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AFGHAN YOUTH and the United Nations

Afghans honoured for volunteerism

UN International Year of Youth highlights a new generation of Afghan role models

With a theme of dialogue and mutual understanding, the United Nations International Year of Youth wrapped up mid-August giving Afghan youth an opportunity to highlight the positive roles they play in the country's political, social and economical development.

The UN General Assembly – which includes Afghanistan and 192 other countries – chose to celebrate youth knowing that youth often lead by example. They practice green lifestyles, promote innovative uses of technologies including finding the latest uses for their mobile phones and online social networks like Facebook, and push their societies to develop and become more tolerant and inclusive.

World leaders decided that these contributions to community, national, regional and global development should be recognized and encouraged.

Around 70 per cent of the Afghan population is under 25 years of age. Afghan youth contribute to the 1.2 billion young people around the world, the majority of whom face limited access to healthcare, education, training and economic opportunities.

Recognizing these challenges and the unique hardships of growing up and living in Afghanistan, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) is honouring young Afghans who give back to their communities and the country. On the final day of the International Year of Youth, 11 August, UNFPA launched its Small Grant Programme for Youth. The ceremony was organized by the Ministry of Youth and UNFPA in Kabul.

Up to 20 small grants will be made available



UNAMA / Fardin Waezi

for youth organisations in urban and rural locations across Afghanistan in the coming months. The aim is to promote youth participation, empowerment and volunteerism as well as to increase awareness about reproductive health.

“While progress has been achieved, much remains to be done to ensure that all our youth become skilled, healthy and productive members of society. And the basis of all this commitment is the realization of human rights

for all within diversity,” UNFPA Executive Director Thoraya Ahmed Obaid said at the Launch of International Year of Youth in August 2010.

“We hope that in 25 years from now, the young people of today will look back at this International Year of Youth and recognize that it has laid the foundations for making the world a better place for themselves, and for succeeding generations of young women and men.”

UN forum spotlights young people’s potential

World leaders and youth urge more jobs and protection from terrorism



Youth are integral in changing the world for the better and they must have support from today's leaders, top United Nations officials told participants at the General Assembly's high-level meeting on youth.

“We are seeking to promote a culture of dialogue and mutual understanding between young people and with young people as key stakeholders in today's world,” General Assembly President Joseph Deiss said in his opening remarks to hundreds of world leaders

and youth representatives.

The two-day “Youth: Dialogue and Mutual Understanding” forum is the largest UN event organized to close International Year of Youth.

In his address to participants, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said, “I think we can do and must do more for our young people. They are the leaders of tomorrow.”

Mr Ban added that helping to combat youth unemployment is one important way today's leaders can help young people.

“The international community must work to expand the horizons of opportunity for young women and men and answer their legitimate demands for dignity and decent work,” he explained.

Participants produced an outcome document calling for strategies to give young people a real chance to find decent work, and urge countries to take effective measures to protect young people from terrorism, among other concerns.

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UN-supported councils give young Afghans a voice

Youth in the provinces work with local governments toward political change



UNAMA / Fardin Poya

“All youth should realize their duties. It is not just the role of the government, but also their responsibility to change their own lives,” said Taimoor Eshaqzai, Ministry of Youth Affairs, a sub-office of Afghanistan’s Ministry of Information and Culture.

In the past month, the ministry formed four youth councils or shuras in the southeast to allow young people access to the government’s social, political and economic activities.

These groups are among more than 120 youth councils active so far in 16 provinces – including Farah, Kandahar and Mazar – with plans for youth councils in all 34 provinces by the end of the year.

“The youth councils have a responsibility to speak to the government about their problems and take action in their communities,” Eshaqzi said.

The councils campaign against drug abuse, clean up trash and find solutions to daily problems – with young men and women equally involved.

The councils are supported by the United Nations in Afghanistan through workshops, training and dialogue with local government officials.

