

Psychosocial Counseling and Mental Health Center Kabul

A contribution to combating the causes of flight and the stabilization and integration of the returnees and their families funded by the German Foreign Office and implemented by Ipsos



Federal Republic of Germany
Foreign Office

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International psychosocial organisation

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EDITORIAL

Ipso is a longstanding and close partner of the German Federal Foreign Office in Afghanistan. What it does is peace-building and reconciliation in its purest and most effective form: through its counselling services, Ipso provides valuable measures against despair, social isolation and violence in a post-crisis environment. By doing so, it affects not only individual Afghans, but also families and indeed entire communities.

The Federal Foreign Office started supporting Ipso's services within the Afghan health system in 2011. It still provides an online counselling platform run from within its cultural container programme. The programme reaches out to people who – for various reasons – cannot attend public health centres. This online platform was so successful that establishing a day clinic in Kabul became feasible last year.

Ipso's Psychosocial and Mental Health Clinic in Kabul opened its doors in May 2016. The entire Afghan public – including returnees from Europe, Pakistan and Iran – are able to make use of the private counselling sessions offered on its premises. Counsellors are trained to the highest standards of the profession and are superbly motivated. They are closely connected to the Afghan Health Service.

In 2016 alone, a total of 4500 clients were treated in individual talks. Many more have made use of its other services – such as ergo therapy/art therapy. Additionally, the clinic conducts group meetings in refugee camps. All in all, 2000 Afghans registered with ipso e-care. Ipso has also created an app making it easy to directly link to a counsellor on a smartphone.

The Federal Foreign Office is proud to be Ipso's sponsor and highly appreciates the great efforts of Ipso's dedicated German and Afghan staff members to support Afghanistan in its difficult transition from conflict to peace. **Friedrich Schröder, Head of Afghanistan Reconstruction and Development Federal Foreign Office, Berlin**

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THE CONCEPT BEHIND OUR PSYCHOSOCIAL COUNSELING AND MENTAL HEALTH CENTER IN KABUL

IN THE FALL OF 2015, MANY YOUNG AFGHANS STARTED TO LEAVE THEIR COUNTRY BECAUSE THEY FELT THAT IT HELD NO FUTURE IN STORE FOR THEM AND THAT THERE WAS NOTHING THEY WOULD BE ABLE TO DO ABOUT IT IF THEY STAYED.

The deteriorating security situation played a role, not being able to get the education many wanted, and a lack of job opportunities. At Ipso we could see however that there was more to it: many young people across the provinces were caught in personal and interpersonal conflicts due to a rapid change of social values in their country. Some traditional family values were at odds with personal values held by a young generation influenced by western society through internet and social media. The feeling of not being able to fulfill the obligations of the social role expected by their families motivated many young people to leave the country.

These young people needed to regain the feeling of being able to influence

their lives; to learn the skills necessary to solve conflicts; to be able to renegotiate their values with those of their families and thus live in harmony with them. This was one of the main reasons why we started our psychosocial counseling and mental health centre in Kabul. Other age groups however also clearly needed support, and as a result, our center offers services to the entire adolescent and adult population, to boys and girls, men and women, students, parents and grandparents alike, independent of their social standing or ethnicity. They have the chance to discuss their problems with counselors who provide unconditional positive regard, empathetic understanding and authentic interest in empowering their clients

so that they regain their ability to lead self-determined and meaningful lives. Based on our experience from the last 12 years of training counselors for the public health system, backed by our highly trained counselors, supervisors and a motivated team, and with the support of the German Foreign Office we opened our psychosocial counseling and mental health center in Kabul in May 2016. Today, each week 26 counselors, two psychiatrists, one medical doctor, and six occupational therapists provide services to 400-500 people visiting our center. Our counseling approach is based on the insight that diagnostic classifications and psychiatric or even psychotherapeutic methods of treatment developed in the western world are not easily applied to

