

Peace and stability through cultural dialogue and psychosocial support in Afghanistan

A contribution to peace and
reconciliation funded by the
German Foreign Office and
implemented by Ipsos



Federal Republic of Germany
Foreign Office

ipso

International psychosocial organisation

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EDITORIAL

Ipso has been a close partner of the German Federal Foreign Office for many years. Its overall mission can be described as peace-building and reconciliation through psychosocial counselling services, thereby providing a wide range of measures against despair and violence in a post-crisis environment. It promotes social responsibility through cultural activities and education at the community level, thereby encouraging cultural reflection and expression. It also uses cultural activities to initiate dialogue between different social and ethnic groups. Ipso has far-reaching effects not only on individual Afghans with a high quota of women, but also on their families and indeed entire communities.

The Federal Foreign Office started supporting Ipso's services within the Afghan health system in 2011 with a variety of programmes. In Ipso's cultural containers in eight provinces (Kabul, Balkh, Herat, Bamyan, Badakhshan, Nangahar, Laghman, and Jawzjan) workstations have been set up enabling people from all walks of life to actively seek counselling in a private environment and to participate in human-to-human dialogue. In 2015, the focus of the cultural container programme was on cultural dialogues with the topics "Intergenerational Dialogue", "Education", "Trust", "Here and There" and "Hope". The current programme 2017/18 focuses on social dialogue regarding human rights, gender equality, domestic and communal violence and conflict resolution. In keeping with Afghanistan's reputation as a media-friendly place, Ipso has also created an app making it easy to directly link to a counsellor via smartphone.

This tremendous success story reverberates not just throughout Afghanistan but potentially also in other post-crisis environments. The Federal Foreign Office is proud to be Ipso's sponsor and encourages you to spread the word about its worthy cause. It is a prime example of Afghanistan and Germany cooperating to make Afghanistan a better place in a challenging environment. **Friedrich Schröder, Head of Afghanistan Reconstruction and Development Federal Foreign Office, Berlin**



THE CONCEPT OF OUR CULTURAL CONTAINER PROJECT

WHEN STARTING THE CULTURAL CONTAINER PROJECT IN 2013 IN AFGHANISTAN, WE NEVER EXPECTED THE CONTAINERS TO BECOME SUCH AN IMPORTANT PLACE FOR PEOPLE TO MEET.

Young people, older people, people with different backgrounds and from different ethnicities, they all came to our containers to express themselves and to explore their culture and art. They came together and got to know other people they would not have met otherwise, engaged with them in discussions and talked about topics which they could not have discussed otherwise. The containers served as hubs for exchange, they provided a safe space for people of all walks of life to express themselves and to listen to each other expressing different opinions. To further support this exchange between individuals, we introduced cultural dialogues to address current topics relevant to Afghans. The aim of the moderated dialogues was to raise awareness of changing social values in Afghan society and to address values connected to traditional values, which for many younger people in Afghanistan were not easily acceptable anymore and caused hardship. The cultural dialogues helped people to identify their own values, encouraging them to address such topics within their

families and their communities. The dialogues were moderated by our Cultural Field Workers of the teams in the provinces of Balkh, Jawzan, Bamyan, Nangahar, Laghman, Kabul and Herat.

For the project period between 2015 and 2016 we had selected five topics. We started with „Education“ and „Intergenerational Dialogue“, followed by „Trust“ and „Hope“. Finally, to react to the refugee crisis, we focused on the topic „Here and There“, exploring visions of home and imaginary places of longing. These topics were relevant because they represented basic values in Afghan culture at stake at that moment. We had some encouraging results. For instance elders who would never have admitted younger people to speak up in their presence before became interested in the ideas of these youngsters and were eager to learn more about the challenges they faced. In another case a father realized that he was being inconsistent when promoting the need for education while not allowing his daughter to visit a school. All people enjoyed the topic of „Hope“.