“We have regular monthly meetings with the provincial council members, government

Najibullah Alokhalil, the head of the Joint Civil Society Forum, established in part by UNAMA, in Khost province.

He noted however, that youth in the city and the rural districts of Khost face different challenges, separating the youth groups.

“The youth in Khost city study; through internet, television and radio, they have a clearer vision of the world. Youth in districts and villages lack access to education because

“The youth councils have a responsibility to speak to the government... and take action in their communities”

officials and tribal elders and discuss monthly problems that we face, identifying solutions within our roles and responsibilities,” said

of insecurity. This will bring a gap between the youth and could have bad consequences for Afghan society.”

Kunduz youth calls for a stronger national plan

By Ajmal Omar, head of the Youth Information and Communication Center (YICC) in Kunduz

I am proud that for the first time in my life, I have been given an opportunity to write something about youth.

These are the main challenges for youth in Kunduz: insecurity; unemployment; lack of universities; and inadequate support for youth.

Provincial youth groups provide great opportunities to boost the talents of youth.

Here are other ideas to assist young people in our region.

- Youth should be more encouraged when they achieve their goals – academically or in their chosen fields of practice.

- Cultural and political centres should be created where youth can share their views. This could be done with cooperation of the governors and local organizations with support from the UN.
- The UN should assist the government to prepare a detailed plan for youth, which includes greater job creation.
- International laws should be implemented properly to pave the way for youth development.

We would like the international community, to help youth unite, establish training centres, and facilitate discussions which discourage terrorism and improve lives.



UNAMA

First Afghan woman premieres political short film at Cannes

"These words – democracy, freedom of speech – came to Afghanistan but people, even educated people, do not know what they mean," said Shahrbanoo Sadat, the first Afghan female director to screen a film at the Cannes Film Festival in France.

Sadat directed 'vise versa one' (symbol), a short film in which she tackles politics and reintegration through symbolism. The 10 minute film begins with a child carrying a backpack into which she collects "votes." Characters, including a woman and a soldier, are symbolic of some Afghans who assimilated into the post-2001 political system.

"A woman puts the burka into the backpack ballot box. A man with the gun does not put in his gun. He unwraps his turban and puts that in. It shows that some people participating in politics changed their clothes but not their ideology," the 20 year-old director explained.

Outspoken about her stance on human rights, Sadat is critical of some female politicians who she called "largely symbolic" and who allow "the man inside them to speak."

The political nature of the film, Sadat said, prevented it from being screened in Afghanistan.

"One of the criteria for showing at Cannes is that the film could not have been shown anywhere else. No problem," she laughed, adding that the showing the film to an audience of 2,000 people overshadowed the glamour and prestige of attending the film festival.

Despite her criticism of some politicians, the Iranian-born Sadat said she is thankful that her family moved back to Afghanistan. She wants more young people, especially women, to participate in politics and has her own aspirations to become president.

Voices of youth

"I may be young, but I am just as smart as anyone else. Everyone who voted for me is of a new generation. They want to bring a change to Afghanistan. "

- Baktash Siawash, 25, youngest member of the Afghan Parliament. He ran his campaign in 2010 as the candidate for youth. His youth supporters gathered signatures for his campaign, even going door to door with his flyers.

"Afghanistan's future belongs to the current youth. If young people are well trained and taught, thus we can see a bright future for this land. Our aims were to run a short program for students that can help them to get some understanding of the current situation in Afghanistan and develop their skills in both leadership and business."

- AIESEC Afghanistan organized a national young leaders conference in Kabul in June with 250 youth delegates from Balkh, Herat, Helmand, Kandahar, Khost, Pakia and Parwan. UNAMA participated in the conference.

New television channel promotes civic education

"There is a need for children to get a sense that they are the leaders of tomorrow and prepare them to lead their communities," said Ajmal Obaid Abidy, the head of a new television channel teaching young people about democracy and encouraging them to participate in their communities.

Aria Television launched in April. Since then, it already gained about 1.5 million viewers in the Kabul region, according to Abidy.