Afghan society and culture. When we realized this in 2004 and saw instead how people in seemingly hopeless situations and with psychological symptoms were able to function again with the help of well-structured conversations and a variety of psychological and psychosocial interventions, we developed a cultural and socially adapted psychosocial counseling approach that has since been continuously evaluated and improved. In 2008 the Afghan Ministry of Health recognized the need to introduce psychosocial services to the population and acknowledged the effectiveness of our counseling approach. We supported the Ministry of Health to integrate and provide psychosocial care in the Afghan

public health system with funding from the European Union and the German Foreign Office. Public health care clinics however are overcrowded and usually have just one counselor, male or female, which means that the opposite sex is cut off from the service of that health clinic because it is culturally inappropriate for a man to counsel a woman or for a woman to counsel a man. In addition to this, many people live too far away from public health facilities to be able to use them. Instead, young people share their problems through Facebook. We wanted to reach these young people and developed an online counseling platform which gives Afghans nationwide access to psychosocial counseling services.

They can log in across Afghanistan for a video conversation with a counselor based in our center in Kabul. Experience has shown that especially young people feel comfortable with online counseling. As a low-threshold approach, it helps to break isolation and to overcome the shame and stigmatization that tends to be attached to psycho-social and mental health support. In some cases, clients having travelled far to meet a counselor face to face continue online later on. At the core of our “value based counseling approach”, is the belief that human beings are at all times capable of positive action, of regaining influence over their lives, of finding meaning and joy. Our counselors do not make a diagnosis but rather work together with our





clients to understand the meaning of the symptoms, factoring in the personal and cultural context of the clients' lives. This understanding of and empathy towards a client's present situation already provides great relief for him/her, thus opening up the space to develop ideas regarding next steps and how to restore everyday functioning in a meaningful way.

This reconnection to oneself with the help of the counselor is the first step towards overcoming constant feelings of powerlessness. The counselor only guides the client towards seeing the situation from a new perspective. The counselor studies the situation with the client and understands the inner dynamic of the client based on the client's own value system.

Providing that space forms part of a structured approach aimed at empowering and supporting clients to find their own solutions to problems that have taken over their lives. In this process the counselor and the client will aim to gain the same understanding of how the client feels, together they explore the psychosocial stressors to understand how "this situation" has developed, understand the role of the people involved and the predominant feeling/emotion the client is experiencing.

A counselor helps a client to differentiate between aspects of a situation which he or she can change and those that cannot be changed, and to focus on a major aspect the client can work on. Based on this understanding and

guided by meaningful questions posed by the counselor, the client is empowered to identify personal solutions which are meaningful to him or her, as well as manageable. Often, a part of this process includes psychosocial interventions, which are based on acknowledged psychological concepts. For instance, when people inflict self-harm or suffer from symptoms of post-traumatic stress, counselors are able to apply interventions which have proved effective.

To be able to regain meaning in his or her own life, it is essential for a client to be aware of his or her personal values, and to relate to them. Throughout the process, it is the client and not the counselor who is the expert on the client's life.

Dealing with a client at eye level is essential in a society as hierarchical as in Afghanistan. It is also a very demanding task for a counselor, who needs to be skilled and well-supported by his or her supervisor. At Ipso, we are proud to have found and trained highly motivated individuals for this task, and to be able to provide them with a supportive work environment.

From 2014 to 2015 counselors working for the public health system counseled more than 110,000 clients. In most cases an average of three sessions relieved symptoms that had driven clients to seek counselling. Towards the end of 2016 more and more Afghan refugees returned to their home country from Europe, causing us to focus on their

issues. Feeling isolated and ashamed of not having been able to fulfil the expectations of their families are common problems among them. Our center provides support which enables such clients to solve personal conflicts, to overcome disappointments and difficult – often traumatic – experiences, to mobilize their resources and skills, and to gain a new perspective that allows them to lead a meaningful life in their home country. To achieve this, many also come to our day care program.

