

SHARING PERSPECTIVES ON CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT IN AFGHANISTAN

December 10-15, 2002

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FINAL REPORT

**SHARING PERSPECTIVES ON CURRICULUM
DEVELOPMENT IN AFGHANISTAN**

December 10-15, 2002
Kabul, Afghanistan

A Workshop Hosted by the Ministry of Education of Afghanistan, the
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary	iv
I. Background	1
II. Workshop Objectives, Participants and Organizers	1
III. Workshop Topics for Discussion and Conference Schedule.....	2
IV. Key Speakers and Opening Discussion: Current Context of Education in Afghanistan.....	3
V. Recommendations on Proposed New Curriculum Framework.....	4
VI. Recommendations on Planning for Next Steps and Potential Obstacles to Curriculum Framework Goals	8
VII. Closing Comments	13
VIII. Challenges and Opportunities for Curriculum Reform in Afghanistan....	15
IX. Annexes:	
A. List of Participants	
B. Workshop Invitation	
C. Conference Schedule	
D. PowerPoint presentation: Evaluating Curriculum	
E. PowerPoint presentation: Syllabi and Assessment	
F. PowerPoint presentation: Summary of Feedback	
G. Guidelines for Group Work	
H. Review Questions Used in Small Groups	
I. Editorial Comments on Selected Chapters	
J. Additional Content Area Feedback	

Executive Summary

The transitional government and the Afghan people, together with the donor community and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), are now taking active steps to rebuild the education system in Afghanistan. The Sharing Perspectives on Curriculum Development in Afghanistan workshop addressed issues of curriculum development as an integral part of building a new Afghanistan. The workshop yielded important results, including recommendations for the Ministry of Education (MOE) on the proposed new curriculum framework. Some key points of agreement established during the workshop include:

- Support the goal of education, as stated by Minister of Education Qanooni, to bring up a generation of Afghans who will be good Muslims, patriotic and unified across ethnic and religious lines, progressive and respectful of human rights and cooperative members of the world community.
- Build on national and international experiences in curriculum development and meet regional and international standards, while maintaining a compatibility with the values and needs of Afghan society. Crucial local concerns are economic resources, as well as the context and conditions specific to Afghanistan.
- Support anti-terrorism and anti-drug policy goals, which can be achieved, in part, by returning to the traditional respect and value for education inherent in Afghan culture.
- Base the curriculum on a spiral or integrated system in which students revisit concepts at several different grade levels.
- Identify specific learning objectives for each subject in addition to having a general education curriculum.
- Teach national unity throughout the curriculum.
- Share the framework with the provinces for further review with educational professionals, teachers, school leadership personnel, students, parents and community members.
- Edit thoroughly the Dari version of the framework with attention to word choice and style, and translate the framework into Pashto.

Significant momentum is in place to produce this new curriculum, but the rush to fast-track curriculum implementation can adversely affect the quality of the curriculum.

Those taking next steps in this process must strongly consider:

- A realistic timeline to, first and foremost, develop the capacity of implementers to understand the depth and breadth of the core concepts of the new curriculum framework. In the process of curriculum development, time must be allowed for planning, development, formative evaluation and revision.
- The provision of capacity training and financial, human and material resources.
- The creation or enhancement of systems and infrastructures that incorporate necessary quality control measures.
- The influence curriculum developers have on the classroom through the instructional materials they develop.
- The development of standards and competencies to improve the quality of the curriculum by identifying milestones that align the study plan, syllabi, instructional materials and assessments, increasing the validity of measures in

- learner outcomes and achievement as learners advance through the curriculum.
- Given that curriculum development and teacher training are coordinated by two separate ministries, close collaboration is required to produce teachers that understand, embrace and practice the new curriculum in the classroom.

The challenges are many, but the opportunity of today is equally as great. Textbooks exist and are currently in use around the country; therefore, there is time to give this process of new curriculum development the needed patience and diligence. Afghanistan has educators who bring exceptional experience and dedication to this task, both those currently in the country and those that continue to return from exile, emboldened by an abiding hope, as well as passionate about rebuilding the education system. Among parents and communities, support is burgeoning for the schooling of their children. The thirst for education is strong and the resolve to build a new curriculum for a new Afghanistan is firm.