Viewers learn the proper way to behave in classrooms and how to be respectful to their parents, while also "gaining leadership skills and seeing the life standards they should look forward to," said Abidy.

The channel has three blocks of programmes. The daytime for preschoolers, an evening block for older children, and evening programmes for children up to 19 years-old.

Aria relies heavily on imported educational television show, such as Sesame Street and Dora the Explorer, but is in production on two original shows.

The first is a mix of puppetry, animation and

songs that focus on social and cultural themes with a strong emphasis on gender equality.

"It's a bit like Sesame Street but from an Afghan perspective. We raise issues that Afghans would encounter on a daily basis."

The second is a behind-the-scenes programme that informs viewers about products and businesses.

"A can of Coca-Cola, for example. How it was made, where it came from," Abidy said.

The programmes are created by Afghan educators with experience in developing curricula for the ministries and the international communities, and media professionals.

The founders are friends who decided that they wanted to educate youth about democracy and give them positive rolemodels.

"The idea for the channel came from us believing that civic education and promotion of democracy are the foundations of a modern country. In order to create that, you have to invest in children."

"There is a need for children to get a sense that they are the leaders of tomorrow"

Girls gain opportunities through youth groups



UNAMA / Eric Kanalstein

Traditional practices can bring unique and sometimes destructive elements to the lives of young women. Many girls marry while in their teens. Many also experience early pregnancy, or are victims of domestic violence.

Girls also face lesser day-to-day challenges from their families and the greater society.

"Some unfair traditional practices are additional 'headaches' for girls," said 20 year-old Sima Safay from Jalalabad. "Most of the time, our parents don't allow us to participate in activities like work training, sports or to appear on TV. We need to raise people awareness to stop these unfair practices."

As part of an effort to raise awareness of the need to involve youth in public life and to equip young people with the knowledge and skills to solve problems, the Ministry of Culture and Youth Affairs, and the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), created Youth Information and Communication Centres (YICC) in 16 provinces within Departments of Youth Affairs.

In Kunar, Laghman and Nangarhar provinces, the YICC is an umbrella organization for more than a thousand young people, offering trainings and workshops on a variety of topics.

For girls, the centre also offers a public space to discuss issues and learn from one another.

"We can see more enthusiasm of girls from their increasing number in the centre," said Malalay Payinda, the director of YICC Nangarhar.

"Now they can discuss problems they face and issues such as marriage, relationship, education, employment and try to find solutions of the problems."

Girls also have access to vocational training. In Methrlam city, 13 year-old Nilofar is learning to tailor while also attending Mastura girls' school.

"I want to tailor so I can train other girls and support my family while I study. I have a dream to become a doctor. When I do, I will continue tailoring my own dresses," Nilofar said.

Educating and training key to Afghan youth development

The UN in Afghanistan works with partners to train a young and literate work force, while also protecting the youngest from exploitation



UNICEF

“Youth need education to develop themselves and their own future,” said Enamulhaq Ehsas, a 20 year-old who chairs the youth group, Youth Federation, in the eastern region.

“If youth are not educated and not given equal opportunities, they cannot find work and they end up vulnerable. This can lead to disillusionment and warlords can influence them to join anti-government elements,” he added.

The education sector in Afghanistan has improved significantly over the past 10 years, according to the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

“The future of this country is dependent on how effective our education system is today. A major cause of the war was ignorance and a lack of education,” said Najibullah Kamran, director of the Kabul provincial department of education.

The overall enrolment of students increased eight-fold to 7.3 million in 2010; the percentage

of female students rose from around zero to 38 per cent, according to UNESCO.

Despite these successes, only about two per cent of Afghans enrol in higher education, said the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF).

A main objective of UNESCO’s Enhancement of Literacy in Afghanistan programme, ongoing through 2013, is to provide adults with literacy skills, ensuring that their children will be educated. Parents’ literacy plays a key role in educating their children, argues the 2011 Education for All (EFA) Global Monitoring Report.

officials also work with communities to convince participants to provide security and encourage their children to attend schools.

