

## **HELPING AFGHANISTAN'S STREET WORKING CHILDREN: ASCHIANA**

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Case study prepared for the Enabling Environment Conference

### **I. BACKGROUND**

Over the past decades, Afghans, particularly women and children, have suffered greatly from the consequences of conflict, from periodic natural disasters and from the ongoing insurgency. Over five years after the ouster of the Taliban, “peace dividends” are hard to come by for the most vulnerable segments of the population. In this context, it is estimated that at least 20 percent of primary school age children in Afghanistan undertake some form of work.<sup>1</sup>

The children in Afghanistan’s capital are by no means spared from hardship. There are an estimated 60,000 children employed on the streets of Kabul, 98 percent of whom are sent out to work in order to help their families survive. Each morning the children leave home in order to go into the streets to try and make a little money by either being involved in begging or gathering scraps of paper or wood for fuel, collecting pieces of metal to sell, burning incense, polishing shoes, or selling items such as plastic bags, phone cards, magazines, chewing gum and cigarettes and washing windshields.

To address the multiple needs of these children, the “Afghanistan’s Street Working Children - A New Approach” (“ASCHIANA,” from the Dari word meaning “the nest”) has been providing

assistance to street working children in Kabul since 1995. ASCHIANA, an Afghan Non-Government Organisation, currently serves close to 10,000 children in total, as well as 1,500 internally displaced children through additional outreach programmes.<sup>2</sup> This case study lays out ASCHIANA’s story and the challenges this unique organisation has faced.

### **The ASCHIANA Story**

ASCHIANA began its activities in March 1995 in the Shar-I-Naw area of Kabul to address the needs of children begging and working on the streets in this area. ASCHIANA was established initially as an NGO under the Minister of Planning, before the existence of the 2005 NGO Law. It was re-registered with the Ministry of Economy in 2006 as an NGO under the NGO Law.

The organisation’s mission is to assist the thousands of war-affected Afghan children at risk and their distressed families, and to ensure them a more positive and more productive future.

ASCHIANA operates seven centres in Kabul and three in the provinces Mazar-e-sharif, Parwan and Herat. The centres provide much needed education facilities for street working children. Each day, over

4,500 girls and boys attend ASCHIANA centres and receive a hot, nutritious meal.

ASCHIANA offers a variety of education and vocational training programmes. Children aged between eight and 10 years learn to read and write to enable them to join the regular Afghan schools. Those aged from 10 to 13 are given a basic education, recreational activities (art, music, sport) and some vocational training. Children aged 14 to 18 concentrate on vocational training to assist them in earning a living. Vocational course offerings include plumbing, electronics and small-machine repair, masonry, carpentry, woodwork, computer skills, photography, tailoring, embroidery and hairdressing. ASCHIANA offers a unique accelerated education programme for older-aged girls whose education was disrupted, compressing two years of school into one.

All children attend health and hygiene education classes. ASCHIANA's mobile clinic visits the Kabul area centres to provide check-ups, diagnosis and treatment of minor health problems. Social workers visit the children's home and workplaces. To promote financial and entrepreneurial skills, a Children's Development Bank is managed by the children. Finally, ASCHIANA has earned a reputation for its art and music programmes for children.

ASCHIANA plans to open centres in other provinces. It will also begin construction this year on a new, larger centre in Kabul.

## II. CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED

Since its establishment, ASCHIANA has encountered a series of problems that have been obstacles to effective operations.

### Access to land

Rising property prices in Kabul resulted in ASCHIANA's loss of previously rented properties for centres. In the context of rising property values and rents, the owner of the land where ASCHIANA's main compound was located (an Afghan entrepreneur) ended the lease in order to construct a hotel.<sup>3</sup> ASCHIANA had then to face the issue of finding land for its headquarters.