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I. Background

Over the past 23 years, Afghanistan has sustained a series of devastating events. Invasion and occupation, civil war, and repressive regimes severely limited access to education for all, with girls and women categorically denied the opportunity for education under the five-year Taliban rule. Although there has never been a complete or accurate national census and estimates of key development indicators vary widely, according to the best estimates in 1997, school enrollment was estimated at 34 percent in urban areas, and only 6 percent in rural areas. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) reports the literacy rate in Afghanistan as the sixth lowest in the world, with only 4.7 percent of females over the age of 15 able to read. While political repression and fighting have deprived more than a generation of Afghans of even a basic education, the Afghan people have embraced a rebirth of education since the fall of the Taliban regime, especially among women and girls. Students returned to schools in record numbers in 2002 even in the face of the destruction of over 70 percent of the nation’s school buildings.

Afghanistan’s education system should be rehabilitated and modernized through careful, culturally sensitive, long-term efforts while the transitional government continues to find shorter-term solutions for the lack of school buildings, trained and qualified teachers, and instructional materials. During the past months, great strides have been made to reinvigorate the Afghan education system and begin work on a new curriculum framework. As part of this effort, a commission made up of 30 MOE staff, Kabul University professors and representatives of UNICEF and UNESCO traveled to Tehran, Iran to participate in a three-week investigation of curriculum in the Iranian school system. After this informative study tour, the MOE was interested in continuing the process of curriculum development and dialogue through a workshop focused on curriculum development. This workshop, Sharing Perspectives on Curriculum Development in Afghanistan, was conceived of as a forum for soliciting feedback and stimulating dialogue on the development of a new curriculum. During the workshop, the MOE presented the draft curriculum framework and the team of facilitators structured questions in order to systematically review different components of the curriculum framework. The forum gave participants an opportunity to actively share their ideas and to engage in debate and dialogue around issues of curriculum for a new Afghanistan.

II. Workshop Objectives, Participants and Organizers

A. Objectives

The primary objective of the Sharing Perspectives on Curriculum Development workshop was to promote dialogue on the proposed new curriculum framework for the Afghan

realignment of the desired set of knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviors. Therefore, a series of training programs with on-the-job follow-up would be far more desirable than one-time trainings for the various populations of implementers. This approach, offering a continuum of interventions, allows for a complete learning cycle of introduction, application, reflection, internalization, feedback and revision to enable ongoing development and progress.

Timeline for Curriculum Reform

Evaluations conducted on curriculum reform efforts in developing countries have repeatedly attributed poor quality of reform to the unrealistic timeframes set for reform implementation and achievement. Educational reform efforts, particularly curriculum development and textbook development initiatives, seldom, if ever, allot sufficient time for an appropriate process of development, formative evaluation and revision or for providing necessary inputs, such as capacity training, provision of materials, and creation of systems and infrastructure that incorporate necessary quality control measures. Unfortunately, reform efforts continue to prioritize *pace* over *quality*. The first round of syllabi and textbook development, in reality, become the capacity-building exercise for undertrained curriculum developers. This round then inspires a second cycle of materials development to actually apply all that has been learned to effectively represent policy concepts in the new curriculum materials and guides. Curriculum reform is an evolutionary process, not one that is finite and complete once the first round of new instructional materials are developed and present within the schools.

Curriculum Developers' Role in the Classroom

Curriculum developers in developing countries often do not realize the potential impact they could and should have on the classroom. Influences on and responsibilities for teacher behavior in the classroom are commonly attributed to those individuals and institutions responsible for teacher training. In the development context, research has informed us that textbooks are most often the driving force in the classroom, as teachers rely on them extensively and perhaps even exclusively. Research also tells us that a quality textbook can help compensate for an undertrained teacher. Curriculum developers creating these textbooks therefore influence the classroom for better or worse. In recognizing the potential impact they have on the classroom, curriculum developers can better serve the classroom through creating quality, responsive materials that stimulate the learning environment and teacher behavior.

Development of Standards/Competencies

There have been efforts in Afghanistan to develop standards or competencies to guide a curriculum. Pursuing standards development becomes increasingly important, given the desire of the MOE to respond to the high numbers of children currently out of school, overaged students, and those displaced and marginalized. Additionally, solutions developed to address these populations are often through nonformal education programs. The development of achievement standards to guide the teaching-learning process provides a nexus between the nonformal and formal education programs and results in an increasingly responsive and comprehensive national education program, satisfying the needs of a broader array of student populations.