“Through dialogue we can convince people in the communities to not burn their schools because that is essentially burning their children’s futures,” said Gul Agha, a teacher in an internally displaced camp.

Voices of youth

“We have 3,000 chickens in one building of our farm, but we intend to rent another building to expand our business to around 8,000 chickens. If we have enough space and electricity, we will be able to supply chickens even to the districts.”

- Akbar Pacha, 20, who with a group of seven friends established a poultry farm in Asad Abad city, capital of eastern Kunar province. The UN Secretary-General has praised cooperatives, such as this one, for enabling young people to pool their resources and create sustainable businesses.

“Everyone in this village was very happy that I took the decision to become a midwife and were very excited when I graduated. People in these rural communities prefer to deliver at home—I am happy to do this and will take my midwife kit to their home—but I try and explain that the facilities in the health centre are much better for them and they can get more comprehensive care there.”

- Sadiqa, 24 year-old, midwife in Central Highlands. Around 9,000 midwives are needed to assist Afghan women. The Ministry of Public Health, UNICEF, UNFPA, WHO and other partners support community midwifery programmes throughout the country.

Afghan and UN officials aim to curb child labour

Eleven-year-old Asmal (not his real name) sells plastic bags and gum in Ghazni city to cover part of his family’s expenses. He sells about 20 bags and earns 40-50 Afs or the equivalent of one US dollar per day.

“My mother likes school but does not allow me to go. I have to work to support her and my sisters,” Asmal said.

Up to 40 per cent of the country’s 15 million children do not study because they need to support families facing serious economic problems, according to the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC).

Some are in violation of the Afghan national law preventing children younger than 14 from working more than 35 hours per week, and only in select industries.

The Child Protection Action Network (CPAN) is an initiative comprising representatives from the AIHRC, Departments of Social Affairs and Police, UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF), and aid groups such as Save the Children – coordinates efforts to curb children’s rights violations and to protect and promote their rights.

An ILO report on child labourer

In June, the UN International Labour Organization (ILO) reported that more than half of the world’s estimated 215 million child labourers work in conditions that put them at risk.

The report, “Children in hazardous work: what we know, what we need to do”, shows that a child labourer suffers a work-related accident, illness or psychological trauma every minute.

“Governments, employers and workers must act together to give strong leadership in shaping and implementing the policies and action that can end child labour,” said Juan Somavia, the ILO Director-General.

To date, Afghanistan and 172 other of the ILO’s 183 Member States have committed themselves to tackling hazardous work by children “as a matter of urgency” by ratifying the ILO convention on the worst forms of child labour.

Youth connecting to the world online

Internet access is changing the way young women and men learn, work and socialize. The UN and its partners are helping train youth to break new barriers in information technology




UNAMA / Fardin Waezi


Hundreds of young Afghans, many of them women, are getting free computer and English training as part of ICT4Youth, a programme created by the Deputy Ministry of Youth Affairs (DMoYA) and the United Nations Development

Programme (UNDP).


The classes are free, timed so as not to conflict with school classes, and flexible enough to allow participants to continue with their activities at home.

 "I use Facebook and Badoo to keep in touch with relatives, university classmates, friends and colleagues. I even found my childhood friends and neighbours in Pakistan. Social media is a good source for networking and you see right away what languages the person knows and get a glimpse into their personalities. Plus, chatting on Facebook is easy even when the internet is slow. I left Pakistan seven years ago but still keep in touch with all my classmates."


- Razia, 22 years old

 "This is about 15 mins, the Hotel Intercontinental is quiet. NO blast and NO gun firing."

- Excerpt from the 140-character tweet tweeted on Twitter by @AmiriTOLOnews, a Tolo Network journalist, during the 28 June attack in Kabul.

