Final Report
AFGHAN DISABILITY RIGHTS CONFERENCE:
FROM POLICY TO PROGRAMMING
May 23 and 24, 2017
Washington, DC

Executive Summary

On May 23rd and 24th, the Embassy of Afghanistan was proud to host the “Afghan Disability Rights Conference: From Policy to Programming” in partnership with the U.S. International Council on Disabilities, the U.S.-Afghan Women’s Council, Georgetown University’s Center for Child and Human Development, Counterpart International, and Trivision. The conference was a follow-up to the National Conference for Persons with Disabilities in Afghanistan, held in October 2016 in Kabul.

The conference brought together 150 international and Afghan experts on disability rights and featured several prominent speakers, including Afghanistan’s Deputy Minister for Disability, Jamila Afghani, of the Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs, Martyrs and Disabled; a special video message from Her Excellency First Lady of Afghanistan Rula Ghani, and a keynote address from Judy Heumann, the former senior advisor on international disability rights under President Barack Obama and a longtime leader of the disability rights movement in America. U.S. Senator Tom Harkin (ret) delivered the lunchtime address and was introduced by Tim Shriver, the chairman of the Special Olympics.

The conference included panel discussions that focused on three priority issues: making education inclusive, making public health and vocational training relevant and helpful.
to all; and opening up employment opportunities. Each panel featured expert and experienced figures in the field, and produced lively, productive discussions that included questions from the audience.

Following the panel discussions, panelists, speakers and participants broke out into three roundtable discussions in which they discussed major the challenges within each focus area; participants came up with original ideas and solutions which were later presented to the entire gathering.

Day 2 of the conference involved smaller, knowledge-sharing workshops that featured experienced American experts working with Afghan delegation about the unique challenges faced by persons with disabilities, especially in the education, public health, and employment sector.

**Further information**

Link to photo album from Day 1 & Day 2 of the Afghan Disability Rights Conference: https://www.flickr.com/gp/155475880@N03/fwgGtQ

Link to clip conference coverage from VOA: https://youtu.be/QkKZtz2pJbs

Click here for the agenda from Day 1. Click here for the agenda from Day 2. Click here to see the conference booklet.

Click here for the Afghan Embassy's coverage.

**Day 1**

On May 23, 2017, registration for the conference and breakfast began at 8:30am followed by opening remarks from Mrs. Lael Mohib welcoming the 150 conference participants and those participating via skype call in Afghanistan. Mrs. Mohib thanked all the partners of the conference and said, “we are proud to have so many diverse and committed partners in our efforts”.

Following Mrs. Mohib’s remarks, a film titled “Believe in Me!” and produced by the Rahyab Organization for Services for the Blind was played. All videos played throughout the conference were directed and produced by education panelist, Ms. Benafsha Yacoobi. Ambassador Hamdullah Mohib then gave welcoming remarks and said, “the Afghan government looks forward to engaging our civil society leaders to bring men and women, and boys and girls with disabilities and as contributors to our country’s development”.

Ambassador Mohib also made the following points:

- Recognized President Ashraf Ghani for making the protection and promotion of rights for persons with disabilities a national priority and the 2012 ratification of Convention of Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Afghanistan
• Stated that the Law on the Rights and Benefits of Persons with Disabilities requires that three percent of jobs in the government are reserved for individuals with disabilities, and prohibits discrimination of persons with disabilities.
• Mentioned the Afghanistan National Disability Action Plan (ANDAP) to implement government policies that support persons with disabilities.
• Thanked the delegation of Afghan civil society leaders and government representatives who attended the conference.

A video message from Her Excellency Rula Ghani was then played to the conference. She told participants that she was pleased to participate in a conference discussing how to facilitate the integration of people with disabilities into mainstream society. She also said, “we are all human beings worthy of respect. Regardless of our age, gender, lineage, the color of our skin, or our abilities and disabilities”.