Our Center also cares for people who have survived terrorist attacks or lost family. In addition to this, our mobile team reaches out to returnees from Pakistan and Iran, are now living in refugee camps and do not have the financial means to travel to our center. In all of this, we constantly improve our value-based counseling approach, evaluate its impact and develop new guidelines for specific challenges our clients are facing. As NGO workers, it gives our lives meaning that we can empower people to improve their lives and indirectly those of their families. It allows us to contribute to a peaceful Afghanistan building its own future.

We all, our Afghan and German Team and myself thank the German Foreign Office and especially Mr. Potzel, who was the Ambassador at the time, for their trust and active support which allowed us to open the Center in 2016 and to run it successfully since then.

Inge Missmahl

YOU AND ME WILL MAKE OUR PARADISE

HE SAID: "THE WORLD IS ROUND,
MOVES AROUND, AND WHEN YOU
TRY TO LEAVE IT FOR A MOMENT,
IT WILL COME BACK TO YOU."



"Look at me – I was lost, sad and very hopeless, I tried to escape, not to face those painful moments again and again and now after eight years I am back in the same situation."

He sighed, smiled sadly and said:

"No, it is worse than before..."

Now I feel ashamed and I feel as a stranger here. I belong to nowhere and this world, this earth doesn't belong to me.

Nobody knows what I have gone through.

Nobody feels my inner pain!"

He repeatedly whispered: "The earth doesn't belong to us!"

It was very painful, when I was hearing these words from a 38 year old returnee. I could feel his inner pain.

These phrases "Where to go" and "the earth doesn't belong to us" were ringing in my ears.

What a feeling, if you believe you have no place on this earth, ...if you question your humanity, ...if you suddenly feel that you are a stranger in your own motherland, ...if you think returning to your home is shameful.

This experience made me feel that we are meaningful!

We have created a place on this earth that welcomes those who feel that they are belonging nowhere. We accept those who question their humanity.

We do give them the right to express their anger, sorrow, shame and guilt.

We do let them feel their courageous and brave hearts behind their disappointed realities.

We walk with them through their past and have empathy and understand each moment of their lives and help them to reconnect with themselves and their pride.

We relate to them, so they do not to feel as strangers anymore.

And we stay with them till they can say: "Yes I am a human, yes I belong to this earth, and yes I belong to this place.

You and me will make our paradise!" Because of this, one should come to "The Door of Hope", our Psychosocial and Mental Health Center in Kabul.

Dr. Fareshta Quedeas, Manager of Ipso Afghanistan

THE PSYCHOSOCIAL COUNSELING AND MENTAL HEALTH CENTER

Our Center opened in May 2016 and is located in the heart of Kabul city. It is open to the public on 6 days a week. All Afghans who are facing personal problems, are psychologically stressed and are suffering from the high level of daily stress caused by various psychosocial stressors are welcomed and treated with Ipso's value based, holistic, psychosocial treatment approach.

- We offer:
- » Individual psychosocial counseling
 - » Medical check-up and psychiatric treatment
 - » Family mediation
 - » Support groups
 - » Intensive psychosocial and psychiatric care, as well as expressive therapy and occupational therapy in the day care program
 - » Online psychosocial counseling for all people in Afghanistan who do not have a direct access to such services



PSYCHOSOCIAL COUNSELING AND PSYCHIATRIC SERVICES

- » Our psychosocial counselors, psychiatrists and physician provide psychosocial counseling, a medical checkup, a psychiatric examination and treatment to young, old, female and male Afghans.
- » Each new client is carefully discussed by our counselors and doctors in the daily supervision meeting. A treatment plan is developed so that the clients can profit from the different programs offered in our Center as well as coordinate co-operation beyond the specialist areas.
- » Ongoing treatment is observed carefully by our national and international supervisors.
- » In the course of the year 2016 around 4500 clients received individual counseling and our doctors treated around 1220 clients. 55% of the cases treated were female and 45% male. A large proportion of people who have sought help at our center suffered from their family situation, family violence, poverty and unemployment. Young Afghans often report the enormous expectation of the family, which puts a lot of pressure on them and is often paired with intergenerational conflicts.