 5 Minutes TV Show: Afghan working women in Kabul

- This UNAMA Television production features Afghan women working in different fields in Kabul – from factories to stores. "hamish mafaq bashed azizam" one viewer wrote, meaning "always wish you success."

 @WFPVAM WFP VAM #Afghanistan #marketprices bulletin month of June 2011 ready on #WFP website: <http://bit.ly/IXeP0y>

- World Food Programme (WFP) Afghanistan twittered that its marketplace bulletin was available online. United Nations agencies and programmes are using social media to quickly disseminate information.


Afghans social media

Young Afghans are increasingly going on the internet – through Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Skype – to find and stay connected with family and friends and to promote social causes.

More than 205,000 Afghans are now connected through Facebook – the 115th most populous country out of 215 using the website. It is a far cry from the Afghanistan of ten years ago when there was no internet and only one radio station.

Those most likely to use Facebook are young, male Afghans. Nearly half of the Afghans on FB are between 18 and 24, and one-third between 25 and 34 years of age. Women account for 15 per cent of Afghan users, according to the statistical website socialbakers.com.

While still limited to urban areas, slow and expensive, internet use in Afghanistan is rapidly growing with at least 20 internet service providers operating last year. According to the specialized UN agency International Telecommunications Union (ITU), more than one million Afghans were on the web in 2010, or about 3.4 per cent of the population. That's three times the number of Afghans online in 2006.

 "Now the cricket (team) is international, maybe, by the grace of god, the rugby will be," said player Mohammed Edris, a 24-year-old dentist."

- The blog Huffington Post quoting an amateur Afghan rugby player training near Kabul. Games have also been organized in Jalalabad and Herat. Rugby fans want Afghanistan to gain entry into the Asian Rugby Football Union (ARFU).


"The classroom environment of ICT4Youth programme is safe and comfortable, so my family does not object to my attending these classes," says Humaira, a high school student. Another female student, Zarmina, regularly brings her nephew to classes so that she can watch him while continuing the training.

In 2010, around 300 young Afghans were trained under ICT4Youth, nearly 40 per cent of them girls. In the first quarter of 2011, about 400 students signed up.

Students are trained by a qualified teacher for one hour every day in basic computer software and internet skills. To prepare the students for future employment, the course also assists with resume writing and preparation for job interviews.

"I train a group of colleagues in the Ministry of Interior," said Samira, a woman in her early 20s.

She said this is her first opportunity to attend a course specifically to develop her computer and English skills.

 "Right now, as I speak I hear her
Drowning in gasoline and fire,
She cries.
"Have mercy, kind Lord
Let me die."
She burns. I burn.
The wet drops of tears on my face burn
Carving a trace on my soul
Through my veins, on my heart"

• Excerpt of poem by Noorjahan Akbar, posted on her personal blog. She also has a Facebook page and Twitter account.



 Photo by Feroqh Ferozi of the UN response to the flooding in Fayzabad District, Jawzjan province posted on the OCHA Afghanistan Facebook page. During floods and other natural disasters, OCHA (UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs) works with all the government, UN and non-government agencies on the ground so that aid and assistance quickly reaches the most vulnerable people.

Youth overcoming differences through sport

Through respect for their teammates and their opponents, sport lays the foundation for social harmony



UNAMA / Eric Kanalstein

More than 300 young people regularly come to the non-government organization Skateistan next to Ghazni Stadium in Kabul. Safe off the streets, they learn to skateboard, learn to read and practice the Koran. With funding from UNAMA, Skateistan organized a series of workshops for children and teens – some focused on the anti-poverty Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) – in celebration of the International Year of Youth.

The MDGs were broken down into more relatable ideas for the participating children, some as young as five. Among the results,

comic strips with sub-themes on education and drug addiction.

Each project was designed so that children with low literacy could take part and learn new skills.

For some children who attend Skateistan's classes, this is the only opportunity to receive schooling and take part in sport.

