

So What?

MEDA Spring 2014

Welcome to *So What?*, a periodic look at MEDA's long-term impact around the world. What really changed as a result of our development efforts? What got better for families and communities? This issue looks at the Afghan Secure Futures project.

Afghanistan — Securing a stake for youth

Afghanistan's a beautiful country but you'd never know it from the headlines.

When newscasts blare about attacks and casualties, it's not easy to see the economic and cultural promise that has been obscured by years of

turmoil and conflict.

Decades of war have left the country in grim shape. Besides tragic loss of life, some 40 percent of Afghan families do not have enough food; 90 percent rely on informal employment to get by; workers are under-educated and under-trained.

An elephant in any room where progressive development is discussed is the burgeoning population of young people who are restless and looking for work. In Afghanistan and elsewhere, long-term joblessness saps hope and heightens susceptibility to recruitment by extremists. A good

The global youth population continues to swell, with nearly half under 25.



iStockphoto

job, however, opens doors for marginalized youth to integrate into the community and join the economic mainstream.

The global youth population continues to swell. According to the United Nations, 46 percent of the world's population is under the age of 25. In Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan, 42 percent of workers are under 18. For most of them, job prospects are bleak.

The deck is stacked against young people in developing countries, says Jennifer Denomy, MEDA's head of youth programming. "They are likely to be unemployed, and if they do find work, it is more likely to be in unsafe working conditions and for lower wages than other workers."

MEDA has a history of working successfully with women in Afghanistan and has earned a reputation for adapting entrepreneurial training for groups on the margins. In 2008 it launched Afghan Secure Futures (ASF) to bolster employment prospects for



The deck is stacked against them. If they do find work, it is more likely to be unsafe and low-paying.

young workers by assisting informal construction workshops that employ apprentices (mainly ages 14-18). Funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development's Displaced Children and Orphans Fund, the \$2.9 million, three-year project sought to strengthen linkages among workshop owners and increase access to financial service providers so they could expand and hire more apprentices. It strove to improve safety for young

workers through dual-purpose loans for equipment upgrading, create a code of workplace safety conduct and promote safety and improved literacy and numeracy for apprentices who may eventually want to start businesses of their own.

What we did

ASF worked with business owners, primarily in the carpentry and metalworking subsectors, who employ youth apprentices. The goal was to develop their businesses and provide a safer, more rewarding workplace experience for young employees.

A lot of vocational training happens through apprenticeships but the quality of apprenticeships varies greatly, some even putting young people at risk of physical injury. Moreover, apprentices often sacrifice time at school in order to work and augment family income. Along the way many forego



Apprentices get their first taste of a safe and rewarding workplace experience.

What they learned

Some 220 apprentices attended regular literacy and numeracy classes in seven locations close to their workshops. For many, this was the only classroom education they'd ever received.

- Apprentices said attending the classes provided them with increased ability to secure other jobs (95 percent); led to promotions, increased responsibility or increased autonomy in the workshop (91 percent); and resulted in improved self-confidence (97 percent). Many also said the skills they learned were necessary to eventually open shops of their own.

- Among workshop owners, 81 percent reported observing increased competence among apprentices who attended the classes. 🌱

A safer place to work

The project resulted in a marked decrease in workplace accidents. Baseline studies at the outset showed that 28 percent of participating workshops had experienced accidents in the previous year. By the end of the project, only four percent reported having had accidents in the previous year. 🌱

formal education and end up getting stuck permanently in low-wage jobs. But despite pressure to work at an early age, apprenticeship can be a positive experience for them as they learn technical, business and life skills through the workplace.

The project worked with workshop owners at both the micro- and medium-enterprise level, strengthening market linkages and access to business development and financial services. MEDA wanted to demonstrate that directly supporting the apprenticeship structure is more cost-effective than the conventional ap-



Long-term joblessness saps hope, creates unrest and can lead to recruitment by extremist groups.

proach of constructing technical-vocational training centers that, in addition to their considerable expense, take young people out of the real market environment.

Safe and responsible apprenticeships offer young Afghan workers the opportunity to gain valuable hands-on experience. ASF also linked apprentices who are no longer attending school to local organizations providing functional literacy and numeracy classes.

ASF improved the working conditions for young apprentices by enhancing their skills and expanding the contract opportunities for the workshops that employ them. In addition to business development services provided by local partners, ASF linked the workshops with local microfinance institutions. Ajmal, owner of a carpentry shop, used such a loan to construct a more professional office and reception area to deal with clients and invested in a finishing saw to do more decorative woodwork that fetches higher prices. The better the shop owners did, the more apprentices they could hire and offer a chance to learn marketable skills.