After the First Lady’s video message, Deputy Minister Jamila Afghani of the Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs, Martyrs and Disabled spoke about the status of the disability rights movement in Afghanistan, not just as the Deputy Minister but also as an Afghan woman who lives with a disability. She said, “for the first time in history, the government has made the protection and promotion of rights of persons with disabilities a national priority”, and contributed the following points:

• According to a report by the World Health Organization, persons with disabilities constitute 15% of the world population and based on a 2005 Handicap International report, persons with severe disabilities constitute 2.7% of Afghanistan’s population.
• Many Afghans, including men, women and children have lost a limb during war or by landmines and unexploded ordinances. Many more have disabilities from birth or childhood, due to inadequate healthcare, poor maternity care and poor birth practices, congenital disabilities, accidents, malnutrition and preventable diseases such as polio.
• The Afghan Constitution and others laws stipulate that persons with disabilities are equal to other people and discrimination is illegal, but in practice, the situation is quite different and many persons with disabilities are deprived of basic rights.
• The government of Afghanistan established a One Stop Shop (OSS) within the Ministry for Martyrs and Disabled for persons with disabilities seeking information.
• The first ever national conference for persons with disabilities was held in Kabul at the Presidential Palace in
October 2016

Following the Deputy Minister, Judy Heumann, the former senior advisor on international disability rights under President Barack Obama and a longtime leader of the disability rights movement in America, gave a keynote address. She made many valuable points including:

- In all countries, stigma and fear of acquiring a disability has been a major barrier for those living with disabilities
- At the national level, the U.S. is working with congress on disability rights but there is great importance in developing at the grassroots level because it needs to be a bottom-up approach
- It is crucial to ensure that people are the local level are more engaged, not just in discussing the problems that exist, but so they understand how processes in the government work to effectuate change
- There are many programs in the U.S. that focus on helping support and develop the voices of parents and voices of disabled individuals and to train them on what their rights are and how to use those rights
- Encourages that a result of this conference is the ability to discuss ways to help educate people so the voices of persons with disabilities can be heard

After a brief break, the first panel on inclusive education for persons with disabilities began with a video titled “Behind the Wall!” by Rahyab Organization for Services for the Blind. The panelists included LaTanya Williams, a Disability Specialist from SERVE Afghanistan; Benafsha Yacoobi, the Director of the Rahyab Organization; Nasir Ahmad Alokozay, the Head of Inclusive Education at the Ministry of Education; and was moderated by Stephanie Ortoleva, the President of Women Enabled International. The panel discussion was followed by a questions and answers segment from the audience. Some key points from the inclusive education panel are:

- Improving inclusive education requires funding – coordination between government and civil society organizations will create lasting progress and without funding it’s not possible to educate communities in Afghanistan
- Awareness and accessibility to information is important because it educates persons with disabilities on their rights and how to advocate for those rights
- Afghan teachers are being trained fluently in sign language – as there are only 4,000 vocabulary words, those teachers should know at least 3,800 words to qualify as fluent
Wall! Episode 2: Health and Rehabilitation” by Rahyab Organization for Services for the Blind. Moderated by Jeff Meer, the Executive Director for Handicap International, the panelists included: Fiona Gall, the Director for the Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief and Development; Sadiq Mohibi, a Victim Assistance and Disability Advisor for the UN Mine Action Services’ Afghan Civilian Assistance Program of the Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs, Martyrs and Disabled; and Abdul Khaliq Zazai, the Director and Founder of Accessibility Organization for Afghan Disabled. The discussion was followed by a questions and answers portion from the audience. Key points from this panel discussion included:

- In the health sector, Afghanistan is still not reaching as many people as it needs to be thus more inclusive policy and implementation of that policy is key
- Difficulty with human resources and conflict within the Afghan government has made it more difficult for inclusive public health for everyone, especially persons with disabilities
- Mental health and psychosocial support is an important aspect of inclusive public health that should not be forgotten

After the second panel, the conference broke for lunch. The lunchtime speakers included Tim Shriver, Chairman of the Special Olympics. Mr. Shriver reiterated a 1963 quote by President Kennedy when he said, “we must promote to the best of our ability and by all possible and appropriate means, the mental and physical health of all our citizens – today we are convened to bring that same message to the people of Afghanistan, to the cooperation between the Afghans and Americans, a cooperation rooted in our common destiny as human beings”. Mr. Shriver introduced the conference to retired Senator Tom Harkin and chief leader in the disability rights movement in the U.S.