"My family is very happy I come here because I can learn," said 13-year-old Wahilla in broken English and Dari. Earlier, she had caught air while skateboarding - in a head scarf and other

traditional Afghan clothes - on Skateistan's ramps.

Wahilla used to sell chewing gum in Kabul. She picked up skateboarding quickly and is now one of Skateistan's youngest instructors.

The students include seven-grader Mukadasa who began training a few months ago but said she enjoyed coming to the sports centre right away.

"I feel happier after coming here. Even after I finish class, I want to skate more in the streets, at home and at school," she said.

Another student, Farhanaz, said her school teacher enrolled her in Skateistan with her parents' support.

"My family is very happy that I study and skate here in my spare time. I want to be the best," she explained.

Skateistan's creator said Skateistan is a place where sport can give young people practical experience in peace building. Bridging ethnic and socio-economic divides, sport provides a platform for you people to come together, talk and learn from each other.

"Sport is an easy entry point. It doesn't matter if young people are rich or poor, educated or not. They participate in exactly the same way in sport," Oliver Percovich said.

Kunduz, Helmand footballers play ball

Kunduz hosted Helmand last month for a football match to improve relations between the southern and northeastern provinces.

The Kunduz Shaheens faced the Helmand Yarans in Kunduz Municipality Park in front of more than 500 spectators.

"I am very pleased to be here and watch the football competition. I will be happy to watch more games in Kunduz with teams from the provinces," said fan Mahmmod Omerkhil.

The Shaheen beat the Yarans six to one. The Yarans were good sports about the loss.

"I am thankful for the hospitality of Kunduz youth. We had a friendly competition," said Mir Wali, defender on the Helmand team.

The head of the Kunduz Culture and Media Communication Foundation, the group which co-organized the game with the Afghanistan Football Federation, said he looked forward to more games by teams from the regions.

Peace Day 2011 plans

Ahead of Peace Day on 21 September, more than 500 youth in eastern, southern, central highlands and western regions are preparing for special sports competitions.

Football in Bamyan and Jalalabad; volleyball in Bamyan, Herat and Jalalabad; and cricket in Jalalabad and Kandahar.

These activities are run by local organizations, such as the Cricket Association and the Department of Education, with UN support.



UNAMA / Tilak Pokharel

Voice of youth

"Some people say I can't do anything because I am a disabled person. But I am showing them that I can do everything."

- Shafiqullah Samim, 28, is among 23 people with physical disabilities who visit the office of the National Union of the Disabled (NUD) in Jalalabad everyday for support and friendly competition.

Kandahar volunteer umpire promotes Afghan cricket

It is barely after sunrise and Hameedullah Agha is already on the cricket field in Kandahar warming up. The volunteer umpire is preparing for a match, discussing weather conditions and pitches with his on-field colleagues.

"It is a great honour for me to be a cricket umpire and to be among Afghans who brought major achievements and glories in the field to Afghanistan," he said on the sidelines.

"You know cricket is a recently introduced game in Afghanistan, but Afghans have keen interest and a zest in playing it. When I see young Afghans playing cricket, I feel so happy."

The Afghan national team came on the international stage last year as the first team to rise through the ranks from Division 5 to World Cup qualifiers.

"My dream is to see the Afghanistan Cricket Team join the International Cricket Council (ICC) and compete with other international cricket teams," Agha said.

The umpire completed training courses in China, Doha and Pakistan to oversee games, and continues to push himself and the players to be the best on the field.

He said cricket, and sports in general, are a way to bring and keep peace in the country.

"Cricket can bring unity and tranquillity amongst Afghan people. I wish to see a prosperous and progressed Afghanistan and I wish to contribute in these efforts."

Young Afghans giving back to their communities

Young women and men work together for reconstruction and peace-building



UNAMA / Jaffar Rahim

The Bamyan Tour Guide Association promotes green tourism with youth groups hiking and skiing in the Shah Foladi protected area.

