
INCLUSION IN AFGHANISTAN

Julia Hayes



Julia using graphics to capture people's views

'You're going WHERE?' was the anxious response from most people when I told them that I had accepted a job in Afghanistan, where I would spend a month evaluating an inclusion project for the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan (SCA).

I reassured them (and myself) that the SCA are an established non-governmental organisation who have remained in Afghanistan during the past 30 years of turmoil, determined to find ways to empower poor families in rural areas. With 99% Afghan staff, longstanding relationships with local communities and the chance to evaluate my two passions: inclusion and children's participation, it was an opportunity I couldn't possibly ignore!



While there are many Afghans with physical impairments due to the fighting, inclusion of children in mainstream schools is new in Afghanistan. There is a lot of social stigma towards disability and families often keep their children hidden indoors, with no expectation that they should or could attend school. However, the Government are committed to changing this, and in recent months created a department for Special and Inclusive Education, who have been impressed with the SCA's inclusive education and employment project.

SCA worked with local communities to find disabled children and then supported them in their homes or at local centres where they are taught basic life skills, literacy and numeracy in order to prepare them for school or employment. They also supported the schools by training teachers, visited included children regularly and provided extra classes for them at the centres. This led to over 770 children (40% girls) being successfully included in schools over the 2 years.

During my month in Afghanistan I spoke with over 260 people including Government officials (including those from the 'Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, Martyrs and the Disabled' (it took me a while to find out 'martyrs' meant war veterans), SCA staff, Head Teachers and teachers. However, the greatest privilege was visiting villages and towns with SCA staff working directly with families and schools in order to meet the children and families themselves.

For cultural reasons I worked with mothers and fathers in separate groups and each had its own challenges. I have to confess that when 10 fathers

The Swedish Committee have worked hard to ensure that both brothers and sisters receive an education

walked in wearing what I considered to be 'Taliban clothes' I was a bit anxious! My own prejudice made me fear they would resent me for being a) Western b) female and c) working. However, within 2 minutes these softly spoken men had introduced themselves, told me they wanted the best for their child thanked me for coming to listen to them, and of course the clothes they were wearing are what all Afghan men wear, not just the Taliban. All of this made me feel humbled and somewhat foolish!

The mother's groups were different. While some were confident and vocal, others arrived covered in sky blue burkhas that were only lifted once we closed the door. Even then some mothers turned away or would only whisper to their more confident neighbours due to the presence of my male interpreter, Farhad, anxious that interaction with a non-family member would bring shame upon them. As they became more comfortable and opened up they told me stories of being ridiculed or blamed for their child's impairment before the SCA came and educated the wider community. Now they feel more included as a family in social functions and community life.



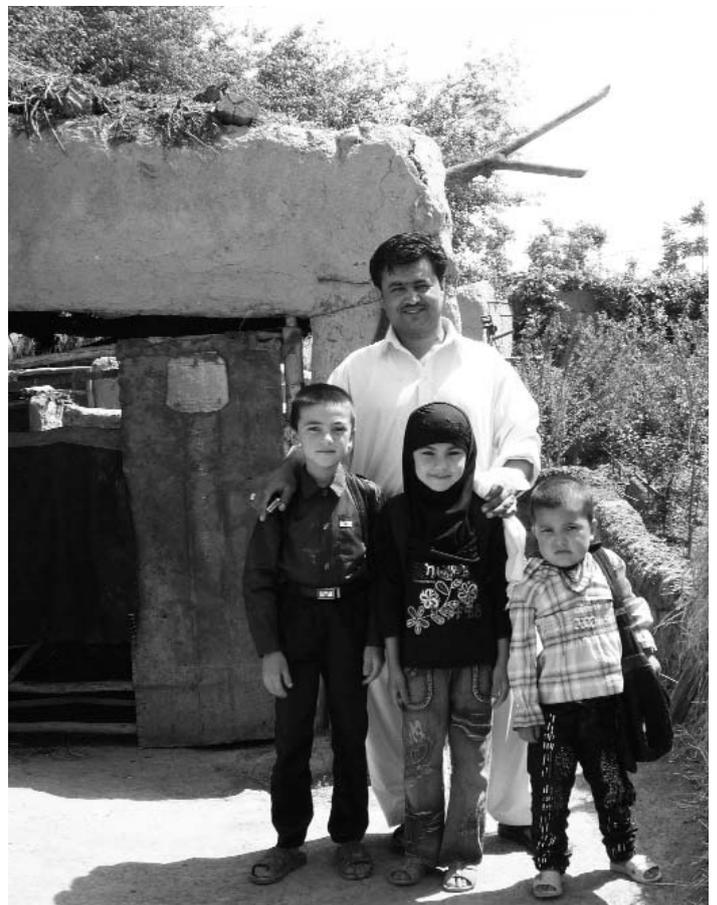
An Afghan father voting for his favourite aspect of the SCA's work with his child

What struck me most when working with the parents was that people are people, wherever you are. Unlike what we are told, they are warm and hospitable people. Just like parents of disabled children in the UK, they all care and worry about their children, all face daily challenges and all want their child to live happily in the local community.

I met a number of children whose lives had been transformed by the project. Having driven past



Julia with some of the mothers in the northern Aibak province



An SCA worker on his weekly visit to three siblings to teach them sign language and writing

rusting Soviet tanks, beautiful mountain plains and grazing camels I arrived in one village where there was a new sewing workshop for six 17-year old girls. In addition to the skills they had learned, the most moving story was that for two of the girls it was the first time they had ever been allowed to leave their home since they were born.

The project has also had a profound effect on a younger generation of children. I met Aliyah who was 13 and had a hearing impairment. She told me that she never believed she would go to school and that her life had been transformed by learning sign language at 11 years old and being taught by school teachers who were also trained in sign language. With aspirations to be a journalist she was determined to complete her education.



Above: Aliyah (centre) with her sister and cousin giving their views on their youth group for children with a hearing impairment



Left: Lives have been transformed as children learn to read and write

As the foreign troops leave Afghanistan by 2014 there is much discussion about the future of inclusion and education in the country. I am quite sure that the SCA will remain and my hope is that children like Aliyah, having had a taste of accessing her rights, will be determined to ensure that future generations of disabled children do the same.

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