**Editorial**

SDC supports culture and ‘human rights from an Islamic perspective’, albeit with a very small contribution. Over the past quarter, however, it was possible to show that, even with small contributions, considerable results can be achieved.

The restoration of Islamic shrines in Bamyan marks a milestone in SDC’s contribution to the country’s cultural heritage, whereas the photo exhibition “New Afghanistan through Afghan Eyes” rectifies prevailing, lopsided images and perceptions of Afghanistan and highlights the rich and manifold cultural facets of the country to a broad international public. Both contributions use culture as a connector between different sectors in Afghan society and across societies.

Culture, however, can also have negative connotations, especially when it entails human rights abuses based on traditional customs which are unfortunately often legitimised through Islam. With SDC’s support, the first national educational conference on human rights and Islam was held in October and triggered debates on several topics involving women’s rights, human rights and Islam among international scholars, Afghan Imams and Afghan women. This conference, which is the first of its kind in Afghanistan, concluded that Islamic teaching must be differentiated from local and tribal customs and that different measures need to be taken to improve the situation of women.

Finally, during the past quarter, SDC launched the booklet “10 Stories” portraying ten personalities related to SDC’s work in Afghanistan. In the framework of the 10th anniversary celebrations, the booklet gives SDC’s 10-year engagement in the country a human face by putting the people SDC ultimately works for in the foreground.

Marianne Huber,
Country Director, SDC Afghanistan

**Newly restored Islamic shrines handed over to the local government in Bamyan**

Khwaja Rawash Sabzposh is one of the three shrines which have been restored by UNESCO-Afghanistan with the support of the Swiss Government. Aimed at preserving Islamic historical and archaeological monuments in Bamyan province, the conservation and stabilisation work at Khwaja Rawash Sabzposh started in spring 2012 and was completed in July 2012. The shrine was handed over to the Department of Culture and the Governor's Office in Bamyan in August 2012.

During the ceremony to hand over the shrine, Mr. Nicolas Plattner, Deputy Ambassador of Switzerland to Afghanistan and Pakistan, said: “I believe that the promotion and preservation of cultural heritage can play a significant role in promoting peace, education, reconstruction, economic opportunity and poverty reduction. As a multicultural country, Switzerland is an example of how culture can become a connector between people of different languages, various religions and diverse cultural traditions. This is why we have a strong commitment to culture as a driver of relations among people and societies.”...

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“New Afghanistan through Afghan Eyes” Photo Exhibition in Switzerland

The International Photography Exhibition “New Afghanistan through Afghan Eyes” opened on October 4, 2012 at the United Nations in Geneva. The exhibition is supported by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and was shown in Geneva until October 19, 2012.

The exhibition is aimed at showing the evolution of Afghanistan over the past decade and highlighting all facets of the daily lives of the Afghan people which have endured despite the ongoing war. The exhibition illustrates Afghan culture and traditions, evidence of democracy, construction and development, education, health, landscapes, poverty, and day-to-day challenges of the Afghan people.

In his opening remarks, Mr. Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, United Nations Under-Secretary-General and Director-General of the United Nations Office in Geneva, said: “This exhibition provides a window into Afghanistan. A window created by Afghans themselves. Through these photographs, we discover historical landmarks, beautiful landscapes and the daily lives of Afghans. This is not an Afghanistan that we usually see in the media - one often marked by violence, conflict and division. It is an Afghanistan steeped in culture, tradition and history. It is an Afghanistan where people struggle and where, at the same time, they enjoy life as they build a better future for their country.”

Mr. Kassym-Jomart Tokayev at the opening ceremony in Geneva

The exhibitions in Switzerland are organized by artlink and are comprised of 100 photos taken over the past 10 years by 14 Afghan photographers who are members of the 3rd Eye Photojournalism Center in Afghanistan. The exhibition was shown in the Kornhausforum in Bern from August 16 to September 15, 2012 attracting over 1500 visitors, which makes it one of the most frequently visited exhibitions in the Kornhausforum this year. The exhibition will be open in Basel from February 12 to March 24, 2013 and in Zürich from April 5 to 24, 2013.

Prior to Switzerland, the exhibition travelled through 10 provinces of Afghanistan from August 2011 to June 2012 where it was seen by over 60,000 visitors.

The exhibitions in Afghanistan were organized by the 3rd Eye Photojournalism Center with support from SDC and the U.S. Embassy in Kabul.