“Our aim is to show the local youth how beautiful their area is, the mountains, the valleys and especially the historical and natural heritage that we have,” said Qudratullah Hussaini, head of the Tour Guide Association.

The tour guide group, which is predominantly female, organized many events in the past year targeting youth, educating them about the importance of environment and eco-tourism through different training courses and sports.

Their recent activity was a cleaning campaign

at Band-e-Amir National Park, where hundreds of young people gathered to collect garbage and encouraged the local communities to keep the park clean.

Earlier this summer, dozens of young people in Bamyan picked up batteries, plastic, paper, and other recyclables around the airport, bazaar and World Heritage sites including the caverns which once housed the giant Buddha statues to mark World Environment Day.

The Afghan National Environment Protection Agency (NEPA), Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock (MAIL), and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) led the event, an “awareness-raising exercise for the

town”, where residents could learn by doing.

More than 30 trash bags were sorted at the UNEP compound and turned into briquettes for winter fuel, and given to non-government organizations that recycle waste.

This year’s theme, “Forests: Nature at Your Service”, highlighted the connections between human well-being, sustainable livelihoods and the health of ecosystems, said Mohammad Zaher Maher with NEPA’s International Environmental Affairs Division.

“As Afghanistan grows, it has an opportunity to deliver better environment and employment opportunities in a green economy,” he added.

Teen journalist empowers imprisoned youth

“As as a young girl, I am strongly committed to my generation. I am very aware of the situation that young people in Afghanistan face every day and I want to help,” said television producer and anchorwoman Zarlash Sarmast.

The 15 year-old produces and anchors a weekly investigative segment for CSA: Crime Scene Afghanistan, a co-production between Radio Television Afghanistan (RTA) and UNAMA.

“The youth segment that I produce for CSA is dedicated to our young audience and to our parents, as well. With this show, I am helping my generation because I investigate and bring awareness about the different problems that youth face in their communities,” Sarmast said.

Among her most memorable cases is of a 14 year-old girl who ran off with her boyfriend when her family wanted to force her to marry an older man. The girl was sent to a juvenile rehabilitation centre.

“When I interviewed her, she really opened up to me about being abandoned by her parents and her community for following her heart.

That case really moved me,” Sarmast said.

“When I interview girls or boys, I give them a voice to talk to their communities, to their parents, to authorities and also to themselves. This voice sends a strong message not only to the youth, but also to the entire community to help solve problems facing youth.”

Sarmast said the teenagers she speaks to are eager to get out of prison or rehabilitation centre and restart their lives.

“They want to get an education or continue with their studies, develop their knowledge and do good in their communities,” she said.

“Being young in Afghanistan is not easy because you have to deal with many cultural traditions that limit you as a member of a community. We need to empower youth. We need to develop the minds and heart of the young generation because they are the future of our society, and the future for peace.”



UNAMA / Ariadna Alvarado

The future of Afghanistan, an opportunity and a responsibility for youth



UNAMA / Fardin Waezi

by Staffan de Mistura
Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General for Afghanistan

AFGHAN youth are growing up at a critical moment in Afghanistan. This country is at a crossroad between continuing conflict and ongoing dialogue. As I travel around the country speaking to young women and men I am increasingly told – this is not the country we want, we want better, we can do better.

This is exactly what we should be hearing from a new generation whose hopes and dreams of a better future transcend 40 years of conflicts. Youth often understands better that we can

“Sustainable positive change in Afghanistan will only exist if you create and maintain it”

and must transcend our cultural differences in order to reach our shared goals, as Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has said.

We, as representatives of the United Nations, must not allow these youth to fall into disillusionment. Our job is to work for them – and with them – to make sure they can inherit the world promised by the United Nations Charter built on dialogue and mutual understanding.

Dialogue and mutual understanding is the theme for the International Year of Youth which wraps up mid-August. The theme

was chosen by the UN General Assembly, of which Afghanistan has been a member since 1945, to promote the ideals of peace, respect for human rights and solidarity across generations, cultures and religions. The year might be coming to an end, but our obligations to youth are not.

