

The Development Agenda in Afghanistan: A Disability Model

By *Abdullah Wardak*



The ISARA initiative is the first to focus on disability issues from a business enterprise perspective

Overview

To many outsiders, Afghanistan may not appear strategically important compared with other major countries in the region, including Iran, Pakistan, India and Iraq. The recent turmoil in the region has often been reported on western TV and the long years of war and suffering for the Afghan people have hardly been noted until recently. However, a closer look at this country, which is poor in resources and yet rich in potential, reveals a different reality. The consecutive attempts to dominate this country by foreign powers prove if anything the very importance of Afghanistan as a stabilizing force in the

region not only commercially but also strategically.

Examples of foreign influence started as early as the time of Alexander the Great, followed by the Arabs a few centuries later, and more recently, by European influence, including the British and the Russians. This meant long years of suffering for the people of Afghanistan and a large-scale drain on national resources.

The long years of war, foreign oppression and poverty in the country have forced many out of education and caused many more to have health and nutrition problems. The lives of the Afghans were made difficult and people's hearts slipped away from true

Islam into extremism. After the communist withdrawal, Afghanistan was left alone with no support from the international community. The Taliban came as a by-product of this situation and they comprised an uneducated group of people who took the teaching of Islam literally and learned a fierce and fundamental strain of Islam. The Taliban were used by the enemies of Afghanistan to create problems in the country and around the world.

In their fight against terrorism, the Mujahdeen had played a major role in preventing Taliban ideology from continuing and spreading throughout the whole region. There were many Mullahs who asked Osama bin Laden

to leave the country as a result of Sept. 11, 2001. When the Taliban came to power, extremist foreign elements increased their operations and influence, which resulted in terrorism.

The UN and Its Peace Initiative

War and its aftermath have affected every aspect of life in Afghanistan. To the present day, cities lack clean water and sanitation facilities. Poverty, unemployment and illiteracy are very high among the population. According to the United Nations (UN), there are between 9-10 million land mines in the country and estimates indicate that more than 10% of the total population are disabled.

There are several development challenges confronting the country and affecting the disability sector including (a) promoting security; and creating a social consensus on human rights, dignity and the value of life through establishing the rule of law. This may prevent impairments caused by war and violence; (b) generate employment for many unemployed people with impairments; (c) rehabilitate basic infrastructure and social services; (d) increase opportunities for vulnerable groups, including minority groups, women (disabled women), and promote their return to the socioeconomic mainstream; (e) employ a community-based decentralized approach to education, rehabilitation and reconstruction; and (f) utilize the full potential of sub-regional cooperation with neighboring countries.

The UN responded to the above challenges through their initiative on Poverty Eradication and Community Empowerment (PEACE). This initiative aimed at widening, for disadvantaged people in general and the disabled, widows and orphans in particular, real opportunities and real choices for personal welfare, in particular by ensuring that as much as possible through a community-driven effort, they benefit from mainstream development.

To improve the situation of over 2 million people with disabilities, serious investment has to be made by all parties, including the international commu-

nity. In fact the capacity of the government of Afghanistan is rather limited, and without external support by the international community, work on disability will be ineffective and the needs of disabled people will continue to be unmet.

In reality, however, while the potential of disabled people and their organizations are so great, they still lack opportunities to develop their skills and be integrated into mainstream society. Development plans often bypass them, ignoring their needs for education, training, employment and a wider need for participation.

Having said that, there are many signs of hope for the redevelopment of a peaceful agenda in Afghanistan. For example, progress has been made on the political front to bring the Loya Jirga (grand council) process on track and move steadily towards a smooth transition from a Transitional Authority to a fully elected government in June 2004. Work is also in progress on the National Constitution and efforts to develop a draft policy on disability are underway. The task of rehabilitation and reconstruction is also coming to life with the lead already taken by the Afghan people themselves. Although the process is moving slowly and on a limited scale, houses are being rebuilt and children are returning to schools, and many health care facilities being set up throughout the country. The return of refugees from Iran and Pakistan has far exceeded expectations and much support is still needed.

What Went Wrong in the Rebuilding Process?