Some young boys dreamed of having a space in their neighborhood to play soccer. There was one place full of garbage. Our team started an initiative in the neighborhood to clean up the place and to create a soccer field. The topic of „Hope“ inspired us to develop an online exhibition and to reach out to artists in other countries confronted with similar stressful and insecure living conditions. We initiated an online exhibition with artists from Syria, Irak, Yemen, Palestine and Afghanistan. They all contributed with pictures connected to the topic of „Hope“, which we later on showed in the containers using a projector. We then asked participants to ask themselves: Whom can I trust? This question brought astonishing results. People participating in the dialogues found that they trusted actually more people than they thought they did. As many people left Afghanistan at the time, we explored visions of home to explore the topic „Here and There“. Visions of home were translated into images and visualized in paintings. Other participants were searching for

images in the public sphere triggering imaginations of a better and easier life somewhere else. Those images were photographed and used as a starting point for further dialogue. In Balkh, people who had returned to Afghanistan from other countries exchanged their experiences with those who wanted to leave. Those willing to leave found out that their ideas of what awaited them in foreign countries were unrealistic. These cultural dialogues were imbedded in cultural activities such as storytelling, poetry, theater, music, painting and calligraphy and culminated in events such as exhibitions or bigger rounds of public cultural dialogues.

The response of the communities in the provinces in some cases was overwhelming. For us it was wonderful to observe how meaningful these discussions had been to the people who had participated including their families, and how much they liked to be involved in the activities and events organized by the container project. They felt empowered. People understood that they

themselves held the key to building trust, to make hopes come true, to overcome the generation gap, to put emphasis on education for girls and to reconsider hastily made decisions to leave the country.

We also reached out to districts and villages that were close to the containers. Our Cultural Field Workers made field trips and held cultural dialogues in these villages. Volunteers supported them. The people they reached out to appreciated the opportunity and encouraged them to return. The containers include a small separate space which is used for counseling sessions with our professional Psychosocial Counselors in our psychosocial and mental health center in Kabul. Each container is equipped with an internet point which allows people who need to speak confidentially with a Counselor to use our online counseling service www.ipso-ecare.com. This service is used every day by many people. With our project we wanted to strengthen the social and cultural identity of Afghans living close to the cultural containers. We wanted to establish

a culture of dialogue amongst these people so they could exchange ideas, explore their own cultural expressions, connect with traditional values and adapt to social and cultural changes in their society from which they cannot escape. Tami Ansary writes in his book „Games without Rules“ (NY, 2012) about the parallel existence of different worlds in today's Afghanistan: He describes them as the 21st century overlapping the 14th century. This image symbolizes the rapid change people in Afghanistan have to cope with. As a result, we look back on a period of two years that was both interesting and meaningful. Judged by the impact and the feedback from the people who participated, we can say that this project increased awareness of cultural issues and encouraged and supported people to find their place in their own society and enabled them to better cope with rapid changes. We all thank the German Foreign Office and the German Embassy for their wonderful support and their trust, and the Afghan authorities for their cooperation. Inge Missmahl and the project team

REACHING OUT TO PEOPLE IN EIGHT PROVINCES OF AFGHANISTAN

TOTAL NUMBERS FOR

Individuals reached through activities
(visitors, workshops, events, exhibitions, field work)
Individuals attending sociocultural dialogues

	2015	2016
Individuals reached through activities (visitors, workshops, events, exhibitions, field work)	18069	85299
Individuals attending sociocultural dialogues	3599	2444