After the BBC World news service highlighted ASCHIANA's plight in April 2005,<sup>4</sup> the Government allocated 2,500 m<sup>2</sup> of land, which was purchased by ASCHIANA from the Kabul Municipality in February 2006. In spite of the fact that Kabul Municipality issued a land title, it was

later discovered that staff of the Kabul Municipality were leasing the same plot of land to an American construction company. After extensive discussions with the Municipality and relevant ministries, and in particular due to the substantial support provided by the U.S.-based ASCHIANA Foundation, the land problem was resolved in January 2007. The remaining problem of confirming the right of way to the land was resolved recently. ASCHIANA lived this experience as an uphill battle against the municipal authorities and business interests.

### High power (energy) costs

A relatively substantial amount of money from the programme must be allocated to ensure a consistent supply of power to the centres. At present, only the main office has a more or less consistent power supply from the power utility. At the centres where the need for power is the greatest in order to run the equipment required for training purposes, generators are the only source of power.

### Burdensome reporting requirements and administrative procedures

The government reporting requirements are burdensome for indigenous CSOs. ASCHIANA's experience is that different reports must be submitted to different line ministries depending on the programme focus. Every three months, ASCHIANA sends reports to the Minister of Economy as well as to the Ministry of Social Affairs. In addition, reports are completed for the Minister of Health, the Minister of Education and the Minister of Justice due to ASCHIANA's education and health programmes. As of last year, the Minister of Foreign Affairs also asked ASCHIANA to submit reports on its operations, to fulfil UNHCR requirements.

Aside from reporting requirements, every time ASCHIANA develops a proposal and submits it to potential donors, one copy has to be submitted to the Ministry of Economy. These proposals are often not approved by funding bodies/concerned agencies. However, in the government files the proposal is usually classified as approved. As a result, difficulties arise later, when government officials require submission of reports on these "projects".

### Capacity development

The low salary levels that ASCHIANA can afford to pay is the major reason for the departure of

staff. Given the low wages offered by indigenous CSOs compared to those offered by international NGOs, staff who have been trained by ASCHIANA leave in order to join other international NGOs that provide higher salaries.

As a result of this frequent loss of qualified local social workers, the organisation must go through a recurring recruitment and training process to find and then train new personnel, only to lose them several months later. This vicious circle costs the organisation time and money, both of which indigenous CSOs are sorely lacking.

### **Delays in disbursement of funds**

Due to burdensome bureaucratic procedures, it takes from six months to a year for the Government to disburse development funds that are channelled through Government by donors for implementation of projects. As a result, delays in disbursement significantly slowed the pace of implementation and, moreover, the payment of salaries of the field staff was delayed for months. For instance, in Mazar-e-Sharif, the field staff of ASCHIANA did not receive their salaries for six months.

Furthermore, the Government has assigned tasks to ASCHIANA without allocating the funds necessary to reimburse ASCHIANA for its implementation costs, further weakening its financial position.

### **Unfavourable environment for private donations**

Government requirements oblige the private sector donors to pay import taxes on aid brought in from outside, as they are for-profit entities, adding an additional bottleneck to private donations. Two consequences arise from this: (i) the activities of the indigenous CSOs are affected (ASCHIANA reports that it is very difficult to import the financed goods given the absence of the human and financial capacity to do so); and (ii) the level of external private donations is reduced.

### **Lack of understanding of roles and responsibilities of Civil Society Organisations**

ASCHIANA's leaders expressed concern about negative and false perceptions of indigenous CSOs, which are engaged for the long term, rooted in Afghanistan, but fragile in terms of overall support and financial sustainability. ASCHIANA

recognises that it needs to engage in some form of revenue producing activities (such as the sale of children's art and handicrafts).

According to ASCHIANA, the problem of negative perceptions toward civil society results from a lack of clear roles and responsibilities, and a lack of understanding of the contribution of civil society organisations to economic and social development and how to foster this contribution. Addressing these shortcomings can lead to a greater appreciation of the contributions of CSOs.