Afghanistan is undergoing a comprehensive stage of development with Afghans themselves involved in the reconstruction process. The involvement of disabled people in this process, however, is still very limited for many reasons – mainly because they lack the necessary skills. Despite all the efforts invested by the international community to improve the situation of disabled people in Afghanistan, little progress is being made. International interventions

have often extended too much control over disability programs instead of facilitating the development process. This has, as a result, worked against the development of collective local ownership and thus there is little involvement and responsibility towards these programs.

These programs have also promoted unhealthy practices such as focusing on consumption habits, and giving hand-outs to those in need instead of building the wealth of the nation or developing local industries. These projects were not participatory in nature and often did not make use of local resources and skills. They promoted a top down approach, and inhibited local people from engaging in their own development.

Moreover, these projects have excluded certain segments of society, especially disabled people and other minority groups, and prevented them from playing a leading part in the reconstruction process.

The Role of the International Disability Community

A substantial number of disabled Afghans comprise those who are war veterans and landmine survivors, including women and children. Many more, however, have acquired impairments from different causes such as road accidents. These include hearing and vision impairments as well as multiple mental and psychiatric impairments. Nature has been harsh to this already deprived region and years of drought and the resulting poverty have been major causes of impairment in Afghanistan, especially those relating to malnutrition. Poverty in Afghanistan, however, is not only a cause of disability but also an important outcome of disabling barriers.

Disability is a development issue with a focus on human rights and hence this concerns the international community as much as any national government. The fact that Afghanistan was subject to foreign rule over the years meant that many violations of human rights have been evident and this result-

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Hamid Karzai, the head of the Transitional Authority, bestowing medals to the representatives of Loya Jirga

ed in a low quality of life for people with disabilities.

As a development issue, disability implies a collective responsibility to be assumed by all stakeholders, including the international community. While there is limited support for increasing the capacity of the Ministry of Martyrs and the Disabled (MMD) by international initiatives such as the Centre for International Rehabilitation (CIR) and the United Nations Comprehensive Disabled Afghans Programme (UNC-DAP), there is no direct cooperation between the MMD and any Japanese non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to date. The MMD has requested technical support from the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) which plans a mission to Afghanistan in the future. The ISARA initiative is the first of its kind to focus on disability issues from a

business enterprise perspective as well as focusing on the overall capacity building of the MMD, including material support.

The above context has also justified precautionary measures to prevent violations of the human rights of disabled people, which is necessary in a country in transition such as Afghanistan. While this is important and should be supported, a paradigm shift is needed where emphasis is placed on enriching the access of disabled people to these rights in the first place as well as building their capacity to be empowered. This paradigm should revolve around the following ideals:

- A development approach to address wider issues such as poverty, unemployment and disability. This has to be addressed within a national development framework and the national budget.

- Regarding disability as a human rights issue – an equal opportunity approach to the needs of disabled people.

Increasing awareness and general public education are amongst the marketing strategies to promote this approach at both the national and international level. Marketing is in fact an important strategy to be used for the rebuilding of Afghanistan.

- Emphasizing the cross cutting nature of disability – collective response to meeting the various needs of disabled people (interagency efforts)

- Involvement of disabled people's organizations (DPOs) – grass-roots participation in the building of the country and a central role in the ownership of rehabilitation businesses.

- Participatory method for planning and policy formulation – ownership of the political agenda of disability in partnership with government and collaborating agencies.

The role of international collaboration in supporting the reconstruction

process and making it more efficient may focus on the following:

- Building confidence and local solutions to local problems by encouraging community-based intervention where local resources and skills are utilized to the maximum level possible. In this regard, building human resources is essential and specialized training and various higher education initiatives are only a few of the mechanisms that can be used to achieve this goal.

- Enhancing cultural values instead of trying to transform them, especially those related to rehabilitation outside the family home and in institutions.

- Being a facilitator of the process rather than a controller.

- Working closely with all stakeholders including government agencies, NGO's and private sector businesses.

- Promoting models for good governance in their own projects and interventions, including high levels of local participation, transparency, accountability and the rule of law. **JTI**

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(This article was written with the cooperation of Dr Majid Turmusani, who is an international disability policy adviser.)

Abdullah Wardak has been Afghanistan's Minister of Martyrs and the Disabled since the formation of President Karzai's Transitional Government in December 2001.