BALKH	2015	2016
CC Activities	4867	6853
Cultural Dialogues	526	831

JAWZJAN	2015	2016
CC Activities	4350	20471
Cultural Dialogues	0	333

BADAKHSHAN	2015	2016
CC Activities	1497	8125
Cultural Dialogues	511	234



LAGHMAN	2015	2016
CC Activities	437	6047
Cultural Dialogues	0	450



NANGARHAR	2015	2016
CC Activities	2520	11674
Cultural Dialogues	866	157

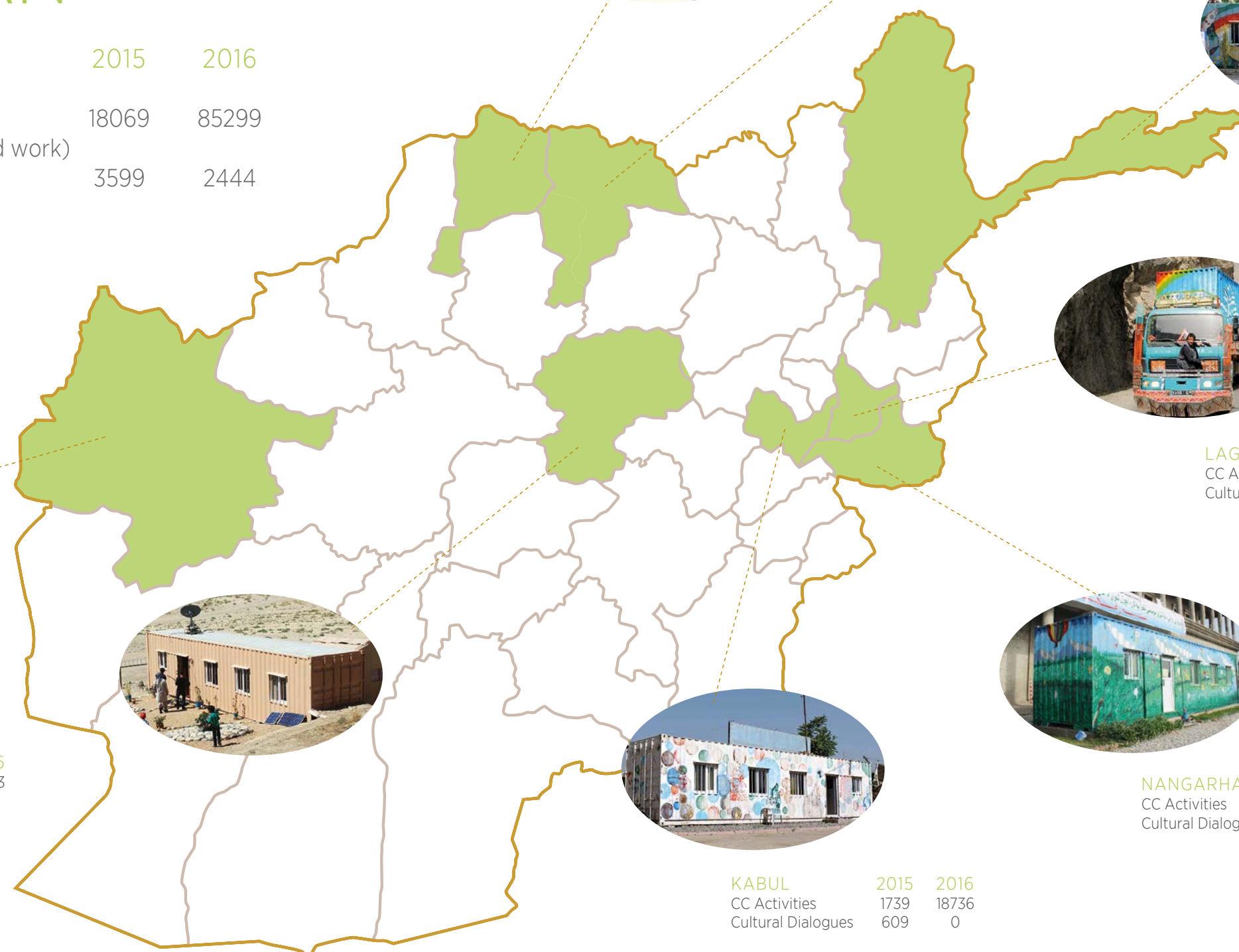
KABUL	2015	2016
CC Activities	1739	18736
Cultural Dialogues	609	0



BAMYAN	2015	2016
CC Activities	2620	13393
Cultural Dialogues	819	439



HERAT	2015
CC Activities	39
Cultural Dialogues	268





OUR CONTAINERS – MY CHALLENGE AND JOY

I was wondering how it could be possible to have an impact on the Afghan population, having a greater need for food, through cultural activities. All my doubts disappeared when I noticed the impact on the communities around our cultural containers. Talking to people taught me that an understanding between the individuals and respect for each other was fostered through the opportunity to express themselves. These observations filled me with motivation to engage myself and to work with full passion and energy for this project.

