

Human resources neglected prior to repatriation

by Atle Hetland

Since 2002 more than three million refugees have returned home to Afghanistan, mostly from Pakistan and Iran, in UNHCR's largest assisted repatriation exercise. Unfortunately, some 75% of them have returned having never received any formal schooling, either prior to becoming refugees or in exile. For all the years of their displacement the international community knew that sooner or later repatriation and reconstruction would ensue. How could UNESCO, UNICEF, ILO and other organisations with education as part of their mandates allow this to happen? Why did they not sound the alarm when UNHCR reported these shortcomings? NGOs and the Pakistani authorities must also bear some responsibility. Why were Pakistan's professional, academic and scientific institutions not involved in educating Afghans?

Afghanistan's reconstruction is being delayed by lack of trained personnel. They would have been available had we – the 'experts' and 'advisers' – done our jobs properly. Instead, we effectively ignored literacy training, vocational and technical training, teacher training and capacity building. We have done little to involve Pakistani and Afghan scholars or institutions and have neither recognised the abilities, nor done

much to build the capacity, of local organisations. ACBAR, the Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief, with offices in Peshawar and Kabul, has done excellent work in involving Afghans. However, there are very few examples of institutional development programmes and long-term inter-university and other institutional linkages between NGOs and institutions, and Pakistani and Afghan institutions.

There is scope for the situation to improve. With donor funding and NGO support, Pakistani and Afghan professionals and government officials could together draw up plans for rapid action. Much training can be done in countries bordering Afghanistan rather than in more distant and costly locations. Afghanistan cannot afford the time it would take to wait until its institutions are fully equipped to undertake the necessary training.

Southern Sudan is facing the same problem. In the late 1990s, I coordinated the Turkana Development Forum. The forum brought together 'experts', politicians, donors, NGOs and refugees in order to provide educational assistance – especially secondary and technical education, peace education and reconstruction planning – for the Turkanas in

Kenya, the Karamajong in Uganda and the southern Sudanese. But although the donors expressed agreement with the Forum's aims and took many chartered flights from Nairobi to the Sudanese border to 'assess the situation', no funding was allocated. Now, when peace finally seems to have come to southern Sudan, the consequence could be more than just delayed development: the whole fragile reconstruction and peace process may be in jeopardy. Had there been greater involvement of the professional institutions in the host country this would not have happened.

Donors must learn to take a back seat, to allow the involvement of local professional institutions and to heed their advice. We need to learn from the past and identify mistakes and their consequences. As donors step back from setting priorities they can put on centre stage those who should already be there: local institutions, governments and the refugees and returnees themselves.

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