Opening of the exhibition at the UN in Geneva

Opening of the exhibition in Bern

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National Conference on Human Rights and Islam held in Kabul

On October 15 to 17 2012, a national educational conference on human rights and Islam was held in Kabul for the first time. Organized by the newly established Karama Network for Advocacy and Human Rights, the conference addressed human rights and women’s rights from an Islamic perspective. There were 60 Imams from various provinces of Afghanistan, 7 religious scholars, including 2 women, from Egypt, Indonesia, Malaysia and Iran, representatives from the Afghan Government, the Human Rights Commission and Kabul University, as well as more than 90 women from different human rights and civil society organizations, attending the conference and discussing at lectures and in working groups different topics with respect to human rights and Islam.

In panel sessions women were given the opportunity to address questions to the international scholars. In a consultative environment the participants had open discussions on human rights and women’s issues from an Islamic perspective and were able to compare family law reforms in other Islamic countries.

The profound Islamic and scientific inputs of the international scholars and their presence as such provided a new dimension to the classical thinking of the Afghan Imams who were used to hearing other answers and interpretations about human and women’s rights and Islam.

Jamila Afghani, the conference’s main organizer, stated: “Although the common environment for such events is usually bureaucratic due to the sensitivity of the issue, this conference, in spite of all its challenges, provided an open space for all to share their views and put forth their questions and concerns either in panels or working groups.”

At the end of the conference, all participants issued a statement emphasizing that Islamic teaching must be differentiated from local and tribal customs, that women must be supported from an Islamic perspective as dignified individuals of society and that various measures need to be taken to improve the situation of women.

Building on the success of the conference, Jamila concluded: “This conference has given birth to many other ideas for future work in collaboration with different government departments, national and international organizations, Ulema and civil society through media and the Ministry of Religious Affairs, the Ministry of Women Affairs and the Ministry of Culture and Information.” SDC will continue to support the Karama Network and seek ways to expand its engagement in the area of human rights and Islam.

Swiss Cooperation Office Afghanistan launched the “10 Stories” booklet on the occasion of its 10th anniversary

The “10 Stories – 10 years of SDC engagement in Afghanistan” booklet was launched on October 9, 2012, in Kabul. The booklet portrays ten personalities - SDC partners, beneficiaries of various projects, civil society and government representatives - and gives a human face to the SDC engagement in the country. In addition to launching the booklet, SDC screened the trailer of the “10 Stories” video.

At the ceremony launching of the booklet, Pia Lignell, SDC Deputy Country Director in Afghanistan, said: “The ten stories tell how people have been coping with the situation and how they all work, to a smaller or larger extent, for change - ranging from change in their personal lives to change in the family, community or at the policy level. The stories show that change is possible, through interventions and the personal efforts of people in all different kinds of situations.”

Mir Ahmad Joyenda, Deputy Country Director of the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU), who is one of the ten personalities featured in the booklet, said: “SDC has been one of the main supporters of the civil society movement in Afghanistan and has made a good contribution to the empowerment of civil society organizations, as well as to the promotion of human rights.”... Continued on page 4
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The stories highlight the difficult circumstances the people of Afghanistan have lived in and how war, different political regimes, widespread poverty and ongoing instability have affected the lives of men and women of several generations. At the same time, they illustrate that change is possible and that SDC can contribute to bettering the situation and ultimately the lives of the people.

The launching of the 10 Stories booklet marks the climax of a series of publications and products produced for SDC’s 10th anniversary in Afghanistan. The soft copy of the booklet and a short video trailer are available online on SDC’s main website, www.deza.admin.ch, as well as on the website of the Swiss Cooperation Office in Afghanistan, www.sdc.org.af. The hard copy can be ordered at the SDC office in Kabul.

Newly restored Islamic shrines in Bamyan... continued from page 1

Khwaja Sabzposh, a large complex of three buildings with a single mausoleum, is one of the outstanding living Islamic buildings in the province and has been an integral part of community life in Bamyan. It is a place of worship and symbolizes the important linkage between religious heritage and community identity, which in turn promotes intercultural and inter-community exchanges and understanding.

The Deputy Governor of Bamyan, Mr. Mohammad Asif Mobaligh, confirmed: “It is always good to start working on historical sites used by the people. The shrines belong to the Islamic period and they are regularly used by the communities as a place of worship.”

Afghanistan's recent history has been marked by instability, and during the many years of war, major historical monuments across the country have been threatened and/or damaged. According to the Ministry of Information and Culture, over 1,200 monuments in the country urgently require stabilization and preservation. Bamyan’s monuments in particular have suffered greatly. In addition to the well-known Buddhas, numerous other archaeological and historical sites are in critical need of conservation.

SDC will continue to support the documentation and stabilization of cultural heritage in order to contribute to raising public awareness about the value of history and culture, as well as their significance in peace-building processes for the present and the future.

“It is always good to start working on the historical sites that are used by the people. The shrines belong to the Islamic period and they are regularly used by the communities as a place of worship.”

Mohammad Asif Mobaligh,
Deputy Governor, Bamyan