Textbooks

A major challenge to the effective development of textbooks is the lack of understanding by textbook developers of the role textbooks can play in the classroom and the manner in which they need to assist the teacher in adopting the new curriculum reform. By following new textbooks, teachers believe that they are implementing the new curriculum. For teachers to be able to implement the new curriculum, the textbooks would then have to guide teachers not only through content, but through methods that put the new curriculum framework into practice.

Textbooks need to be based on the standards and follow a clear, comprehensive and well-paced set of learning objectives. Textbooks need to be appealing by stimulating learner interest, motivating students to learn by arousing their natural curiosity and desire to reason. Textbooks, promoting student-centered learning, aid teachers in engaging learners in higher-order thinking and offer options for classroom assessment activities that let teachers and learners know what has been learned and what remediation is required.

Assessment

Assessing learner achievement is one of the most challenging aspects of education. Most educators in developing countries think of national examinations when the term assessment is used. Considerable time and effort has been spent in numerous countries undergoing educational reform on developing teachers' ability to assess learners in the classroom and using assessment as a guide to teaching and remediation of learners. Coupled with enhancing teachers' understanding for assessment as a tool in measuring learner achievement, there is a need to enhance teacher understanding that learner performance is a measure of their achievement as a teacher.

When providing instruction, teachers should have a clear idea of the expected outcomes for learner achievement so that they can adequately and fairly assess learner accomplishments. Identifying learner outcomes is the destination point for which the teachers should aim to reach through classroom instructional activities. Assessment as well as instructional activities should be guided by the standards set through the syllabi and the instructional materials and reflect achievement of not only sub-skills but the higher-level complex skills. Assessment and remediation should be a continuous and integral part of the teaching and learning process.

Teacher Training Programs

Since curriculum development for primary and secondary education and teacher training for these cycles are the responsibility of different ministries within Afghanistan it will be critical to establish close communication so that teacher training programs reinforce the new curriculum framework and enable teachers to develop their capacity to actualize the new framework in the classroom. Teachers are required to understand the new methods, content and principles that the framework supports and how to effectively utilize instructional materials toward having a positive impact on learner achievement. Classroom performance is not to be about teacher behavior, but about learner

achievement. Teacher behavior is an input to a learner achievement ‘end’; teacher behavior is never an ‘end’ unto itself.

B. Opportunity of Today

Afghanistan has short-term solutions that can provide relief to the advancement of education as longer-term solutions are being developed and implemented. However, settling on short-term solutions and foregoing long-term planning would be to the detriment of the overall achievements of the educational reform. Within Afghanistan, textbooks, teachers and classrooms exist and, while in short supply and limited quality, there is enough to render the system functional at a very minimal level. Parents and communities are growing in their support of schooling for their children. International donors are available to lend the technical, financial and resource assistance.

Textbooks exist that can be used in the interim while new, appropriate, better-quality textbooks that represent the new curriculum content, methods and goals are developed. As these textbooks have not yet begun to be developed, there is still time to conduct several critical sets of activities, namely: engage the various levels of implementers in rigorous training on the new curriculum framework, its concepts and principles; acquire long-term technical assistance for the MOE for the curriculum development initiative; and develop standards upon which the syllabi and subsequent materials are to be based, prior to their development.

Afghanistan has the benefit of educators with valuable experience in implementing educational programs, as well as in providing instruction in classrooms. Participatory processes have begun and should continue to grow to promote collaboration between the private and public sectors, fostering a collective responsibility toward providing educational opportunities equally to the people of Afghanistan. While experienced educators do currently reside in the country, the MOE can provide further incentives to entice exiled Afghan educators back home. Teacher training institutions, with the help of donor agencies and regional support, can build on the experiences of teachers teaching with NGOs, in refugee communities or at home in public institutions; develop both pre-service and in-service programs based on the new curriculum framework; enhance outreach to teachers already in the schools through mass-media measures; and support these initiatives for in-service teachers by establishing teacher-to-teacher programs utilizing and diffusing existing knowledge and experience of teachers. Mass-media efforts could also assist with disseminating educational messages to parents advocating for education of all Afghan children and for responding to the significant changes in the new educational policy.

Careful planning on the part of the MOE and in collaboration with donors can bring about a comprehensive development strategy with sufficient resources to provide necessary inputs and systems. These inputs should come in multiple phases of the curriculum reform process and extend across a timeline allowing for internalization of policy concepts, and an understanding for how to operationalize them. The timeline must also allow for building system infrastructure from the MOE to the classroom to support development, implementation and dissemination of Afghanistan’s new education reform.