

Newsletter, 22 May

Dear friends,

Unfortunately, I can again only inform you indirectly about the situation in Afghanistan. My colleagues and other friends tell me on the phone about what is being thought and done in Afghanistan.

About the situation in Afghanistan:

Almost nothing is happening in OFARIN's programme. Because of Corona the staff does not come to the office. It is Ramadan. At the weekend is Id-ul-Fitr, the festival that ends the month of fasting.

The state schools were also closed during Ramadan because of Corona. OFARIN also interrupted his classes and will not start again until the state schools open again. It is not yet known when this will be the case.

Corona also dominates life in Afghanistan. However, regulations designed to prevent the spread of the disease were only reasonably observed for a fortnight. Now, no one is staying at home any more. The shops are open again. But when you make a phone call, you are still asked - until the person you are calling picks up - to wash your hands with soap and water for 20 seconds, and you are told which fruit is healthy. Every day the media report several hundred new infections - and the number is rising. How such numbers are determined is unknown

Some people believe that the disease does not exist in Afghanistan. The government is simulating the emergency situation in order to get foreign aid. All over the world, corona causes shortness of breath and conspiracy theories. My colleagues assure me that they know of several cases of corona. But who diagnosed them?

Beyond the schools, it is less quiet. There have been several attacks in eastern Afghanistan. In the Shiite Kabul district of Dasht-e-Barchi, a large maternity hospital belonging to the organisation "Médecins sans Frontières" was attacked and a horrific bloodbath ensued. Women in labour and their babies were murdered. Over 20 people died. It is likely that these raids were carried out by the Da'esch, i.e. the followers of the Islamic State. My colleagues do not believe that the Taliban are capable of such brutality. Usually, the Taliban admit to their actions. They refuse to accept responsibility for the cases mentioned.

President Ashraf Ghani cannot accept that the US wants to end its military engagement in Afghanistan. He tries to reverse the decision, claiming that the Taliban have committed all the attacks, including the bestial massacre in Dasht-e-Barchi.

Ashraf Ghani is not stupid, but he often decides spontaneously and autocratically. In this case, many Afghans think he has lost his way. Some even believe that he organised the attack on the hospital himself.

However, Ashraf Ghani is no longer the sole president of the country. As you know, the official result of the presidential election was controversial. Dr. Abdulla Abdullah, Ashraf Ghani's rival, did not recognise the election results and also had himself proclaimed President. This conflict has now been resolved. Both gentlemen are prepared to share power.

My friends assume that Dr. Abdullah is seeking a more flexible approach to the Taliban. One can hope that this is true and that the division of power does not break down just because of this difference. Then serious negotiations with the Taliban could begin.

How "sustainable" can OFARIN's programme be?

Afghanistan is not in a position to organise a school system that teaches its youth the basic cultural techniques. I have explained this on several occasions, and I do not want to bore you once again with explanations of this fact. But it is possible to prepare Afghan teachers to give effective lessons. The work of OFARIN proves that. OFARIN's teachers like their work. As soon as they see how successful their teaching is, they become convinced followers of OFARIN's methods.

Afghanistan lacks successful teaching methods. OFARIN brings such methods to Afghanistan. Afghan teachers easily adopt the methods and make them part of their work. This is what successful development aid looks like.

Yet institutional donors, especially German government agencies, do not support OFARIN. They also insist that OFARIN must be an Afghan organisation and that whatever OFARIN sets up will pass into Afghan hands after a foreseeable - i.e. limited - time.

It should be possible, with considerable effort, to split the Kabul office into a German and an Afghan part in order to satisfy the desire of such donors for an Afghan organisation. This led to internal frictional losses and to a poor standing of the Afghan OFARIN office vis-à-vis the Afghan authorities. The construction would be absurd, because development aid is simply the transfer of knowledge and skills from a developed country to a developing country, not from one developing country organisation to another. But when it comes to money, you have to put up with the absurd whims of bureaucrats. In that case, however, a lot of money should be at stake.

The other demand of institutional donors, on the other hand, that the project must be transferred to an Afghan agency after a set time, is an insurmountable obstacle. Here, at least, the donors' intentions are understandable. They want to know for what time and with what means they will commit themselves.

When the Afghan hands into which OFARIN would have to place its programme after a limited period of time, only those of the Ministry of Education would come into question. This ministry is not in a position to organise useful school lessons. Its staff is corrupt and disinterested. Under the aegis of this ministry, OFARIN's programme could not exist for a month.

Even you, dear friends, who are watching and supporting the work of OFARIN, will now ask yourselves anxiously: What will become of OFARIN? If OFARIN entrusts itself to a major donor, it will be handed over to the Afghan state after a set period of time, and that will be an end to horror. But if no institutional donor can be found, OFARIN's future is very uncertain, especially for economic reasons. Here it becomes clear that OFARIN is a human construct and, like all human beings, mortal.

When institutional donors try to force the transition of programmes like OFARIN into Afghan structures, they pretend to ensure the continued existence of the programmes and speak of "sustainability". Some officials even believe that. What they want to preserve is the organisational form of OFARIN. Perhaps it will exist in Afghan hands for a few weeks longer than the work on content. But the value of OFARIN lies in the work on content.

What lives on from OFARIN's work lives on in the heads of its staff, its teachers and above all its students. OFARIN's students can read and write properly and have mastered basic arithmetic. They plan and decide more rationally than others. They can read and understand bills and contracts. They take a lot with them that they need for their lives. OFARIN produces this sustainability anew through its teaching. Afterwards it lives on in their minds, independent of OFARIN's existence.

But does OFARIN only give something to individual people? Will OFARIN's methods and the way they work together gradually disappear from Afghanistan when OFARIN ceases its work?

OFARIN hopes that his work will continue in Afghan institutions. We dream that our programme will grow and become a challenge for state schools. The more students attend OFARIN's programme, the more parents, but also other citizens, politicians, mullahs and entrepreneurs will ask: "Why do students in state schools learn almost nothing, but at OFARIN they learn incomparably much more? When such questions become unmistakable, we are happy to help reform the state school system. Then Afghan schools could introduce teaching methods similar to those of OFARIN, which would sustainably improve teaching.

But we have little hope that OFARIN can become so big by supporting institutional donors to challenge Afghanistan's state school system. All our hope rests on you, dear friends. No, you don't have to reach for your wallet immediately. All you have to do is tell your friends about OFARIN: "There is a programme that really does provide efficient development assistance - in Afghanistan, a country that is generally considered hopeless. The OFARIN organisation that runs this programme also needs money. But compared to the billions that our state or the UN have poured into this country without any results, OFARIN's efforts are clear and comprehensible, and the results are gratifying. If you want to do something meaningful in the so-called Third World, take a look at the homepage ofarin.de!".

The more people participate in OFARIN, the more OFARIN can make a difference in Afghanistan.

Unfortunately we have to admit that OFARIN's income is not at the moment such that we can achieve much. On the contrary, we fear for our existence. Many of those who have been involved in OFARIN in the past

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months are affected by Corona - less often purely physically but often economically. And if you have to see for yourself how to make ends meet, you can hardly take care of the literacy of children and women in Kabul or Logar. But it looks as if we in Germany and its neighbouring countries are getting the virus under control. Most of the economy will also get back on its feet. So when you are suddenly blinded by a ray of light from the end of the tunnel, please think of the people in Afghanistan! It will take them a long time to reach herd immunity or to benefit from any vaccinations that are left for them. So far, OFARIN has given them support and hope. And they will really need it even longer.

Best regards

Peter Schwittek.