Glimpses of Hope in the Shadow of War

The Afghan Youth Project

A report on selected research results and policy implications

THE AFGHAN YOUTH PROJECT
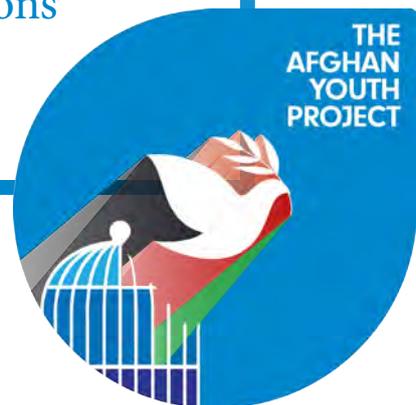
Phil C. Langer
Aisha-Nusrat Ahmad
Ulrike Auge
Khesraw Majidi

Figure 1. *Graphic recording from the Afghan Youth Symposium @ IPU, March 2019 (by Dominique Kleiner)*

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DIE PSYCHOANALYTISCHE UNIVERSITÄT IN BERLIN

Research team: The Afghan Youth Project was developed, designed and conducted as part of a participatory framework that included (in alphabetic order of first names): Aisha-Nusrat Ahmad, Angela Kühner, Farhad Majidi, Hamid Shah, Khesraw Majidi, Nasera Faryabi, Obaid Majidi, Phil C. Langer, Shaista Alikhan, Shamsia Mohammadi & Ulrike Auge.

Authors of this report:

- *Dr. Phil C. Langer* is a professor of Social Psychology and Social Psychiatry at the International Psychoanalytic University Berlin and an associated member of the Center for Transdisciplinary Gender Studies at the Humboldt-University Berlin and the Institute of Sociology at the Goethe-University Frankfurt.

- *Aisha-Nusrat Ahmad*, M.A., is a research associate at the International Psychoanalytic University Berlin, an associated lecturer at the Frankfurt University of Applied Scieces, and an associated member of the Cornelia Goethe Center for Gender Studies at the Goethe-University Frankfurt.

- *Ulrike Auge*, M.A., received her master's degree in Social and Cultural Anthropology from the Free University, Berlin and is currently pursuing a master's degree in Psychology at the International Psychoanalytic University Berlin, where she works as a student assistant.

- *Khesraw Majidi*, is currently pursuing his master's degree in Social Sciences at the Humboldt-University Berlin. He works as a student assistant at the International Psychoanalytic University Berlin and a peace envoy at the Humboldt University and is a Humanity in Action fellow.

For **further project material**, please visit the university website at www.ipu-berlin.de or contact us directly.

Contact information: Prof. Dr. Phil C. Langer, International Psychoanalytic University Berlin, Stromstraße 3b, 10555 Berlin, Germany; e-mail: sozpsy@ipu-berlin.de.

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Executive Summary

خلاصه تحقیق

What is the report about? In this report, we present key findings and policy implications from the **Afghan Youth Project**, which was carried out from 2016 to 2017 in the Northern provinces Balkh and Kunduz of Afghanistan. It focuses on the experiences of Afghan youth as well as the perceptions and interpretations of their current situations, emphasizing their important role as reflexive actors in a sustainable peacebuilding processes in the country.

What is it based on? In order to understand how young people perceive the current socio-economic and political situation around them, their everyday experiences in a conflict-ridden environment, and their outlook toward the future, we applied an empirical qualitative research approach that combines interviews, projective essays, drawings and ethnographic observations. This approach depicts the diverse lifeworlds of young people in Afghanistan by taking into account the existent ethnic, religious, socioeconomic and educational heterogeneity in urban as well as rural areas in the provinces of **Balkh** and **Kunduz**. In total, the Afghan Youth Project brings together the voices and visual expressions of 223 young people (→ see p. 16).

What can the reader expect? These young people deliver a remarkably acute analysis of the current socio-political and economic situation and the manifold structural problems in their country. They elaborate on their criticism at the macro and meso levels and express how these issues affect their current lives and conceptions of the future. Some of the key areas of concern for them are:

- **ongoing violence in the country** (→ see pp. 27)
- **the current political system** (→ see pp. 42)
- **poverty and unemployment** (→see pp. 52)
- **corruption and nepotism** (→ see pp. 48)
- **education** (→ see pp. 58)

In the accounts provided by these young people, such issues are closely interwoven with one another: they impact their everyday lives on account of the complex interactions that arise between massive social injustice, experiences of inequality, innumerable daily stress factors, and various forms of everyday violence, which particularly affects minorities, girls and women.