## **III. RECOMMENDATIONS**

From ASCHIANA's perspective, moving forward on the following recommendations would create a sounder environment for its operations:

1. **Simplify reporting requirements:** Allow CSOs to report to only one entity, e.g. the Ministry of Economy, with the single reporting format that can be transmitted to other ministries.
2. **Develop a cadre of qualified local social workers:** In order to provide highly qualified local social workers, a faculty of Social Studies should be launched within Kabul University.
3. **Increase opportunities for "income" in order to ensure financial sustainability:** Given the fact that ASCHIANA children involved in the art programme produce Afghan handicrafts and paintings with an Afghan context, it could be possible to establish a small boutique, perhaps in collaboration with the domestic private sector, where the children's handmade products would be exhibited and sold. This could be the stepping stone toward financial sustainability of the organisation.
4. **Encourage domestic philanthropy:** Given the importance of the revitalisation of philanthropy work within domestic as well as external private enterprises, the Government could possibly introduce tax reductions for those private sector businesses which work closely with the CSOs. This would create a fruitful and encouraging environment for those involved in charity work.
5. **Involve Government in the development of a joint NGO Code of Conduct:** In order to bridge the gap between the Government and indigenous CSOs and international NGOs, the Code of Conduct should be developed in consultation with the Government and all relevant stakeholders in order to ensure uniform adherence to it, and in particular allow the Government to understand the operational procedures of indigenous CSOs as well as international NGOs.

#### IV. DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

How can one frame the responsibilities of Civil Society Organisations and the responsibilities of Government toward these organisations?

1. How will the proposed changes in the NGO Law affect domestic NGOs?
2. What simplification of the registration process would be beneficial to domestic NGOs?
3. How could reporting requirements be streamlined? What standards would be meaningful for an organisation like ASCHIANA in terms of financial reporting, governance and transparency?
4. What role could a Code of Conduct play in encouraging CSOs to adhere to certain standards and to allow them to be better understood within Afghanistan?
5. Are there changes in the tax regime that would be justified to ease the fiscal burden on organisations such as ASCHIANA?
6. What steps could be taken to improve the environment for contributions from businesses in Afghanistan? What could Government do to make it easier for businesses to support domestic CSOs/NGOs with logistics, including the import of aid?
7. Many Afghan NGOs/ CSOs lose their best staff to international organisations, INGOs and international businesses, due to the much higher salaries these institutions can afford to pay. This clearly undermines efforts to strengthen and build up a truly Afghan civil society. Are there potential solutions for this?

How could international institutions/ organisations and domestic organisations better complement each other rather than compete for resources with Afghan organisations usually losing the competition?

Is this an issue that should be given more serious consideration by international donors as well?

8. ASCHIANA managed to resolve difficult land ownership and transfer issues with the help of the media. What lessons can be learnt from this experience? Have other domestic NGOs/CSOs faced similar problems, and have they been able to mobilise public opinion in their support? In what ways could the public support base for CSOs be strengthened to help them handle issues of corruption or powerful business interests?

*This case study was prepared based on a series of interviews with the Founder and Director of ASCHIANA, Engineer Mohamed Yousef and ASCHIANA staff.*

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<sup>1</sup> UNICEF, Afghanistan country report, 2007, p.1.

<sup>2</sup> Recognising the need to provide care for street working children and other vulnerable children, the Government launched in 2006 a National Strategy for Children at Risk designed to improve care and support for the country's most vulnerable children. A key focus of the strategy is on developing community and family-based support for vulnerable children. With endemic poverty underlying most of the risks facing children in Afghanistan, the strategy also points to the need for the capacity of communities and families to be enhanced, to enable them to best support children at risk within the community itself.

<sup>3</sup> Later on, the Government forced ASCHIANA to close its centres in Microrayon III to take back the premises for programmes for "normal" children.

<sup>4</sup> Coghlan T., (2005) "Kabul street children may lose 'nest'" ([http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/4441503.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/4441503.stm))