OUR PSYCHOSOCIAL COUNSELING AND MENTAL HEALTH CENTER IN KABUL

DAY CARE PROGRAM

- » The day care program provides five days a week occupational and expressive therapy and life-skill training besides counseling and psychiatric treatment.
- » The people who are admitted to the day care clinic are mostly overwhelmed by their everyday life and suffer from a variety of symptoms and stressors that require comprehensive treatment and care. Their complex emotional situation and high level of stress in everyday life puts them in a state of hopelessness often combined with anxiety and fear. They feel powerless and helpless. The structured, individually coordinated treatment program helps them to reconnect with their resources. They feel seen and understood and can develop new strategies to influence their life and better cope with the psychosocial stressors. The therapy on the one hand and the daily requirement to be active strengthen self-esteem and enable the clients to focus on their situation and to engage with people who suffer from a similar situation. For most of our clients this is the first time in life having the space and time to develop on a personal level and to be cared for and to receive empathetic understanding as well as empowerment. Life-skill trainings then enable to better communicate, to understand own feelings, to manage emotions and to deal with smaller conflicts and to use these skills in a constructive and healthy way in their life. About 450 individuals were treated in the day care clinic in 2016.

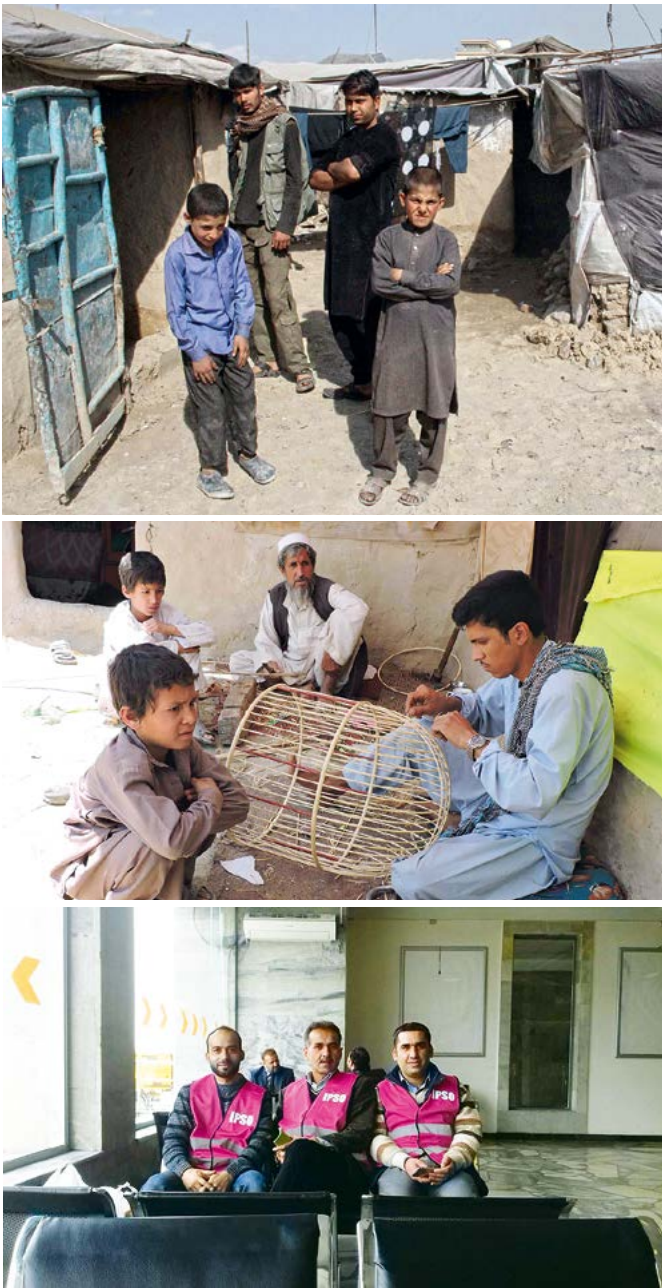
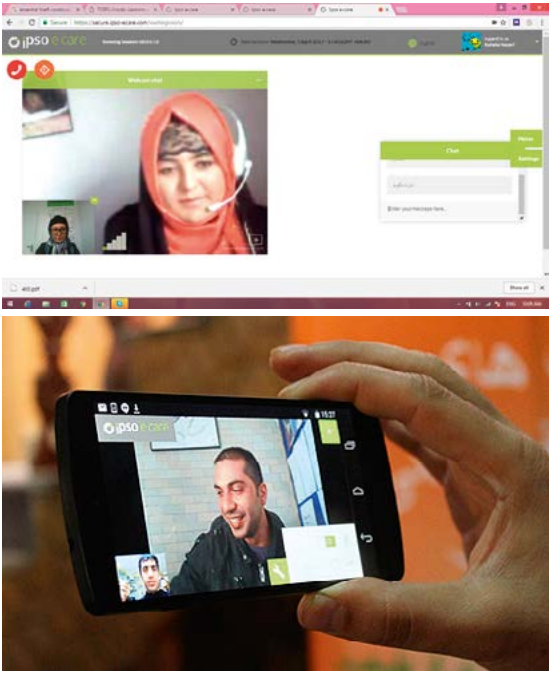


