

Overview of the OFARIN programme

OFARIN offers elementary school education. It was set up for girls and boys in 1998, when the Taliban ruled.

Apart from my wife Anne Marie and me, only Afghans work in OFARIN's Afghan team. OFARIN develops its own teaching materials. Permanently employed "trainers" regularly visit all classes, advise the teachers at work and discuss their observations with other trainers at headquarters. In seminars, they prepare the teachers for new lessons. Our teachers are secondary school pupils, housewives, students, civil servants - even mullahs. They can be described as specifically trained amateurs. All students should understand and actively master the teaching material. This is the focus of OFARIN's work. In the meantime, there are also classes for women and young girls who have never been to school. Most of our pupils, however, also attend state schools. This is one of the reasons why OFARIN's lessons only last 90 minutes a day. 30 minutes of this is Islamic religious instruction.

Even before the ARTE film was made, we knew that Afghan youth learn practically nothing in state schools. Afghan public schools cannot be much better, because they have to follow many of the rules of state schools and because there are no properly trained teachers in Afghanistan - maybe a natural talent or two - but there are no properly trained teachers. Afghan teachers are neither didactically nor pedagogically trained. They are only trained for one subject, but they have to teach everything that comes along. Many have entered the teaching profession by paying bribes.

"The majority of Afghan high school graduates are illiterate (after 12 year classes). Most do not understand the addition and subtraction of two-digit numbers. We have been making such assertions for some time in small circles. But who really believed us? When the

ARTE team arrived to shoot the film, we spoke in detail with teachers, headmasters, pupils and parents. Our blatant assessments were completely correct. Because you may still find it difficult to believe these statements, I will repeat them, because they are important for assessing our actions in Afghanistan: "The majority of Afghan high school graduates are illiterate. Most of them do not understand the addition and subtraction of two-digit numbers.

The ARTE film was made in 2017, shortly after the donor Misereor had parted ways with us. Since then, we have lived solely on donations from people like you. The programme had to be drastically cut back. Instead of 9000 pupils, we can now only teach a good 3000 pupils. The staff only receive emergency salaries. We live from hand to mouth.

This crisis showed what our programme means to the people in Afghanistan. Over 50 teachers have continued to teach, even though we could not pay them. That is how important our teaching was to them for their country and their students. At OFARIN, teachers, trainers and other staff work together in a goal-oriented and friendly manner. When they work together in this way, many things become easier and more efficient. It could be the same in Afghan institutions and offices! Beyond his teaching, OFARIN is an example that gives hope.

Our lessons take place in private flats, but mostly in mosques. The work in mosques and OFARIN's partnership with the Ministry of Religious Affairs goes back to the early days of the programme during the Taliban regime. They are a unique selling point of OFARIN. Since 1919, King Amanullah had vigorously modernised Afghanistan. Afghanistan should become as progressive as England, Italy or the USA. Compulsory schooling and military service were introduced and a legal system like the one in France, with civil and criminal law with

prosecutors, local and district courts. The Islamic educated Kadis lost their monopoly in the legal system and the mullahs lost much influence on the youth because of the state schools. Before 1919, children could learn to read and write almost only in mosques. Afghans did not understand why they should be treated the same way as infidels. The government's modernisation efforts were sabotaged by the mullahs. They preached that it was a sin against Islam to send children to state schools. A fierce culture war led to bloody conflicts between modernists and conservatives, between communists and mullahs, between democrats and Taliban, between schools and mosques as early as 1929 and then since 1978.

The lesson of all this is that there can be no progress against the Islamic clergy in Afghanistan. OFARIN's cooperation with the mullahs in the mosques is just right. And it is constructive and friendly. Our mullahs are very loyal partners. Of course we only get to know mullahs who like to work with us. Certainly there are also mullahs who don't want to have anything to do with infidels. But when they hear from our partners that it is possible to work with OFARIN in a fair and objective way, this is not a disadvantage.

Originally, OFARIN's teaching was supposed to be aimed at children whose conservative parents had forbidden them to attend state schools. We wanted to offer them elementary education like in public schools and initially adopted the state curriculum. Now we know that this curriculum has nothing to do with the actual teaching in state schools.

The public schools are designed for pupils to attend them for twelve years. Even assuming that the students learn something there, this is a far unnecessary expense for the schools in view of the Afghan labour market and a waste of students' lives. Considering the school's capabilities, everything is madness.

OFARIN wants to expand its current programme into an approximately eight-year primary school, where pupils acquire the skills they need for non-academic professions. At least this will help our students. People who know our programme ask themselves: Why is it that you learn something at OFARIN, but nothing in state schools? The bigger our programme becomes, the more business people, civil servants and mullahs will ask themselves the same question. This should create pressure to reform the school system. OFARIN is happy to advise and support such a new beginning.

In recent months, education has been suspended in Afghanistan. Now they would like to put the corona pandemic behind them. The school system is starting up again. Our clients are also pressing for a fresh start. My wife and I only want to travel to Afghanistan under safe conditions. It is no problem for the programme that we are absent for longer periods. Our staff know what they have to do and work very reliably. However, OFARIN's way of teaching is very different from what you are used to in Afghanistan. In the long run, it is important that a foreigner accompanies the students in order to stabilise the level of teaching they have achieved. It is indispensable for the development of new teaching areas. Nor is it conceivable that a programme supported solely by Afghan forces could be financed in the long term.

As soon as you can travel back to Afghanistan without fear of Corona, some of your comrades-in-arms who live in Germany are willing to come with you to Kabul to support and get to know the work there during short stays. In order to win a foreigner for a permanent mission, however, adequate payment would have to be possible. Until then, OFARIN's programme must have a much stronger economic basis.

We could not avoid the Corona pandemic. Its rages are even more bitter for those affected in Afghanistan than here. We are collecting money to mitigate the economic consequences for the families of those affected. It is clear that we can only have a modest impact with this action in the vicinity of our students and teachers. Whoever would like to donate to this programme would have to label their contribution with the "Corona" sign.

Randersacker, 13.9.2020 Peter Schwittek.

Translated with www.DeepL.com/Translator (free version)