involving education, but these efforts are focused on the schools in urban communities. A statement made by UNICEF stated, (6) "through UNICEF, USAID supported the establishment of 4,055 community-based education classes including over 58,000 girls, have access to education." Yet there is no evidence that these rural schools are being established where they are needed; with recent facts collected stating that and ever so vital to deter "brain drain."

The term "brain drain" is defined as the migration of trained professionals (in any field) in search of the better standard of living and quality of life, higher salaries, access to advanced technology and more stable political conditions in different places worldwide. This migration of intelligent minds for better opportunities, both within countries and across international borders, is of growing concern within countries worldwide. In order to combat "brain drain," there must be a focus on the youth in Afghanistan. They must have a strong advocate on their side and hope that the compassion and things that they learn from the people in their own country will compel them to stay in the place they called home for so many years.

As Afghanistan continues to fall behind, they will have no way to feed the expected population of 60.84 million people by the year 2050. The importance of education is not just for the people from the ages of five to eighteen, but the adults and elders that never received the proper education either. Directly, this problem affects children, indirectly this problem affects the entire country. As we begin education for the those who are in need, we must also look at the creation of jobs. Studies show that as

young adults become more educated, they leave the country to seek job opportunities elsewhere. (2) Without education, development of new agricultural technologies is at a standstill. Therefore, yields in crop fields have no way to improve and there is no knowledge of integrated pest management and crop rotation. Along with improvements in crop management, there would also be a very apparent improvement in the animal husbandry practices used on family farms. (1) But food security affects the way we teach our children too. Some would even say that food security and education have a symbiotic with one another. Without the nutrition that is important to the developing brain and the education to grow that food efficiently, one could not exist without the other.

To encourage development and knowledge of these technologies', college students in the final semester of their agriculture teaching certificate could have the opportunity to provide standard higher level education, aid in the growth of new farming practices, and even the possibility of FFA and 4-H programs being established. This solution would be funded by, not only the college but, other private donors and the students participating in the program as well. An individual would oversee the program, ensuring the quality of education and to promote good relations between the rural people and participants in the program. This program would ensure the improvement of technologies, which in turn, will improve yields and health of farms. On the flip side, it would be very important to put these students in places where conflict is no longer prevalent. The government of Afghanistan would have to be 100% supportive as well, which I do not foresee being an issue considering that the program would be providing free upper-level education to the citizens that do not have access to it regularly.

A model for this program would be AgriCorps. AgriCorps connects American agricultural professionals to rural communities. This program gives experiential, school-based agricultural education and works to establish 4-H based programs in West Africa (Ghana and Liberia). AgriCorps has been a tremendous success; with 9 fellows currently in Ghana and has directly affected the food security in countries where the program is in place.

With student teachers traveling to foreign countries, a set of student standards or curriculum must be put into place to ensure the greatest use of time and resources. Ag Ed on the Move, a program created by Missouri Farmers Care, is a great model of an elementary curriculum that can be modified to an individual classrooms' needs. Ag Ed on the Move is a 10-week program that creates an understanding of the agriculture industry and farm families. Participants have the resources needed to discover the importance of crops, livestock, nutrition, conservation, and agricultural career opportunities. Lessons include, but are not limited to: making corn plastic, bread in a bag, making butter, and egg candling. This program costs nothing to implement in a

school district and all materials are provided by Missouri Farmers Care.

Another option for aiding the rural communities of Afghanistan would be shipping retired school buses by way of a container ship. This solution would be more costly, with the costs of freight and coordination of shipping plans, but it would be utilizing the school systems already in place in the central cities. This solution would also create jobs for the adults in the rural communities; driving school buses just like here in America. Granted, there would be issues with the affordability of diesel fuel and the cost of maintenance and repairs to the buses, as problems arise would be hard to facilitate. But with the help of non-profit organizations and the government of Afghanistan, this solution could be the best at working with what it already has.

Yearly, the United States of America throws away thousands of textbooks or educational reading materials. With over 2 billion textbooks printed in the United States every year, more than 40 million books are thrown away and recycled. Instead of recycling or throwing away these materials, efforts could be made to send them to the teachers and educators in rural communities. With every plan, there are flaws; shipping costs and distribution of these materials could prove to be difficult, but with the assistance of people on the ground in Afghanistan, these materials could be easily distributed.

In conclusion, the 25.09 million people in the rural communities of Afghanistan are suffering from the lack of knowledge and access to efficient and age-appropriate education. With a population growing 2.36% annually, we, as a world, must address the problem with education reaching the rural communities at every corner of the globe. Rural life is so important and precious, yet we are punishing children of all ages with little, to no, access to a quality education. Education in rural communities can be improved by sending agriculture education majors to work with children on-site and establish FFA and 4-H programs, sending retired school buses to areas of extreme need, or providing older textbooks of all subjects; that would normally be thrown away in America. No effort to improve access to education will be wasted, because with knowledge comes food security; solutions to this problem sound daunting, but the revolution starts with one.

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