The international community is working with Afghan partners – both within the government and outside – to try to expand the horizons of opportunity for young women and men and answer their legitimate demands for

education, health care, decent work, and above all dignity and security.

With 70 per cent of the population under 25 years of age, it is the Afghan youth that is sacrificing and being sacrificed during this unresolved conflict.

The Mid-Year Protection of Civilians Report released by UNAMA Human Rights Unit last month shows that more Afghans are dying than ever before, most through indiscriminate uses of landmine-like pressure plate improvised explosive devices (IEDs). I take

this opportunity to reiterate on behalf of the UN our calls on parties to the conflict to do more to respect civilians and to strengthen civilian protection.

People who care about their nation do not destroy it.

Despite the challenges you face, you are connected with your young neighbours on your street and across the borders much more than you might realize.

You are all part of the Facebook generation, you play video games and listen to music, you pray, you volunteer to help others, many of you study, many more work to help parents and siblings, and you all likely look around and think – I want more.

The United Nations in Afghanistan is working in many ways to promote a better life for you, including by working with the Government to include youth more in its decision making and planning.

Our agencies and programmes work together on five main priorities which include youth: 1) peace, reconciliation and reintegration; 2) human rights protection and promotion; 3) sub-national governance and the rule of law; 4) maternal and newborn health; and 5) sustainable livelihoods.

But the international community and its partners can only do so much. Sustainable positive change in Afghanistan will only exist if you, the young people of this country, create and maintain it.

Effective youth participation means that young people are not seen as passive recipients of or the root causes of society’s problems. Instead, they are stakeholders who make important contributions to the country’s development.

You have an opportunity and a responsibility to go beyond the conflict of the past decades and take ownership of your country. If you do not bring about positive change, who will?

The opinion piece was first published in the Daily Outlook Afghanistan on 9 August.

UN on Radio Television Afghanistan (RTA)

The United Nations produces weekly radio and television shows on a wide range of topics.

Afghanistan Today (Afghanistan Emroz) is broadcast on the national broadcaster RTA every Saturday at 9:05am on 105.2 AM.

The UN also co-produces two regular television shows with RTA.

CSA: Crime Scene Afghanistan (Dar Jostejo Haqayeq) is an award-winning crime and investigation series broadcast every Thursday at 9:00pm on RTA.

Mirror of the City (Aina-e-Shaher) is a current events show that airs every Sunday at 9:00pm.

For more information:
<http://www.unama.unmissions.org>

Speaker series: If I did it, you can do it

“We, women, strive and work in hard conditions so that young girls may one day be able to work and have a better life and better prospects. I hope that our young women will be persistent and determined in achieving what they have inspired for,” said Maria Bashir, Afghanistan’s only female chief provincial prosecutor.

Bashir, long a role model for young women and men, will be the guest speaker at Herat University and local high schools as part of the “If I did it, you can do it too” campaign co-organized by the Office of the Governor, the Department of Women’s Affairs, the provincial Department of Education and UNAMA.

The speaker series is meant to showcase the achievements of Afghan women who have had successful careers in public service, and allow young women who attend high school or university, or recently graduated, an opportunity to ask such role models questions. Thousands of young

women are expected to attend the event.

Among Bashir’s many accomplishments is her leadership on prosecuting offenders of the Law on Elimination of Violence against Women (EVAW). As of last year, her office used EVAW to file charges in about 90 cases.

The series is scheduled to expand into other regions of the country.

In Gardez, the series will spotlight two renowned women. Dr Nazdama Paktiawal is an Afghan surgeon and one of only several women doctors in the province. Since 2002 she has been serving as the Deputy Director of Public Health for Paktya Province.

Young women will also have an opportunity to hear from Halima Khazan, the first woman to graduate from high school in Paktya province. Ms Khazan has been the director of Women’s Affairs for the province since 2002, and uses her position to promote girls’ education.

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