In the context of a fragile, precarious and insecure situation, these young people develop collective **counter-narratives of hope** and desire that depict a different, peaceful Afghanistan. These counter-narratives include conceptions of a fair, just and meritocratic society that provides realistic opportunities for its people – especially those who are vulnerable and in need. **Unity** and **solidarity** are strongly emphasized, as we can see from accounts provided by young women. **Faith** and **hope** are a key part to their visions for the future, granting them the strength to cope with ongoing violence and daily stress factors.

What can we learn from this? Young people can and do play a crucial role in peacebuilding and societal transitions. At the same time, however, they need support to identify suitable roles that can allow them to contribute to **social transition** and **peacebuilding**. Afghan society and its political establishment, as well as the international community, must tackle the challenge of providing young people with affordable education and perspectives as well as helping them to take action. The latter can be achieved by getting young people to meaningfully participate in civil society discourses and political decision-making processes. Listening to the voices of Afghanistan's youth is essentially for establishing a peaceful and prosperous country. (see pp. 93)

Figure 2. *Map of Afghanistan with the research project regions highlighted*[1]

Overall population: 31.6 M (CSO 2018/19)/ 35.5 M (World Bank 2017)
GNI per capita in 2017: 560 $
Life expactancy at birth in 2016: 63.7 years

Religion
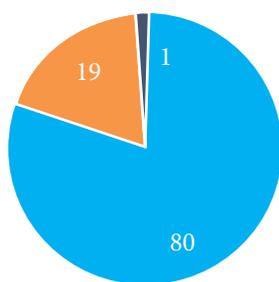
Ethnicity

Living...

Sunni
Shia
Other
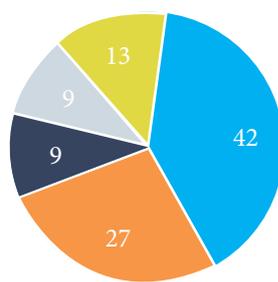
Pashtun   Uzbek
Tajik   Other
Hazara
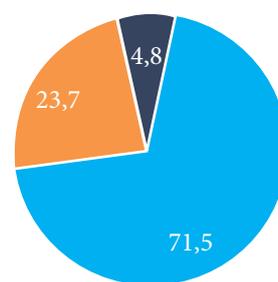
in rural areas
in urban areas
as nomads

Figure 3. *Selected sociodemographic facts (compiled from Central Statistics Organization, German Federal Foreign Office and World Bank)*[2]

Preface

پیشگفتار

Afghanistan has been one of focus areas of politics, media and the public for many years. Even though the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) ended in 2015 once it handed over complete security responsibilities to the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces, the country is a far from being at peace. Hardly a week goes by without reports of terrorist attacks or fighting involving the Taliban or Daʾesh (*al-Dawlah al-Islamīyah fī l-ʿIrāq wa-sh-Shām* – the so-called Islamic State, ISIS or ISIL), often resulting in dozens of dead and injured civilians. According to the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and the UN Human Rights Office, more civilians were killed in the Afghan conflict in 2018 than at any time since records have been kept. The 3,804 documented civilian deaths included 927 children, the highest recorded number of boys and girls killed in the conflict in a single year.

Children and adolescents represent more than just a highly vulnerable group that is exposed to high levels of violence: accounting for almost two-thirds of the Afghan population, they are also a (potentially) strong force within the societal and political order, as reflected in the Afghan saying: "Young people are the future-makers of Afghanistan"

جوانان آینده سازان افغانستان هستند

The experiences and voices of Afghan youth are, however, still underrepresented in scientific and political debates that primarily focus on 'powerful' political and military actors, both national and international. Empirical insights into the everyday struggles of Afghan youths, their perceptions of the political, societal, and economic situation, and their wishes, hopes and vision for a future Afghanistan are scarce.

How do they experience and interpret their life-worlds? How does violence affect their identity and integrity while also shaping their view of a different Afghanistan? What do they imagine a future Afghanistan to be like? And to what extent do they consider themselves capable of contributing to societal and political change? What can we – as scholars, policy-makers, activists, educational experts and mental health practitioners in governmental and non-governmental organizations – learn from them in our endeavors to support the country's journey towards sustainable peace?