When we introduced the activities of the containers to the local authorities, they could not believe that it would be possible to work out of such a container. They had the experience that organizations active in the field of culture were not able to reach the common people.

Not a miracle, as a luxury office won't allow common people to discuss sensitive issues, express themselves, reflecting own traditions and customs, feelings, hopes and fears. But in the container they could! Ipso's containers were offering a stage to common people and a huge interest grew in the surrounding communities, institutions and culture departments in the provinces. But not only people of the direct environment were excited, as in 2015, when we had the opportunity to set up a new container, many calls from different provinces reached us with the wish to place the container in their province.

I remember when I was in Jawzjan for the opening ceremony of the container: The Director of the Department of Culture and Information together with other governmental officials approached me and said: "It's a normal

practice of NGOs prepare lunch or dinner, when they invite official people for a gathering. But believe us, your program has not left a minute to think about lunch - it was wonderful." He had realized that our program was different. We nourished the soul and were not feeding the body.

Most of the NGOs were thinking that culture could be presented through remembering and celebrating a day of a poet, a writer or a practice which is named in the calendar. In our containers we showed that culture can be alive, physically, through people engaging in cultural dialogues, through cultural expressions and artistic activities. The concept and methodology of the cultural dialogues with specific topics made people aware of their cultural diversity and richness of local culture and customs. "Education", "Trust", "The

gap between generations", "Hope" and "Here and There" were the topics of the last two years. They all promoted to respect differences and search similarities for our societies' common good. I remember when I was in Balkh when the topic of "Intergenerational Dialogue" was discussed and a young woman expressed that previously she was thinking that her parents were only talking about values which were not important to her anymore. "But now", she said, "through this cultural dialogue, I understood that useful things never expire, they even may work for generation after generation!"

One day a young man came to our office in Kabul and introduced himself as Naworoz Shah Hamrazm from Shighnan district of Badakhshan province. He was the head of the Pamir Youths Social Association. Shighnan district is located

150 km away from Faizabad city which is the center of Badakhshan province, where our cultural container is located. The region he came from is isolated as there are no proper streets in the mountains. People are engaged in embroidery, livestock and agriculture, they are poor and even do not have access to education, medication and other services. In spite of these difficulties this young man had asked us to open a cultural container in this district or at least to send our team regularly for field visits. He said: "I believe that if we identify with the cultural and social values, we will become able to be strong and bear everything that comes."

One day we have send a young journalist to visit our container in Nangahar. He was afraid to go to a Pashtoon province. At that time the ethnicity mattered, therefore he himself being Hazara was

not feeling too comfortable to travel to Nangarhar. When he was invited to our office in Kabul for the feedback session, he said: "During my whole life my father and other elders used to say to not sit with Pashtuns as they are dangerous people. So being the son of my father, I was following this recommendation. But when I visited Nangarhar and saw the people there, I found them friendly and honest, reaching out to me with hospitality. In the container I met various people, rich and poor, educated and uneducated with high positions and without any position. I was amazed, very happy and started to think that a peaceful living together in Afghanistan could be possible.

Samiullah Totakhil, Project Coordinator



STATEMENTS FROM OUR CULTURAL DIALOGUES – HOPE

BADAKHSHAN

Many young people in Afghanistan suffer from hopelessness. The cultural dialogues helped them to overcome challenges and reach their goals by expressing their hopes for their own personal life and by translating these hopes in achievable objectives.

One of the participants said: “My family had been suffering from hopelessness and they all think negative and don’t see the goodness that surrounds us. But after having taken part in the cultural dialogues, we all started to change, day by day. We were inspired to work against this feeling of hopelessness.”



