

Operation Exceptional Child:

**A Comprehensive
Approach to Educating
Children with
Disabilities in
Afghanistan**

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Building up the civil society in countries such as Afghanistan will not only help to alleviate human suffering, but will also have profound national security implications for our own country. **To this end, the immediate objective of PATHS, a registered 501(c)(3) organization, is to build a state-of-the-art school for boys and girls in grades K through 12 with a wide variety of disabilities in Afghanistan.** This school will be built and staffed by Afghans and will provide a shining example in the region of the very good intentions of the American people to genuinely help some of the neediest children in Afghanistan. This project is quite unique not only because it will be state-of-the-art, but also because it will serve children with a wide variety of disabilities in grades K through 12 – certainly a first for Afghanistan and a wonderful contribution to the US hearts and minds campaign in securing that country, winning over the local population and changing the tide of the war so that our troops can begin to come home.

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Introduction

Disabled children, ravaged by war and disease, suffer immensely and have very few resources available to them in Afghanistan offered publicly or privately to help improve their lives. Moreover, neither the US State Department, USAID, nor any NGOs in-country are adequately addressing the needs of disabled children. Essentially, children with disabilities in Afghanistan have been largely ignored up to now in spite of the fact that they have

suffered for years with physical and cognitive impairments due to decades of war, injuries from land mines, malnutrition, poverty, the spread of polio, and pre-natal drug abuse. Currently, there are more than 200,000 children in Afghanistan living with permanent disability (physical, sensory and/or mental impairment), according to a 2007 survey conducted by Handicap International – and Save the Children documents that roughly 75% of these children do not receive any kind of formal education whatsoever.

In a society like Afghanistan, disabled children are typically shut out and shut away from the mainstream population as there are little or no services available to them. It is a heartbreaking and dismal existence for these children as they are often times treated worse than animals. The situation is aggravated further and creates a much more volatile environment for our troops as the Taliban regularly target these special children turning them into human-bombs to use against our military. We must get these children off the streets - we must begin addressing their needs and provide them with an education so that they can instead become contributing members of their communities and add to the overall security, success and future of their country.

Occurrence of disability in Afghanistan

A number of surveys have been conducted on disability in Afghanistan with mixed results. The most recent studies have revealed disability among children range between 1% and 4% of the total population (Ministry of Martyrs and the Disabled (MMD), 2003; Handicap International, 2007). The varying estimates can be attributed to inconsistent definitions of who is considered disabled and the difficulties present in completing any kind of viable research in Afghanistan. Furthermore, negative attitudes towards people with impairment together with poor infrastructure and the lack of resources make it problematic to conduct proper research and effectively identify those with disabilities (Coleridge 2001).

Disability and the limitations of Afghan society

To move forward in recognizing greater security and overall development, Afghanistan is in need of a more comprehensive approach to educating children with disabilities because currently no such policy exists as this excerpt indicates:

"Education policy in Afghanistan, on the other hand, has no reference to special education of disabled people including a higher education. In late 2002, the Ministry of Education, supported by UNICEF, drafted the Policy for the Rehabilitation and Development of Education in Afghanistan. This policy document in its First Item states a compulsory primary education for all regardless of gender, ethnicity, language or religion. There was no reference to compulsory education for disabled children, unfortunately. Instead, there was indirect emphasis on the prevention of impairment by various educational strategies. This includes awareness raising of the negative consequences of terrorism, drug addiction, war/conflict and discrimination, all of which may be considered causes of impairment." (Wardak & Giorgio 2005).

The lack of any kind of formal education policy for disabled children in Afghanistan directly attributes to the country's high unemployment statistics, cited most recently to be hovering around 53% (MMD 2010). The current policy on employment of the disabled in Afghanistan is limited at best and results in disaffected youth joining the insurgency and adding to the overall insecurity of the country.

Additionally, an education policy that emphasizes only "prevention of impairment" as the above excerpt illustrates, is not comprehensive by any measure. There is room here to develop and implement a much needed education policy that will more broadly impact the lives of children with disabilities and add to the overall security of Afghanistan.



Policy recommendations for educating children with disabilities in Afghanistan that would be implemented in every PATHS school for disabled children

- PATHS school will be state-of-the-art and will serve boys and girls with a wide-range of disabilities in grades K-12, with respect for religious preferences to separate genders.
- The state-of-the-art component of PATHS school will be served by providing assistive communicative and mobility devices to all students where appropriate. It is vital to note that without these assistive technology devices children with disabilities are unable to rise to their full potential or fully recognize an improved quality of life and greater independence.
- PATHS comprehensive program will support the inclusion of disabled children in their communities through greater involvement in community affairs at all levels (where age appropriate) including village, district, and national to ensure equal participation and a greater stake in their own destiny.

- PATHS curriculum will include access to an early intervention program (Pre-K) to ensure that children with disabilities will have the capacity to enjoy educational opportunities beginning at the kindergarten level. Early intervention services will include education and health care for Pre-K children deemed high-risk. These services will be holistic, assisting the entire family since the home environment plays such a big role in a child's overall development, health, and welfare.
- In addition to academics, PATHS students will also study independent living skills and social integration within the broader community.
- PATHS curriculum will consist of comprehensive vocational training for all students in the upper grades (9-12) and will respond to genuine market needs within the community with special considerations given to assistive technology and job modifications in an effort to achieve successful job placement of the student.

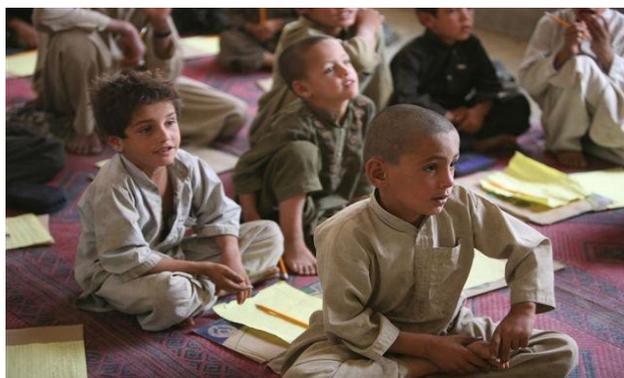
Towards a more inclusive approach

This comprehensive policy that would be implemented in every state-of-the-art, K through 12 PATHS school for children with disabilities can be applied with equal success in government-run as well as in private schools. The key to its success is in offering children afflicted with either physical or cognitive impairments a space of their own. In theory, the concept of mainstreaming children with disabilities with their regular peers is a good one; unfortunately, what happens in practice more often than not is that children with disabilities receive an inappropriate education based upon their needs. Children with disabilities deserve the same chances of success which is best realized in an educational environment tailored and modified to meet their specific needs more adequately.

Education as a human rights and development issue

Education is a basic civil human right and ALL children, including children with disabilities, have a right to receive an appropriate education. The lack of educational opportunities for children with disabilities in Afghanistan remains a key reason for poverty and their exclusion from wider community affairs. Furthermore, deficiencies in marketable vocational training for children and youth with disabilities results in an absolute lack of opportunities for further personal development and diminishes their access to employment and other future prospects. In Afghanistan, children with disabilities have the potential to make a powerful contribution to the overall development of their communities and the future stability of their country and they deserve an opportunity to receive a more comprehensive education that a PATHS school would offer.

Finally, the immense amount of good will that PATHS state-of-the-art, K through 12 school for boys and girls with a wide variety of disabilities will foster with the local population due to its uniqueness cannot be underestimated. A school for disabled children such as PATHS will further compliment the US mission in securing Afghanistan and winning over the hearts and minds of the local population in an effort to change the tide of the war so that our troops can begin to come home.



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