Senator Tom Harkin told the conference that this is “a time when the global disability movement is gaining attention and momentum around key goals that have been part of the U.S. approach to disability policy for more than 25 years.” He also said, “when I had the honor to lead the U.S. Senate effort to pass the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990, we established 4 goals for public policy: Equality of
Opportunity, Independent Living, Economic Self-Sufficiency, and Full Participation. Senator Harkin made the following points in his speech:

- Inclusive education, public health, and vocational training and employment are all critical building blocks to achieving the vision of laws like the Americans with Disabilities Act and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)
- Invest in the growing leadership of Afghanistan’s disability population, recognizing that the progress that has been made in the U.S. happened because Americans with disabilities and their families came together to ask the government to recognize their rights and common experience of discrimination and exclusion
- A big part of investment in the U.S. has been federal support for independent living center and parent training and information center
- Prioritize the importance of creating a societal expectation that all people with disabilities are successful in the labor market
- If competitive and integrated employment becomes the norm for Afghans with disabilities, then education, transportation, health care and long-term services and support systems are all working together to achieve that outcome

Following the lunchtime addresses, the third and final panel on employment opportunities and vocational training for persons with disabilities convened with a film by Rahyab Organization for Services for the Blind titled, “Behind the Wall! Episode 3: Employment and Vocational Opportunities”. The panel was moderated by Deepti Samant Raja, a Senior Consultant to the Global Disability Advisor at The World Bank. The panelists included Dr. Jean-Francois Trani, an associate professor on Global Research on Inclusion and Disability at the Brown School, Washington University, St. Louis; Samiulhaq Sami, an Inclusion Manager at Handicap International Afghanistan; Ali Yarwar Hoshmand, the CEO of Seema Bag Factory; and Amina Azimi, and Advocacy Officer at Afghan Landmine Survivors Organization (ALSO). The main ideas of the panel on vocational training and employment opportunities were:

- Employment of persons with disabilities within the government structure is low, however the employment of persons with disabilities in NGOs is higher, for example: according to Sami Ul-Haq Sami, Inclusion Manager at Handicap International, HI hired 14% persons with disabilities in Afghanistan
- Disabled women face extreme difficulty in employment in Afghanistan – they are the vulnerable population of the society so they must be payed special attention to
- Lack of resources severely inhibits the capacity to provide employment for persons with disabilities
Conference participants then broke off into three breakout sessions focused on inclusive education, inclusive public health, and employment opportunities and vocational training in which they discussed chief objections for persons living with disabilities and ideas for solving these problems.

The **education breakout session** discussed the following:
- Universal education for all children
- The stigma that surrounds persons with disabilities
- Increasing examples of girls with disabilities in textbooks and through cultural exchanges

To address the above issues, the education breakout discussed the following solutions:
- To address the issue of stigma, improving education of tribal leaders to use inclusive and respectful language in all areas of Afghanistan through media campaigns
- Importance of changing the perception of what having a disability means
- Crucial to cultivate parents as leaders in the disability rights movement
- Teachers play a very important role in inclusive education - they should be trained to accommodate different types of disabilities, including psychosocial and mental health disabilities
- Consider accessibility for options to pursue higher studies as people move up in the world

The breakout session on **inclusive public health** discussed community based healthcare and education, health outcomes, and health infrastructure as mechanisms to improve public health in Afghanistan. The following were the big ideas from the public health session:
- Use faith and community based cultural brokerage to improve public health
- Increasing self-advocacy for rehabilitation
- People-centered budgeting and health clinics
- Train workers in community-based rehabilitation

The last breakout session on **employment opportunities and vocational training** addressed lack of awareness and advocacy, lack of technology, and unemployment among the general population of Afghanistan as major challenges for employment of persons with disabilities. Some ideas to work towards solving these issues were discussed as follows:
- The Graduation Model, a program to help people graduate out of poverty and better their situation
- Establishing an internship model for university, high school, and middle school age students and identify local markets that need services
• Investing in the capacity of people with disabilities as leaders to advocate for rights and education of those with disabilities
• Raising awareness by fostering role models that can demonstrate that people with disabilities can be productive and can lead
• Consider how leaders within the disability community can be further empowered to train those around them and to advocate, manage, fundraise, and recruit volunteers
• Utilize local resources and manpower to develop sustainable projects