KABUL

Young people and teenagers were our target group, as they are hopeless about their future and life and being hopeful wasn’t more than a story to them.

The result of the talks were astonishing! Sitara, 16 years old, had to walk a long distance from her home to the container and said: “I never loved going anywhere more than to the cultural container. I found good friends here, who showed me my ability and skill, which made me hopeful for my future. I learned to know more about my life and myself. One of my wishes was always being an artist. I come here and laugh out loud without any fear, I learn to share and express my emotions through painting, words and with my friends. I hoped to be in such a place, now I am and my dream came true.”

LAGHMAN

In Laghman we first asked ourselves: What is the value of hope? Then we asked the people: What is your hope? And then: How can we encourage others to be hopeful?

In the beginning most of the participants could not express their hopes. But then, slowly, they dared to talk. They had thought that they have no right to be hopeful in these times. After a while they said: “It is a great chance for us to become hopeful again.”



BALKH

They were hopeless and disappointed because of the current situation in Afghanistan. We showed documentary films about people who regained hope after accidents or catastrophes, we motivated people to paint their hopes, gave them a face through poetry and songs. Then we showed these works in an exhibition which reached many people, all day long people were talking of how to restore hope again. So the topic of hope had a very positive effect on the people and the society. They started a re-thinking and changed the way of perspective and became hopeful – first not for Afghanistan, but for their children, their work, their family, then for their communities, and slowly they thought that the future of Afghanistan is not hopeless and it is the input of each single person which changes the future of their country.

NANGARHAR

We reached out to different people, educated, illiterate, artists, farmers, people of different religions (Muslims, Hindus), different professions, Islamic Scholars, students and teachers of schools and of universities. We were sitting together; every one shared their experience according to their life and they exchanged their ideas according to the problems of the country. Most people were hopeless. But we could observe how people started to become active again, because they understood that they could do something to make their hopes become reality. Most of the participants were telling us their life stories and we searched in these stories for the positive moments, those moments in which these people had been able to influence their situation! These gave them hope and the willingness to act hopeful.



BAMYAN

Our goal was to motivate young people in schools and universities to think about their hopes and their future plans. We encouraged them with storytelling, poetry, video clips and theatre and at the end in an intimate sphere we discussed the details of their hopes. It’s clear: most of our participants were hopeless, due to joblessness, poverty, insecurity, educational problems and so on, but we tried to find together solutions for their problems in order to improve their lives – this gave them hope. Talking and reflecting on hope opened a new door and pushed people to think about what they want for their future. For instance Mr. Abdullah, one of Bamyan’s artists who is creating wooden sculptures, thought that being an artist is useless because there is no market for art work. Therefore, he decided to leave his artistic world. After several cultural dialogues, he wanted to be an artist again! He improved his methods and skills and today he runs an art center in Bamyan and trains students.

JAWZJAN

In our Jawzjan cultural container we discussed this topic with people from different classes, with teenagers, young adults and the elders, always in one group! The young people were able to learn from the older and the older learned from the younger how to meet lives’ challenges without giving up hope.

TRUST



BAMYAN TEAM

Old, young, women and men participated in the cultural dialogues and talked about their own experiences: We do not trust on each other because we do not know each other, we did not talk enough with each other, we are afraid of each other. But when we talked about our country, our feelings, our challenges, we started to trust each other. When we feel the values, and learn about the ideas of other people, we start to respect their opinions because we can feel the person behind. We cannot build trust in a short time, but we can break trust in one moment.

BADAKHSHAN TEAM

The topic "Trust" caused people to think about the time when they were able to live in an atmosphere of intimacy, trust and honesty, which in today's society is fading away day by day. So storytelling and cultural expression through artistic activities caused great changes in the mindset of the people and families who had participated in our programs. And it spread to the communities through events and exhibition starting a dialogue among people.

BALKH TEAM

People of all kind and age gathered and sat with each other sharing stories about trust with a special love as they seemed to realize how precious trust is. For the younger generation especially the trust between boys and girls was very important.