The Afghan Youth Project (originally titled "Wie der Krieg im Kopf den Blick auf Frieden trübt" in German, translated as "Glimpses of Hope in the Shadow of War") aims

to address at least some of these questions. The project was carried out in the northern provinces of Balkh and Kunduz (with some additional field research in Kabul), mainly in 2016 and 2017. Based on an empirical-qualitative research approach, more than 220 children and teenagers participated in the project by providing us with their stories, their analyses of the present situation, and their ideas for the future. Through interviews, group discussions, projective essays and drawings, they share rich insights into the current situation that young people in Afghanistan face and offer us meaningful stimuli and ideas for how to collaborate with them in thinking about what needs to be done.

In this report, we present selected research findings from the project and outline policy implications that respond to the needs of Afghan youth. Although we do share analytic insights and empirical material here, this is a research report in a strict sense. In order to reach the broader public, organizations working in the country, policy-makers and media experts focusing on this region, we refrained from performing highly detailed analyses, elaborating on our theoretical frameworks or citing secondary literature in this report. At the same time, this report is not a policy paper in a strict sense either. In order to do justice to the complexity of the current situation facing young people in Afghanistan, we not only felt obliged to include additional background information (found in orange colored boxes throughout the report) and brief references to informative research debates (found in blue colored boxes throughout the report) but also to present the youth voices and perspectives in all their diversity in this report. Ultimately, we ended up exceeding the planned scope of this report fourfold.

Put into positive terms: We believe that the report contains a multitude of exciting empirical data, insightful interpretations and useful pieces of contextualization, which various individuals interested in and working on Afghanistan might find useful. It brings together issues such as security, political developments, and economic and educational challenges – topics which are usually presented separately. Ultimately, context matters and intertwining it with the empirical material we received from the young people offers the possibility of unleashing new interdisciplinary dialogues and political perspectives for joint action.

First, a word of caution before moving on: While this project has generated quite extensive, diverse and rich empirical material, we must also stress that it only represents a particular snapshot of the situation faced by the youth of Afghanistan. Regionally, the project covers roughly two provinces and touches upon the capital. Whether or not the findings are representative of other parts of the country remains an open question. With regard to what one might tentatively refer to as a "worldview", the majority of the project participants explicitly shared our vision for a peaceful and democratic Afghanistan devoid of fighting and terrorism. We do, however, acknowledge that viewing violence as a means of survival, belonging or social and political change is a position that young people in Afghanistan can and do take, as well. Nevertheless, we decided to focus on the strong voices of solidarity, unity and peace that run through most of the accounts provided by our project participants.

The snapshot we present in this report – one that is certainly temporary and is likely to have changed to some degree since the four times we went to Afghanistan between 2015 and 2017 – does not seek to make generalizations: neither the young people we quote here nor we as researchers can speak for all young people in the country. However, we do refer, more often than not, to "the young people (in Afghanistan)", "(Afghan) youth(s)" etc. instead of relying on (certainly more precise) terms such as "project participants", "interview partners" or the like in this report. We believe that this lexical choice improves readability and adds a particular drive to the message that the project participants who we provide a voice to – inevitably paternalistically – in this report and with who we sympathize.

"Welcome to the skies of Afghanistan" was the announcement that roused two of us – Aisha-Nusrat Ahmad and Phil C. Langer – from sleep during a flight to Mazar-e-Sharif in March 2016. Looking out of the window of the plane as it was preparing to land, we saw that the sun was just about to rise. Both of us recall the intense feelings we connected to this moment – hope just over the horizon amidst a complicated reality on the ground that awaited us below. It was on this research trip that Khesraw Majidi entered our project team (incidentally, yet purposefully) with his very personal vision of hope. For her part, Ulrike Auge, who would join the team after our research base moved from Frankfurt to Berlin, also brought theories of hope into our discussion, rooted in her ethnographic background, which went on to guide us through the project.

Unfortunately, the sense of hope that was so strong at the beginning gradually faded away each time we returned to Afghanistan. Kunduz city was captured by the Taliban yet again, forcing family, friends and project partners to flee. One of the hotels that accommodated us in Kabul, where we enjoyed the first almond blossoms of the spring, was attacked and partly set ablaze, an act that left 18 people dead, staff and guests alike. The German general consulate in Mazar-e-Sharif was bombed and the embassy in Kabul was heavily damaged during an attack that resulted in dozens of civilian fatalities. Violence skyrocketed in some areas, and we wondered why it had taken German officials so long to acknowledge the presence of Da'esh/IS in the country: a development we could quite clearly observe during our pilot study in 2015. Where had the hope gone?