AWARENESS RAISING ACTIVITIES
IN KABUL

- » Our “Awareness-raising” teams are regularly visiting schools, universities, educational institutions, hospitals, camps and relevant ministries and organizations to inform about the effects of psychosocial stress in personal and family life and about the availability of our services.
- » In addition, our Counselors are regularly at the airport in Kabul to welcome the returnees from Germany and to offer them open groups and personal talks.
- » Through this work a total of 16,000 people could be reached in 2016. Many of the people we spoke to, attended our center in Kabul to receive individual support.

ONLINE COUNSELING

- » Through the online counseling service a wider public of Afghanistan which does not visit public clinics and our Center in Kabul or who do not have access to such services can be approached. Furthermore, clients of the Center can be followed up, when they are back in their provinces. The online counseling is offered through our platform: www.ipso-care.com.
- » Most Afghans who use online counseling are confronted with extremely sensitive issues that affect taboos or a loss of honor. It seems that the anonymity of online counseling gives people greater security to tackle such difficult issues as they feel confident in the virtual space with the counselor and have the opportunity to end the conversation at any time.



PROVIDING SERVICES TO
RETURNEES

- » Returnees from Europe, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan are often unable to come to the center as they are living in refugee camps and emergency accommodations that do not have transportation facilities. In order to provide this group access to our services, our counselors regularly visit refugee camps in the region and the emergency shelters of MORR and IOM in Kabul.
- » The aim of counseling sessions with returnees above all, is to enable them to develop a new perspective in Afghanistan and to integrate difficult life experiences into their life. Life skills, the mediation of an understanding of one's own situation, the activation of resources and elaboration of how to approach their future are then the next steps. Many people had left Afghanistan for specific reasons such as family conflicts or political threats and insecurity. Often they face the same situation when coming back. Then our family mediation, life skill training and different programs have proven to be very useful. Many felt that they were strangers in their own country. Frequently mentioned problems of the returnees from Europe are feelings of shame, guilt, isolation and lack of perspective, since they have the feeling that they have not lived up to the expectations of the family. Now back in Afghanistan, this group finds it very difficult to re-integrate itself into the social structure and overcome this shame and to find new meaning in life. In the groups and through the counseling they can reconnect to themselves and discuss their personal social and cultural identity, as many had been confronted with new and other values and life situations. The counseling helps them to assess their situation correctly and strengthen their self-efficacy in order to take their lives in Afghanistan back into their own hands.

