



Innovations in Education

Providing community-based education in rural Afghanistan

Improving access to education

In a nation ravaged by conflict for over two decades, it is not uncommon to find many adults and children in Afghanistan who missed out on the opportunity to go to school and who therefore do not have the basic skill of functional literacy. Fortunately, the international community is increasingly recognizing that children and youth in emergency and early reconstruction situations have the right to education.

A community-based approach

Improving access and equity for marginalized groups is one of CRS' strategic priorities in education. The agency has made this a priority in Afghanistan since 2002 by supporting an Accelerated Learning program for rural children and youth who had previously missed out on schooling. Today, CRS supports community-based education in villages such as Shah Mohammad's as part of the Partnership for Advancing Community Education in Afghanistan (PACE-A). PACE-A is a USAID-



The first day of the opening of a new school outside Herat, where CRS has been working with local partners to strengthen access to schools and quality education. Agustinus Wibowo/CRS

funded project that CRS implements in collaboration with the Aga Khan Foundation, CARE and the International Rescue Committee.

The program is meeting the educational needs of over 57,000 children (70% of them female) in over 1,000 villages. It is designed to establish classes in rural villages where there is no formal school. This is most important for young children and girls who often cannot walk long distances to attend school because of security concerns and the need to work at home. Establishing a community-based school allows children to be educated in a safe environment, from a teacher known by the community, and with a flexible schedule that does not interfere with other household responsibilities.

The way the model works is simple. CRS meets with the community to see if they would be interested in supporting a school. The community is then responsible for finding a space for the classes and identifying a teacher within the village who has a sufficient level of education. Particular attention is paid to identifying female teachers and encouraging



The bulk of the CRS-supported schools in the Du Layna region of Afghanistan are for girls, who traditionally do not walk long distances outside their villages to reach government-run schools. Laura Sheehen/CRS



A student at one of the 64 schools established by CRS in Du Layna. The community provides a tent or room, while CRS pays for books, chalkboards, bookbags, teacher training and more. Laura Sheahen/CRS

the community to send their girls to school, as girls are still marginalized in many parts of Afghanistan.

Attention is also paid to the quality of teaching and community ownership. Teachers receive training in child-friendly and multi-grade teaching methodologies, subject upgrading, and methods for working with the community. School Management Committees (SMCs) are trained in how to carry out their responsibilities to better support the teacher and the school. PACE-A also works closely with the Ministry of Education to ensure community-based schools and teachers are fully integrated into the Ministry's planning.

The Story of Shah Mohammed

Shah Mohammad is one of the elders of Takht Roi village in Afghanistan. Last year, when his wife became ill, he had to take her to Herat City to find a doctor. When they arrived in the city, he and his wife waited in an empty building all day, mistaking it for a doctor's office. Finally, Mohammad asked someone about the doctor's arrival. He was surprised and disappointed when the man replied, "This is not the doctor's office. The doctor's office is over there. Can't you read the sign?" In that moment, Shah Mohammad wished he were literate and vowed that his daughters would go to school so that they could read. With the help of CRS, his daughters were able to enroll in the second grade class in his village, and have since learned to read and write. The next time he went to visit a doctor in Herat City, he took one of his daughters with him to read the signs on the buildings. It is this significant change in his family's life that gives Mohammad the confidence to say, "Literate people are like fruitful trees that always yield. Everyone benefits from their fruits."

Looking Ahead

Ongoing learning is an integral part of all that CRS does. To make sure that we continue to learn from our work and improve it, CRS is working with Professor Dana Burde of New York University to study the impact of community-based education in rural areas. Once completed, this research will provide important insights into the effectiveness of a community-based approach in areas affected by conflict, such as Afghanistan.