Editorial

For SDC Afghanistan, promoting human rights and building up quality education are two important fields. In this issue of Tahud Swiss we look at specific activities in these two fields. Despite considerable improvements over the past 11 years, the human rights situation remains precarious. Moreover, in 2012 the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission noted a significant increase in reported cases of honor killings and sexual assaults. This worrying development prompted the Commission to conduct a national inquiry into honor killings and sexual assaults. The first of its kind, the inquiry required breaking away from the taboo of speaking about these issues, mainly among the victims and their families, and revealed appalling findings. The first article presents the report’s main findings and conclusions.

The second article reflects the monitoring visit of an SDC team to an education project implemented by the Organization of Technical Cooperation for Community Development in Samangan province. Besides lack of qualified teachers and teaching materials, security concerns and economic factors, the absence of infrastructure is one of the main factors preventing children from accessing education. The SDC-funded project equips selected schools with desk and chairs and, as a result, significantly contributes to a better learning environment for many students.

Marianne Huber, Director of Cooperation, SDC Afghanistan

First National Inquiry into Honor Killing and Rape in Afghanistan

Despite all the efforts undertaken over the past 11 years to protect and promote women's rights, violence against women remains one of the most serious problems in Afghanistan. Every year thousands of cases of violence against women from all over the country are reported to the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC). The worst cases are those of honor killing and sexual assaults.

To address and investigate these cases, the AIHRC launched the first national inquiry into honor killing and rape in Afghanistan and released its report in June 2013. The findings of the national inquiry report are appalling. They indicate that, between April 2011 and March 2013, 243 cases of honor killings and 163 sexual assaults had been registered by the regional and provincial offices of the AIHRC. The report stresses, however, that a large number of these cases are never reported because of strict traditional sensitivities and cultural obstacles.

According to the report, almost 50% of honor killings were committed as a consequence of sexual relations or attempted sexual relations outside marriage (“Zena”). Sometimes “being a victim of sexual assault” can result in an honor killing, which accounts for 3.8 % of all honor killings documented in the national inquiry.

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The report states that, in the traditional societies of Afghanistan, women and girls who become victims of sexual assaults are considered to be a source of shame and disgrace for their families and tribes. Therefore, killing the woman is viewed as redressing and removing this shame and humiliation.

More than 15% of honor killings documented by the national inquiry were committed because a woman or a girl had escaped from home. Similarly, 3.8% of the cases occurred because they did not wish to accept a forced marriage whereas 1.9% because they expressed interest in marrying someone of their own choice.

Social traditions and customs are very strict and harsh with women; men, however, are not treated as harshly because of their culturally defined superior position. The above-mentioned cases seldom reported the killing of men. The findings show that women are extremely vulnerable and suffer from severe restrictions.

Sexual relations out of wedlock provoke cultural sensitivities, especially among the victim's husband and his family, which can ultimately lead to an honor killing. A husband's possessiveness towards his wife and his dominant role, along with her inferior position in her husband's family, make a married woman highly vulnerable. As a result, wives are the most common victims of honor killings. In most cases, husbands or members of the husband's family are the perpetrators.

As for sexual assaults, in 57% of the cases the relationship between the victims of sexual assaults and the respective offenders was not clearly stated. In 8% of the cases, only "offender" was mentioned. In 65% of the cases, the assaults were committed by those who had no special relationship with the victims. Alarmingly, in 35% of the cases, the violence was committed by those who had a relationship with the victim.

The national inquiry was conducted using a participatory approach. As a result, over 2,000 people from different groups in society, including representatives of the State, civil society, justice and judicial authorities, media, provincial councils, and elders, were involved. In addition, influential figures of society participated at different stages of the inquiry. Similarly, interviews were conducted with 136 accused persons, offenders, victims, eyewitnesses and family members of the victims.

As a result of the report, the AIHRC will now look into laws and policies and will give priority to making specific recommendations to improve the situation by providing reports on the issue. AIHRC will also be raising public awareness and sensitivity to put an end to these forms of brutal violence against women in order to hold the government accountable for protecting women's rights.

The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) plays an active role in promoting and protecting human rights in Afghanistan. Defending human rights is one of the key global values of SDC and therefore SDC has been supporting the AIHRC since its establishment in 2002.

In its human rights work, SDC supports both those who are responsible for implementing and protecting human rights (duty-bearers) and those who should benefit from them (right-holders). Therefore, to make sure that human rights services are understood in a situation of conflict requiring cultural sensitivity and delivered by the main duty bearer, that is, the State, SDC is also contributing to the Human Rights Support Unit (HRSU) which was established 2010 in the framework of the Ministry of Justice. The inter-ministerial HRSU advises and supports the government to mainstream and implement human rights into its policies, programs and legislation, and to build a "human rights culture" within the executive branch of government.
Afghanistan's education system is one of the weakest in the world and its population remains one of the least educated. With its current literacy rate at about 34%, Afghanistan is still far from reaching the Millennium Development Goal for primary education. Nevertheless, there are now nearly seven million children and youngsters enrolled in school, 37% of them girls, compared to slightly more than one million students and almost no girls in 2002.