KABUL TEAM

Trust was a word that to young people seemed to be forgotten, whereas elders had saved it in their minds as a memory. The team in Kabul addressed this topic through cultural dialogues, theater performances, symbolic activities, painting, poetry, storytelling, and educational films. People participating in our activity noticed that if we trust each other our individual, family and social life takes a different face and color. Elders believed that the main reason of war and insecurity today is due to distrust.

JAWZJAN TEAM

Discussing trust increased the participants' ability to trust each other and to work on trusting each other in their families and communities.

AND EDUCATION



BAMYAN TEAM

We facilitated many cultural dialogues with the people in Bamyan. Together we discussed questions such as: Why do we need educated young people? Is it possible to improve our society without educated people? These questions caused that people started to think deeply and make true decisions for their lives.

BADAKHSHAN TEAM

It was important to conduct cultural dialogues, storytelling and to perform theater in the most remote villages of Badakhshan which were less aware of education as it provoked people to think about why they forbid their children to go to school. Through the dialogues they realized the importance of education and many families started to send their children to education centers and schools.

Inviting literate and illiterate families to the CCs and encouraging them to tell their life stories helped the families to realize the importance of education.

INTERGENERATIONAL DIALOGUE

BALKH TEAM

At first, accepting each other’s beliefs and traditions seemed to be difficult for the participants who came to discuss this topic. But over the time, they started to respect each other’s opinion and understood why they were thinking as they were. Especially the younger generation realized how far their parents had been away from opportunities they have access to.



NANGARHAR TEAM

In Nangahar the separation between the elders and the young generation is strict. The elders did not share any of their experiences with the young people. And the young people had demands on the elders which they refused. With cultural dialogues, individual meetings, theater programs and Islamic scholar lectures we motivated both groups to talk to each other. We motivated the elders to share their good and bad experiences in life with the young people, which have the potential to become a bridge to the future.

KABUL TEAM

In our container young people and elders were talking about their opposite opinions for the first time. They were referring to their memories, and life adventures. The young ones were asking themselves: Why don’t we tolerate the opinion of our elders? And the Elders asked themselves: Why do we treat the young people so strictly and do not listen to their opinion? It was wonderful to observe, while talking to each other in the container, how they could create a peaceful relationship and start to understand each other.

Tolerating opinions and creating a sense of empathy between the generations was the main purpose of the cultural dialogues in the Kabul container. We also observed that discussing this topic brought positive changes in the behavior and the opinions.



HERE AND THERE



BADAKHSHAN

The younger generation of Afghanistan that intends to leave the country seriously needed the topic Hope! They are searching happiness and luck elsewhere although experience has proven that the real luck and happiness is “here”. The people focus on the negative aspects of life. But the cultural dialogues caused them to focus on the positive happenings and to pay attention to the goodness that surrounds them.

During our cultural dialogues regarding “Here and There”, participants who had returned to Afghanistan shared their experiences. They talked about the challenges and difficulties they were facing during their journey and in the host country. This had a huge effect on the younger people who also joined the dialogues and intended to leave for a better future.

One of the participants said: “I lived in Pakistan for a while and had a very comfortable place, my daily income was higher than here and all kind of facilities for life were provided - but I was not happy there! In the depth of my heart and soul, I missed the love of my family, of close friends and my social position. I was always called a refugee and treated in this way. Finally I decided to come back to Afghanistan. When I crossed the border, I had a strange feeling as if I would be in heaven. I will never forget that moment and feeling.” When the participants expressed their feelings and memories regarding their motherland, the goodness of their home country, the richness of their culture and the memories of their migration experiences, the participants felt much better being here.

BALKH

The beauty, the values, and the positive and negative circumstances in our home country were discussed during our dialogues. Often for the first time, the participants talked about the meaning of homeland and home to them. They mentioned the value of being together, the value of traditional life, and the value of the most beautiful places burnt into their memories. Hamid, a resident of Mazar-e-Sharif, was convinced of his thought to leave Afghanistan for a better future. But after he had participated in one of our cultural dialogues, he had changed his mind. He said that he was filled with negativity and had not been able to see the beauty of his country and what he would lose if leaving Afghanistan.