After each individual breakout session, the conference reconvened to discuss all big ideas as a larger group. The discussion was facilitated by Phyllis Magrab, the Vice-Chair of the US-Afghan Women’s Council, and Director of the Center for Child and Human Development at Georgetown University. The conversation resulted in these main ideas:
• Public awareness is crucial and necessary
• Need for creation of cross-cutting strategies
• Role of key partners is important, must be able to identify who they are to create stronger coalitions for change
• Leadership within the disability community must be nurtured and employed once it is developed
• Technology is key
• Establish financing strategies, such as microfinancing, because lack of funding is a common theme in major challenges faced by persons with disabilities

Carol Grabauskas, Deputy Director of the Office of International Visitors at the US Department of State and Isabel Hodge, Deputy Director at the US International Council on Disabilities both gave closing remarks.

After the conference broke for dinner, participants reconvened to hear a closing message from Saeeda Etebari, an internationally-renowned Afghan jewelry designer and entrepreneur at the Turquoise Mountain Foundation. Ms. Etebari told the conference, “I was born in a refugee camp in Peshawar in Pakistan and because the conditions were not good, I got very sick and was diagnosed with cerebral meningitis. Due to the illness, I couldn’t walk for the first three years of my life and I lost my hearing too.” Ms. Etebari spoke of her love for making jewelry at the Turquoise Mountain Institute because designing a piece that someone buys and wears is special and very rewarding. She said, “I love making a connection with someone through a shared sense of beauty.”
Day 2
May 24, day two of the Afghan Disability Rights Conference was a smaller, knowledge sharing workshop at the National Youth Transitions Center in Washington, D.C.

The workshop commenced with introductions by the Afghan delegation which included Deputy Minister, Jamila Afghani; Director of Inclusive Education at the Afghan Ministry of Education, Nasir Ahmad Alokozay; Advocate of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), Amina Azimi; internationally-renowned Afghan artisan who specializes in jewelry design at the Turquoise Mountain Institute, Saeeda Etebari; Director of the Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief and Development (ACBAR), Fiona Gall; Founder and CEO of bag company, Ali Yarwar Hoshmand; Director General of Social Protection at the Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs, Martyrs and Disabled (MoLSAMD), Fazal Elahi Ibrahim; representative of the Afghan Amputee Bicyclists for Rehabilitation and Recreation (AABRAR), Inayatullah Miakhil; Disability Adviser for UN Mine Action Service at the Afghan MoLSAMD, Sadiq Mohibi; Chief Executive of the Family Welfare Focus Organization, Saiwash Payab; Disaster Risk Reduction Program Manager at ActionAid Afghanistan, Musbahu Rahman; Inclusion Manager at Handicap International Afghanistan (HI), Sami Ul-Haq Sami; Director for the National Assembly of Disabled Institutions (NADI), Abdul Rahman Sharifi; Research Assistant at Will Cornell Medicine, Wasima Shinwari; Associate professor on Global Research on Inclusion and Disability at the Brown School, Washington University, St. Louis, Jean Francois Trani; Founder and Director of Afghan Disabled Rehabilitation Association (ADRA), Bashir Ahmad Wali; Disability Director for SERVE Afghanistan, LaTanya Williams; Founder and director of the Organization of Rahyab for Rehabilitation Services for the Blind in Afghanistan (ORRSB), Benafsha Yacoobi; and Director and Founder of the Accessibility Organization for Afghan Disabled (AOAD), Abdul Khaliq Zazai.

After introductions by the Afghan Delegation, the first panel on inclusive education began with Leila Peterson, Executive Director of SchoolTalk; Katy Beh Neas, Executive Vice President of Government Relations at Easter Seals; and Angela Spinella, a special educator in the D.C. DC Office of the State Superintendent of Education, Technical Training, and Assistance. The second panel on inclusive public health included Dr. Marisa Brown, a research instructor at the Georgetown University Center for Child and Human Development, University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (UCDD); and Kelly Buckland from the National Council on Independent Living. The last panel on vocational training and employment consisted of Laura Owens, President of TransCen Inc.; Susan Prokop, a Senior Associate Advocacy Director at Paralyzed Veterans of America; and Lauren Appelbaum, the Director of Communications at RespectAbility. The workshop and conference concluded with
remarks from Isabel Hodge from the U.S. International Council on Disabilities.