MEDA forged relationships with local partners who boosted on-the-ground traction and increased the likelihood that impact continues after MEDA is gone. Partners in building training capacity were the Afghan Builders Association (ABA) and the Federation of Afghan Commercial Traders (FACT). MEDA also worked with the government's National Skills Development Program (NSDP) to jointly deliver "training of trainers" sessions on workplace safety.

ASF organized a large "Afghan First" product exhibition to promote locally made products. It brought ASF carpentry and metal workshop operators together along with wood and metal producers and suppliers of raw materials, crafts and

He learned ... and returned

Ajmal produces tables, chairs, cabinets and bed frames for local furniture shops in Kabul. Like many Afghans, his family suffered economic hardship and social persecution under the Taliban regime in the late 1990s. They fled the country for Iran where Ajmal worked as an apprentice in a carpentry shop and learned a trade. In 2006 he returned to Kabul and opened a shop which has grown to employ 15 adult workers and seven youth apprentices. Extensive contacts with family and friends enabled him to find good employees, but the overall quality of Afghan labor was inferior to what he found in Iran.

"What can you expect, with all these years of instability," he says. "Not many people in Afghanistan have had the same learning opportunities that I have."

He invested in a 2,000-square-foot facility, more than he needed at first. "I wanted to shoot high," says Ajmal. "You have to take these chances if you want to succeed in this business."

Spoken like a true entrepreneur. 🌱



Shop owner Ajmal: Passing on skills and hope to a younger generation.

household goods. The exhibition attracted 7,000 people over three days, visiting booths displaying a range of products from furniture to jewellery to local foods and delicacies. Participants were offered training in product design and effective customer service, including how to take and follow up on product orders.

Business associations and apprentices gained ideas on how to plan and execute a large event.

Did we succeed?

By the end of the project 1,080 apprentices were working at 363 carpentry and metal workshops and large firms. Among the outputs:

- Wages of apprentices increased from \$7 to \$18 per week.
- Most business owners increased earnings by 50 percent and in some cases 100 percent.
- Workplace injuries dropped significantly.
- Literacy training was provided to 220 apprentices.

The project trained workshop owners to understand market demand and the entire chain of production and delivery of goods and



For more than a thousand apprentices, wages soared and workplace injuries plunged.

services, thus enabling them to see where they could add the most value and in turn build a business.

What's next?

While the Afghan Secure Futures project has concluded, the business needs of youth remain a strategic area for MEDA.

Experts say long-term joblessness among young people can lead to mass emigration, social unrest and entrenched cycles of poverty, producing an increased susceptibility to recruitment by extremist groups.

Most worrisome is that this looming "youth bulge," already fostering unrest, has yet to peak in many conflicted regions. Places like Sub-Saharan Africa, Afghanistan, Iraq and Yemen are expected to hit their peak number of young people in the next 15 or so years, and unemployment among this sector could be a key geopolitical challenge for this century.

"You can see the consequences in the daily headlines," says Kim Pityn, MEDA's vice-president of international operations. "We believe these trends can be stemmed, even reversed, by providing young people with viable options for the future. For MEDA, the way to do this is to help them develop an entrepreneurial mindset and promote entrepreneurship as a viable career path."

Youth entrepreneurship pays dividends even to those who don't go on to start a business. The skills and perspective they gain sets them up for success in other kinds of jobs. And the "real world" exposure boosts school retention rates, as most students who drop out do so because they feel their studies lack relevance.

Pityn says youth are at a key learning and social stage where they are defining their aspirations for the future and developing key social and professional networks. When properly nurtured, economically active youth can be key breadwinners within the family unit. 🌱

Someday, a shop of his own

In his early teens Yama worked Sunday to Thursday as one of Ajmal's apprentices. He attended school from 9 a.m. to noon, then came to the shop to work until 6 p.m.

The oldest of four children, Yama used his \$10 a week earnings to help his family buy food and clothing.

While he appreciated being able to go to school, Yama got a special buzz from learning how to operate machinery and build tables and chairs.

"I am learning many useful things here," he says. "I can see myself running a carpentry shop like Ajmal one day." 🌱



Apprentice Yama: First school, then work

Feedback invited

Readers are invited to comment on this report. What has surprised you about the scope and impact of MEDA's work in Afghanistan? What else would you like to know? What do you think we should have done there, or could still do? Send comments to the editor: wkroeker@meda.org