By engaging with the stories of the children once again in the writing of this report – which reflects the history of the Afghan Youth Project and of our team – the bit of hope we wish to share with the world has been able to surface anew. May it prosper and spread.

Research design and methods

Building on a preliminary investigation from April 2015, we designed an empirical-qualitative study to delve into the life-worlds of young people in Afghanistan, focusing on the research questions noted above. Opting for a qualitative design better accounted for the micro-level of the young people's experiences. Narrative interviews with young people between the ages of 10 and 21 in the northern provinces of Balkh and Kunduz were at the heart of the study. The pragmatic choice of these two provinces was justified by their differences in terms of the prevalence of violence, respective socio-spatial structure (especially the distribution of urban and rural areas) and demographic composition, which, as contrasting cases, promised to deliver insightful results. In addition to the interviews, asking the participants to make drawings at the beginning and in between two thematic parts of the interview (the "draw and tell" technique) had three aims: they could ease communication as an icebreaker, they could be used as a guideline for subsequent questions, and, from a trauma-theoretical perspective, one could very well retrace experiences that could otherwise not be expressed verbally. During the first field phase, we decided to broaden the methodological design and collect projective essays – based on Gillespie and Allport's (1955) nearly forgotten study "Youth's Outlook to the Future" – asking children to write about their life expectations for the next 10 years; drawings were also included at the end of the writing process (the "write and draw" technique).

Between April 2016 and June 2017, we interviewed 52 children and adolescents between the ages of 10 and 21 (28 individual interviews, 6 group interviews, 2 backtalk focus-group discussions – 43 of the participants were between 14 and 19 years old) and three teachers (backtalk focus-group discussions). The interviews were conducted by the peer researchers in Dari or in Pashtu, who separated participants by gender in most cases. Some interviews were also conducted by the German team members in three field-study phases (March 2016, October 2016, February 2017), either directly in English or with interpreters.

Sampling took place in a contrastive manner to depict the diversity of living environments and life-worlds, representing urban and rural areas in the provinces of Balkh and Kunduz (with individual interviews and ethnographic observations in Kabul). Some of the interviewees had been engaged in demanding physical work since childhood – e.g., as mechanics, painters, construction workers, wheelbarrow drivers – while others had already begun studying at university. In a group discussion, young women were interviewed who had not received any formal education for economic reasons or due to family prohibitions. A group interview with young women, who had fled Kunduz city after the Taliban had taken over, provided insight into the current reality of living under conditions of war and ongoing armed conflict. After receiving permission from the Ministry of Justice of Balkh Province, a group interview with male adolescents in prison could be carried out in order to include the perspective of violent-affine youth. In addition to the interviews, a total of 171 essays and drawings were collected at different facilities (public and private schools, an orphanage) in Balkh Province, with municipal approval, and in rural areas. The participating children were between the ages of 10 and 21.

Thematic analysis and group interpretations of the interviews, group discussions and essays were based on English translations. The interim results were discussed with the peer researchers during each subsequent visit, allowing us to make adjustments to the study in the respective field phase.

Allport, G. W., & Gillespie, J. M. (1955). Youth's outlook on the future: A cross-national study. New York: Doubleday; Blatter, J., Langer, P. C. & Wagemann, C. (2017). Qualitative Methoden in der Politikwissenschaft. Wiesbaden: Springer VS; Langer, P. C., & Ahmad, A. N. (2018). Psychologie und Biographieforschung. In H. Lutz et al. (eds.), Handbuch Biographieforschung (pp. 175-186). Wiesbaden: Springer VS.

Figure 4. Graphic recordings from the Afghan Youth Symposium @ IPU,
March 2019 (by Dominique Kleiner)

The youth's voices

صدای جوانان

Their perception of the present...

دیدگاه جوانان

What is at stake in Afghanistan according to the country's youth?
Afghanistan's youth delivers a remarkably acute analysis of the current socio-political and economic situation along with the manifold structural problems facing the country. The young people in this study elaborate their criticism at the macro and meso levels and expresses how these issues affect their current lives and conceptions of the future. Some of the key areas of concern for them include the current political system (or, more precisely, the concrete enactment of policies, prevailing attitudes, and the behavior of politicians and political leaders), poverty, unemployment, corruption, nepotism, education and, of course, ongoing violence. In their accounts, these issues are closely interwoven, impacting their everyday lives through the complex interaction of massive social injustice and experiences of inequality, innumerable daily stress factors and different forms of violence.

