

3/30/2023

Afghan Peace Education Program
(Building Peaceful Society/ Media and Culture of Peace Projects)
Questionnaire

Interviewee: Dr. Seddiq Weera,

Former project director of Afghanistan Peace Project and Research Coordinator at McMaster University.

Interviewer: Muzhgan Hamraz

Research Coordinator, Participedia Project, McMaster University

Brief Description of Questionnaire

This questionnaire is designed for the Purpose to provide adequate data about Afghanistan Education Peace Program which was implemented by McMaster University and its partners between 1999-2002. Based on ongoing efforts of McMaster and its counterparts, Participedia is initiated as a global crowdsourcing platform for researchers, activists, practitioners, and anyone interested in public participation and democratic innovations. Participedia aims to be useful to scholars (and practitioners) as an open-source, real-time, cumulative qualitative and quantitative data repository about participatory and deliberative governance experiences since 2011.

The information that you provide will be documented on Participedia as Case entry and will assist readers to increase their knowledge and receive adequate data regarding the projects in Afghanistan not only inside Canada but across the globe.

Thank you for your participation in this interview in advance and looking forward to have your pries contribution responding to the following questions:

1. Please introduce yourself and tell me a little about your current role and research.

My name is Seddiq Weera. I was born and raised in Afghanistan where I studied and practiced medicine. After immigrating to Canada in 1991, I completed an MSc in clinical epidemiology at McMaster University followed by my PhD studies at the University of Toronto (that I could not complete in time). My involvement in peace and reconciliation stemmed from the focus of my doctoral research on the role of psychosocial education in prevention of interpersonal challenges.

The teachings of Professor Johan Galtung and the support from McMaster University scholars at the Centers for International Health and Peace Studies, enabled me to take practical steps in promoting a culture of peace and a national reconciliation program in Afghanistan. Despite my focus on education sector reform between 2002 and 2018 in Afghanistan, I continued working with civil society organizations in promote a nation-wide mutual understanding initiative.

Presently, I manage and support research activities at the Michael G DeGroote School of Medicine at McMaster University.

2. Please describe and tell us about the Afghan Peace Project initiated by McMaster University.

In mid-1990s, while working as a research fellow at McMaster University, I joined the Health REACH project with a hope to contribute to capacity enhancement and institutional development in Afghanistan. Health REACH was a partnership project between the Centre for Peace Studies and Centre for International Health at McMaster University that funded reconnaissance visits to cities of Hirat and Jalalabad in Afghanistan and city of Peshawar, in Pakistan.

In 1999 I carried out a consultations and pilot training on psychosocial issues with Afghan experts at the Peshawar-based British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan (SCA). The weeklong consultation and training, attended by male and female producers and program writers from the BBC Reach program and teacher educators from the SCA, covered topics such as stress management, communication, conflict-analysis, conflict resolution, and reconciliation. It was this visit that led to the conception of the McMaster University peace program for Afghanistan.

First phase of the Peace Program for Afghanistan, started as the project titled 'Media and Culture of Peace' that was developed and implemented in partnership with the Afghan University in Peshawar. This phase had two-fold activities a) to share best practices in conflict analysis and transformation with the Afghan politicians and b) to enhance capacity of the civil society organizations and university students and faculty members in promotion of a culture of peace and reconciliation.

Professor Johan Galtung facilitated a week-long workshop with senior members of the Peshawar-based Mujahideen parties where he guided them to bring out layers of causal factors to Afghan war and win-win options for achieving durable peace.

Workshops on conflict analysis, conflict transformation, promotion of empathy, and national reconciliation were held with group of women only (brought together by the Afghan Women Organization of Fatana Gailani), educators from non-governmental organization as well as students and faculty members from the Afghan University. The civil society organizations included three peace NGOs (non-governmental organizations) namely CPAU (Council for Peace and Unity), SDA (Sanayee Development Foundation), and RACA (Research and ...) that remained as partners for the rest of the project activities.