The main reasons preventing children from having access to quality education are the shortage of basic infrastructure and the lack of appropriate and standardized learning and teaching materials. An SDC team traveled recently to the remote districts of Dara-e-Suf Bala and Dara-e-Suf Payeen in Samangan province to monitor one of the SDC-funded projects, which provides basic infrastructure, including chairs, desks, boards, tents and water tanks, to government schools.

Lack of qualified teachers and basic school infrastructure

In Dara-e-Suf Bala, SDC met Mohammad Reza Amiri, Director of the District Education Department, who had left his family behind in Kabul to serve the children and population in his country's rural areas. “No one is willing to work in the rural areas of Afghanistan mainly because of low salaries and lack of basic amenities for living,” says Amiri. “Lack of qualified teachers is one of the major problems we have. Of the 441 teachers we have in the district, only five have bachelor's degrees and the rest are either school graduates or have only completed secondary education. Although we have a teacher training college in the district, there is a lack of facilities and resources, as well as professional instructors, to train the teachers.”

As we travel with Amiri for another hour to reach one of the schools supported by the project, Amiri talks about the education challenges in the district. “We have over 21,000 students in the district and only 46 schools, of which 12 have buildings and the rest are either operating under tents or outdoors. But even schools that have buildings lack basic equipment such as desks, chairs and boards and students study on the floor.”

First girl graduates and interest in education

We finally reached Ziraki Girls High School, which is one of the project's beneficiaries. Mr. Aqil, the principal of the school, informed us that his school had received 25 sets of desks and chairs and a water tank from the project. “The desks and chairs have encouraged the attendance of the students and now almost all the students in our school are equipped,” says Mr. Aqil. Ziraki currently has 375 students and had its first round of girl graduates last year. “Of the 17 girls who graduated last year, three are currently teachers in the school, three received scholarships to study in Turkey, and six passed the Kankor (state university entry exams) in Balkh province, which is a very good and positive sign for girls’ education.”

Talking about the people's perception of education in the village, Mr. Aqil says: “The people encourage their children in our district, particularly in our village, to attend school and become educated. However, many families have financial problems and as a result there still are children in our district who are deprived of basic education.”

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Project design and approach

The project is implemented by the local NGO, the Organization of Technical Cooperation for Community Development (OTCD), which is responsible for the whole chain of procurement, design, production and distribution of basic school infrastructure equipment. Khalid Jalil, the project supervisor, explains the design of the desks and chairs: “The design of the desks and chairs is in line with the standards set by the Ministry of Education. However, we have put a lot of effort in selecting good materials and manufacturing to make sure they last at least 10 years.”

Prior to production and distribution of the equipment, the OTCD team conducted an assessment in almost 100 schools in the seven districts of Samangan last winter. “We conducted the assessment in order to prioritize the schools on the basis of need, prior existence of school buildings and remoteness. There are many organizations that have supported the schools in Samangan, but many of them have covered the center of Samangan or nearby districts. Our approach was to start with the most remote schools which have a building and are in dire need of desks and chairs,” says Dr. Shairshah Bayan, Project Manager of OTCD.

The project focuses on primary and secondary school students and its target is to distribute over 2,600 sets of desks and chairs by the end of 2013. In addition, the project will repair the repairable chairs and desks in Aibak. Production of desks and chairs is ongoing and the OTCD team has distributed over 900 sets of desks and chairs in Dara-e-Suf Bala and Dara-e-Suf Payeen schools so far and will start distribution in Roy-e-Doab district in coming days. It will then move on to the two remaining districts: Khoram wa Sarbagh and Firoz Nakhchir.

Enthusiasm for more

“When the chairs and tables arrived in one of the schools, the students requested their teacher to teach for an additional hour that day since they enjoyed the comfort of studying on the chair and desk for the first time in their class.” This is what Sahab Nazar, a member of the monitoring and evaluation team of the District Education Department of Dara-e-Suf Payeen, told SDC with joy. “The distribution of chairs and tables contributed a lot to the enrollment of new students and encouraged the attendance of existing students.”

According to Mr. Abdul Aziz Azizi, Director of the Samangan Education Department: “Of the 110,000 students enrolled in schools across Samangan, only 40,000 are equipped with desks and chairs.” This highlights the project’s relevance and importance and the need for further support in the province.

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