THE CASE OF ZEYERAT

AN AFGHAN RETURNED FROM GERMANY.



Before Zeyarat travelled to Germany, he was a tinsmith in Kabul who had taken over the business from his father. Life was difficult because he had to share a room with his parents, his two sisters and his brother. His father was too frail to work and his brother too young, and so the burden of acting as the head of the family and of earning an income fell to Zeyerat alone.

Zeyerat loved his family. He wanted to provide well for them and make them happy, and he dreamt of a life in which he would have the funds to marry, start a family of his own and enjoy the respect of his extended family and neighbours. Zeyerat's income as a tinsmith however was low, and the harvest from some agricultural land the family owned did not contribute enough to make ends

meet. Having left school after 8th grade meant that his prospects of a better job in Afghanistan were not good.

Zeyerat therefore decided to seek his fortune in Europe, so that he would be able to enjoy a better life and provide well for his family. An uncle encouraged him to go to Germany as a country with a strong economy and a welcoming attitude towards migrants. Zeyerat's family sold their land and the tinsmith's tools to pay a human trafficker, and in 2011 Zeyerat started his journey. The trafficker took him to Pakistan and then to Baluchistan, from where the journey became difficult. More than twenty people had to share the back of a small truck taking them to Iran. It went at such high speed that some fellow travelers fell off. Those who reached the

Turkish border were taken to Istanbul on an 18-hour journey, which they endured hidden under bus seats. Taxis took them to the Mediterranean to travel to Greece on a fishing boat. A storm came up and a Turkish freighter was not able to help them. Finally, a Greek ship found them and threw them fishing nets and ropes so that they could climb on board. The sea however was rough and some people were crushed when the boats bumped into each other. The remaining group travelled to Germany through forests in which they encountered thieves who threatened their lives. Zeyerat reached Germany, but empty-handed.

Life in Germany was entirely different from what he had expected. He was not allowed to work and spent two years waiting for his fate as refugee to be

decided on by the German authorities. Zeyerat became anxious, downcast and lonely, and did not contact his family because he was ashamed of not being able to live up to their and his expectations. When his application was finally rejected, hopelessness engulfed him and he did not know what to do. In the end he decided to go back to Afghanistan.

Going back was difficult because Zeyerat felt he had let down his family, having spent all their money on a trip that had failed. Interacting with the neighbours was difficult, too, because he felt they were judging him. On top of this, Germany had changed him because he had experienced a different way of life, and it was difficult to go back to how things had been.

Zeyerat brooded about this all day and felt very lonely. The counseling he received in Kabul helped Zeyerat to gain a new perspective on his life, to see his own resources and to use them better. In the sessions with the counselor he was able to reconnect to his Afghan values and also discuss what he had learned on his trip and how it had changed his views and perspective. He was able to develop a vision for himself with his family. He decided to open up to his family and to introduce them to some of the things he had learned to appreciate in Germany.

Before his journey, Zeyerat had been against girls going to school and having a say in the choice of their future husbands. Even leaving the house to do the shopping had been too much. Finding

a new way of being useful to his family, Zeyerat started to assist his mother and sisters with their work at home, to protect his mother from his father when he was harsh to her, and to remind them all of the respect for each other that is important for a family in any country. Family relations have improved, and Zeyerat has decided that he does not only want to continue his own education to increase his chances for a better income, but he also believes his sisters should be given the chance for an education. While away from home, he learned Italian cooking and wants to use this skill to open a restaurant together with a cousin who is also a good cook. Most importantly, Zeyerat has regained self-confidence and trusts himself again to shape his own future.

Sarah Ayoughi and Inge Missmahl



OUR TEAM

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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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