The politicians asked the McMaster University team to facilitate dialogue among Afghan warring factions and groupings and the civil society groups requested help with development of peace and reconciliation resources including storybooks for children. Sixteen illustrated storybooks were developed in partnership with the Sanayee Development Organization/ Foundation. The aim was to help Afghan children understand the impact of loss, fear, anger, shame, sadness and stereotyping on interpersonal relationships and how to deal with their emotions. The peace manual provided detail on concepts of stress, grief, anger, hostilities and hatred, self-esteem etc.

Second project, Building Peaceful Societies (2001-2002), was an extension of the first to expand education and consultations on conflict analysis, resolution and national reconciliation to include senior officials of the newly established government in Kabul and to pilot test the peace storybooks as well as the manuals in schools inside Afghanistan. At this phase, partnership was solidified with Cooperation for Peace and Unity (CPAU), Sanayee Development Organization (SDO), and Research Council of Afghanistan (RACA). Drs. Johan Galtung, Jack Santa Barbara, Joanna Santa Barbara along with peace

educators from partner organization held day-long awareness and consultation sessions with the senior members of the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Information and Culture and Ministry of Higher Education of the Afghan Interim Administration. In addition to covering peaceful conflict resolution and peace journalism, international examples of national reconciliation programs were discussed in more depth.

As a result of the new partnerships with the institutions of the Afghan Interim Administration, UNICEF-Afghanistan supported the Ministry of Education to undertake pilot-testing of the peace storybooks and manuals in Kabul schools and print a package of storybooks for every school in the country. Similarly, the Help the Afghan Children (HTAC) replicated the training of teachers on peace manuals and the use of peace story books in schools in Kabul and Kapisa provinces. Both organizations had follow-up peace education activities for years to come. In 2003, the Ministry of Education mandated textbook developers to incorporate peace messages into language and social and religious textbooks. Meanwhile, HTAC trained its teacher educators in the use of storybook and added a pre- and post-assessment of the use of storybooks in their schools. An international advisor to HTAC developed a teacher manual for a better use of storybooks in classrooms and reprinted the 16 storybooks in Pashto and Dari languages (see detail here: [A Journey of Peace](#)).

3. Describe your personal experience as a director of Afghan Peace Project?

After consultations with the educators and writers of the SCA and BBC radio in 1999 I was convinced about lack of thinking, beliefs, knowledge, and skills for addressing conflicts peacefully and for restoring trust after hostilities, in Afghanistan. Twenty-four years later, I feel the same way. It saddens me to get more testimonials on how lack of communication and problem-solving skills adversely affect relationships in families, neighborhoods, and communities. It breaks my heart to see a strong majority of well-intentioned activists from all walks of life in Afghanistan lack empathy for one another and therefore cannot join hands for bigger and vital goals.

4. How did you select your targeted population for this project?

Understanding the interface between war-like thoughts and beliefs and violent conflict; and considering the strength of a university group in education and research, we chose to partner with an education institution and expand the collaboration to civil society especially NGOs that were already promoting a culture of peace. Workshops with Afghan politicians in Peshawar was organized in consultation with partner organization to explore options for dialogues among warring factions for creating a nation-wide peace platform. Next stop was Rome in Italy where discussions on a peace platform were held with Dr. Zalmay Rasul and Mostafa Zahir. After September 11, extending project work to Kabul Interim Administration was a joint decision with the partnering peace NGOS.

5. What did participation look like in practice? What role did organizers, supporters, funders, and participants play during each step of the process?

Participants included non-governmental organization representatives especially those working on peace education and conflict resolution (men and women), university professors and students from the Afghan University (in Peshawar) and from the Poly-technic University (in Kabul). Participants in a multi-day workshop with women, were all women including schoolteachers and community members. Participants in a larger civil society session represented a larger number of Peshawar-based non-

governmental organizations. Participants in Kabul sessions included senior members of the Ministry of Education, seniors from Ministry of Information and Culture and the seniors and faculty members from Ministry of Higher Education. Sessions were co-organized and co-facilitated with peace educators from the partner organizations mainly CPAU, SDO, RACA. International experts like Professor Johan Galtung, Drs. Joanna Santa Barbara, Jack Santa Barbara and Graeme MacQueen, offered examples of best global practices, Afghan organizers translated into Farsi and Pashto and elaborated on local examples and application aspects. Some sessions were led by the Afghan peace educators only. McMaster University's Centre for Peace Studies, was approving plans, offering administrative support, managed finances, and reviewed and submitted reports to the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). CIDA, expected mid-year and end of the year reports.