BAMYAN

We approached the topic by asking the participants: “What feelings occur, when thinking about our home? What are the beauties of your village? Why are some people leaving the country?” The reasons why people often leave their home country are insecurity, poverty, lack of job opportunities and the hope for a luxury life. But no one seems to be really satisfied with the thought of leaving the country. They cannot find their place of comfort and happiness in foreign countries.

KABUL

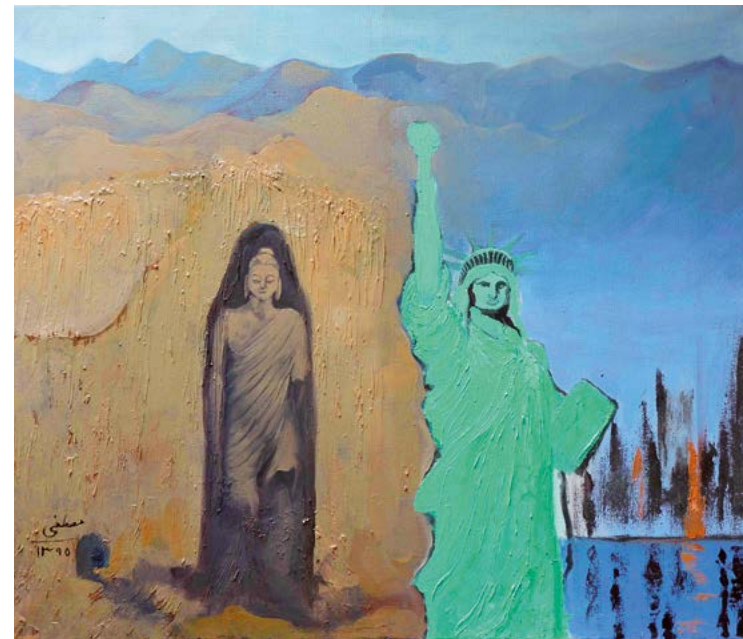
The people who took their families to foreign countries and who had returned shared their inner experiences and reflections during the cultural dialogues and described how they had realized in the time being away that they had ignored the beauty and goodness of their country, while seeking happiness in a land of strangers. A 26 year old man who wished to live in one of the foreign countries said during a dialogue taking place in one of the parks of Kabul: “My Mother did not want me to leave my homeland, but I did anyways. When I faced all the challenges in Turkey I decided to return to my country and made a commitment to myself to never leave my home again.”

NANGARHAR

By participating in these dialogues we learned about the good and bad things in our culture and realized the importance of living in our home country. People shared the real experiences of living in other countries and that had a huge impact on others.

LAGHMAN

We spread this topic in Laghman through cultural dialogues, exhibitions and poetry programs. The majority of people said that they like their home and like to be with their friends, relatives and family. However the lack of jobs and security, and the poverty sometimes force them to run away. As a team, we are convinced the topic was important and had huge effect on the community: Many of the youngsters want to leave the country. In our cultural dialogues, everyone shared their personal experience and the real stories of leaving. Many of the participants named serious problems in Afghanistan which made them willing to leave the county. But when they understood that running away is not a solution for their problem, they slowly changed their mind.



OUR PROJECT TEAM



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Ipsos gemeinnützige Gesellschaft mbH

International Psychosocial Organisation

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Purpose:

Ipsos is specialized in the field of mental health and psychosocial care, in developing locally adapted concepts, delivering trainings for psychosocial counsellors, medical doctors, nurses and community health workers for treating mental health-related problems including depression, anxiety and posttraumatic stress following war, insecurity and challenging living conditions.

Furthermore, it aims at strengthening the cultural identity of war-torn societies through cultural programmes, which is a precondition for peace and reconciliation, and the rebuilding of civil society in the aftermath of a civil war and natural catastrophes.

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