



## Support for Afghanistan: Don't Stop Now!

It is now 16 years since Afghan Connection, along with many others, started to work in Afghanistan following the fall of the Taliban. Despite substantial progress, the country continues to face major challenges in its pursuit of a better life for its people. Are these challenges too great? Should we simply give up and move on?

Some may argue that Afghanistan has had its chance; that more recent crises (Syria, Yemen, Libya) are a higher priority. But it would be wrong to abandon our collective investment in a country which history has treated harshly over many centuries and which still matters to the world.

The UK together with the rest of the International Community has invested heavily in Afghanistan. Although many problems and challenges remain, particularly security, the country has changed beyond recognition since 2001 - for the better. Education, the key to any country's future, has been transformed. Around three million girls are now enrolled in schools, compared with a handful 16 years ago. Healthcare is now available to millions who never had access to proper care before. As a result, maternal mortality has been dramatically reduced since the removal of the Taliban. Afghanistan enjoys a relatively free media; a raw (if imperfect) form of democracy; and an awareness of the outside world, which has changed attitudes and made the idea of the country reverting back to the intolerance of the Taliban increasingly unlikely. And there are over 20 million mobile phones in Afghanistan - there were none under the Taliban, for obvious reasons.

The longer this progress continues, the more difficult it is for intolerance and oppression to reassert themselves. This is hugely important to the people of Afghanistan. But it also matters to us. In a world in which we are ever more mutually dependent, failure in Afghanistan would be profoundly contrary to our own interests - we cannot make ourselves immune from the dangers which exist beyond our borders. The outside world got involved in Afghanistan in 2001 precisely because Al-Qaeda represented a threat to the wider world.

The case for sticking with our commitment to Afghanistan is strong. And nothing is more critical to the country's long-term prospects (and therefore to protecting our own interests) than education. It helps to open minds, reduce ignorance and provide new opportunities for Afghanistan's younger generation - boys and girls alike. But, as yet, the Afghan Government doesn't have the capacity to deliver education across the country to all who need it.

So charities such as Afghan Connection have a real - and valuable - role. We work in partnership with governments (both the Afghan Government and the UK Government), because there's no sense in charities competing with official government channels. We need to supplement their work by providing ways to help communities, which are often beyond the reach of the official system. In our case, Afghan Connection focuses on education projects primarily in one remote province (Takhar), where there is little in the way of government funding or direct aid. Here, we collaborate closely with the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan - an NGO which has been working in Afghanistan without a break since the 1980s and which employs some 5000 Afghans. Thanks to this relationship, all our support on the ground is delivered and overseen by Afghans, which helps provide sustainability, national ownership and community buy-in to all Afghan Connection's projects.

We believe that our focus on education in Takhar allows us to maximise our impact, rather than spreading ourselves too thinly. In recent years, we have built 19 schools there (46 in total across Afghanistan) and have 2 more funded for 2018. We have trained over 1000 teachers and developed community-based education for nearly 3000 children in remote villages where the government has not yet supported education. Since 2002, through this approach, we have educated over 11000 children in Takhar and up to 75,000 children across Afghanistan. Although the schools are for both boys and girls, we place a strong emphasis on ensuring that schools work well for girls (and meet any legitimate concerns which

their families may have - particularly over providing separate facilities for girls). We believe this may have contributed to Takhar having one of the best records on girls' education of any Province outside Kabul.

For the future, we want to consolidate what has been achieved in Takhar - with the specific goal of 100% of girls in the District of Worsaj (where we have worked longest) having access to education. Even more important, we will be working with the Afghan Government to identify how best to replicate our experience in Takhar elsewhere in the country. Afghanistan is remarkably diverse - geographically, politically and ethnically. But we believe that some of the methods we have pioneered could be successfully applied in other Provinces, with potentially major impact.

What is critical in a country like Afghanistan, is hope. Without this, people will give up. That's why we have supported cricket in Afghanistan for almost ten years. In that period, the National Team has gone from playing Jersey in Division 5 of the World Cricket League to beating the West Indies in the T20 World Cup. They have just been awarded Test status and are amongst the top 10 teams in the world. They have been an inspiration to millions of young Afghans, giving them a belief that their country can succeed. We believe our continuing support for grass-roots cricket in Afghanistan, most of it focused on schools, is a natural complement to our work on education. Sport develops skills in leadership and team-building, which are essential if Afghanistan is to thrive. Both education and cricket are preparing the next generation to take their country forward towards a better future.

Afghanistan won't be transformed overnight. It will remain a poor country with relatively weak institutions for years ahead. But it can have a good future. Its people deserve no less. We at Afghan Connection are determined to take forward our work, building on the foundations laid over the last sixteen years. Hence our appeal to all who care: "Don't stop now". It would be a tragedy to allow all that's been achieved, thanks to the efforts of so many, to crumble gradually due to a failure to see things through.



**Afghan Connection**

**200,000 lives transformed through education and cricket!**

**#dontstopnow**