6. Were participants satisfied with the outcome? What did they expect and were their expectations met?

Participants found every discussion, consultation, and workshop eye-opening and were suggesting expansion of such consultations and dialogues to the entire country as well as to all educational institutions, mosques, and all levels of the government. Some suggested that the Afghan government must launch a peace and reconciliation program. A member of the McMaster University team, met with the Hamed Karzai the head of the Afghan Interim Government and suggested a temporary Ministry of Peace and Reconciliation for a period of five to ten years. The same member of the team advocated for a national reconciliation program with the two religious leaders Peer Gilani and Hazrat Mojaddedi. In 2021, a visit to Rome was the beginning of creating a peace dialogue between the Peshawar group, the Cyprus group and the Rome group to explore a common ground. In retrospect, I see the McMaster peace projects as a useful pilot and feasibility exercise which could have been used for developing large scale programs. Many small scales spin off initiatives occurred later that could be attributed to the McMaster peace projects such as the HTAC use of peace resources for many years to come, the development of the Life Skills textbook for grades one to three in 2003-2004 which was authored by a member of McMaster team, the 2010 Canadian efforts to coordinate peace civil society organizations, and consultations and advocacy for a national reconciliation program in Afghanistan.

7. What were the issues at the core of the project? How and to what extent were participants given the opportunity to have their opinions or voices heard on these issues?

The core of the projects was capacity enhancement among Afghans to promote peaceful resolution of conflicts and post-hostility reconciliation to replace violent conflict, hostilities, and hatred.

8. Were tools/techniques used to facilitate the dialogue? If so, which ones?

On a political level, the aim was to help Afghans dig deeper for layers and roots of their conflict, focus on finding win-win resolutions, and consider regional and global dimensions of the war in peace efforts. Examples of other violent conflicts and best practices in ending war and durable peace were used to stimulate thinking beyond zero sum games of war-thinking. The role of media and peace journalism was introduced to complement peace education in schools and communities. Finding common ground, ideal future for all, and the use of creative thinking to find more than one solution were some of the strategies introduced and put to test through small group discussions. Another tool was the use of

hierarchy of position (rigid and less flexible) versus objectives (why they want it), versus basic rights for all as bases for peace negotiations. This tool assisted participants to move away from dialogue around position more towards the objectives, which would hypothetically allow warring factions to use creativity and find win-win options that would allow peace agreement that would meet objectives of all parties. The ideal of negotiations based on basic rights was liked by most participants because it could bring hostile parties to work together. Another tool was promotion of empathy to deal with biased views of hostile parties and reduce hatred allowing parties to work together and move away from blame game to focusing on real unresolved national issues.

9. What did the Afghan Education Peace Program achieve in Afghanistan and even the region?
Did the program have any lasting impact?

Promotion of a culture of peace to replace hostile and hateful thinking, beliefs and behaviors led to emergence of peace champions and spin off initiatives among NGOs as well as the ministries of education and higher education. However, the program fell short of enabling Afghans to run a national reconciliation and building a national cohesion.

10. What were the major challenges you faced in implementing this project and were able to overcome?
11. Did you encounter any criticisms or challenges during the project?

One criticism came from an Islamist leader of warring factions who labeled us as promoting western way of thinking and that Islamic teaching was rich enough in teaching peace. The peace NGOs did not like the project-focused approach of McMaster University and the Canadian government and wished for a long-term program to enhance individual and institutional capacity for ending war and achieving durable peace.

12. What were your plans to continue, were they come true or not?

McMaster team was hoping for a global partnership for forging the peace agenda in Afghanistan however, discussions with the political office of the United Nations in Afghanistan and the President of the country Hamed Karzai, fell short of major follow-up by these two entities.

13. Would you like anything else to add? Suggestions, Recommendations and Objections?

I am as convinced today, as I was in 1999 that a deep shift in thinking among Afghans is essential to allow them to focus on a common ideal for all and move away from issues that divide them.

Thank you!