A desperate call for peace

صلح

> Every moment is difficult to live in Afghanistan and your life is always under threat.

Experiences of military violence are a key concern among young people. In every single essay, the security situation is addressed as a frame of reference for reflecting upon the consequences of a chronically insecure and potentially violent environment affecting people's everyday life.

> There are multiple things that make Afghanistan insecure: the first is suicide attacks, second robberies, third – how can I tell you – it is the kidnapping of young children in the streets and roads, who cannot go anyplace. So, these things heighten insecurity.

> In fact, we are the kind of people that we got used to something. True – there are some voices of insecurity around, but we got used to it. But still, I do have concern in my thoughts suicide explosions and I am forced to think about it.

One of the frightening incidents was a suicide attack that took place some years ago in Mazar. At the time, I prayed that it would not repeat anymore because, whenever suicide takes place, everything gets distorted, voices and maybe someone remains without a father or without mother and or remains unaccompanied. So, I am scared of such thing and perhaps this has become ordinary in Afghanistan as there are, maybe, about 5 or 10 suicide attacks during a day in Afghanistan to be worried about, and so I'm terrified.

When I think about the future, I imagine that I've graduated from university, I'm a good engineer and I have good living … but will I be able to achieve my wishes? Because there's no security and all across peace may or may not come.

We witness suicide attacks, war, killing, and blood most of the time. I'm really tired.

Today, there are conspiracies of Taliban and IS in the country, that they could stop us from improving through their unjust acts and they can confuse our minds.

What is indicative here is that, after almost four decades of war and conflict, military terminology has found its way into their everyday language, signaling a normalized perception of chronic insecurity. Speaking of "security" versus "insecurity", of "fighting" and of "killing", has become a common feature in the interviews and essays. Children of a very young age use these words to refer to, describe and criticize the current violent state of conflict affecting their country. The descriptions of violent acts seem distanced and emotionally detached.

This observation – which we might refer to as a normalization of violence or even as a sense of normalized fatality – also holds true for some interviews. In a remarkable research encounter with street kids in Kunduz, none of whom were older than 13, the interview recording starts with a brief scared cry from the field researcher reacting to the sound of artillary shelling. The reaction from the boys is telling as they try to comfort him by saying: "Don't be scared of that! They just fire but the shelling is in the fighting area", adding that "the government controls the area at the moment but there are rumors that fighting will start on the 10th day of the new year." Normalization of violence includes and is fueled by the publication of pictures and videos of atrocities, a common practice by the regular media, while more graphic images and videos are widely distributed and shared through social media among the youths.

Sometimes, however, the narrative strategies of normalization fail and stories of flight and death, the loss of social trust and deadly despair surface that breach their implicit expectation of "violence as usual" time and again. In a group interview with three young women, who escaped the second capture of Kunduz by the Taliban a few days before and took refuge in Mazar-e-Sharif, shared the following in different sequences:

It was very dangerous to leave home. They captured many places, but we were completely resided house due to the fear of so much fighting, because many people got killed in cross fights between the Taliban and government. Therefore, there were huge human losses in the fighting. […] We were all completely in fear and it was difficult to move. The continued firing affected our mental thinking and status was in so much stress as well had headaches; we could not sleep properly and did not know what to do.

It was really like with lots of troubles and eh problems we...we somehow we manage to come to here. We had to cross like different you know situations and then the roads here like all dead bodies were over there. We had to sometimes, you know we could have like eh always can be … we had we were just sometimes putting our feet, you know on the dead bodies and then there were lot of arms eh persons people all over there.
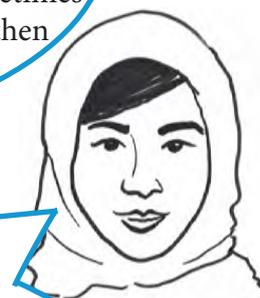
Last time after - eh after the Kunduz eh Kunduz was captured by the Taliban then we just had the hope that like the situation is going to be ok and would get normal. So there won't be security issues anymore and we moved back to Kunduz. We just hoped that we can start again, the education and everything. [...] We were really like they assured us that there won't be any problems in the future, never it would come under the sway of the Taliban again. But this time like people have lost their faith on their promises you know...

We are right now really tired of living this kind of life and I think we would prefer like being a dead body than living like this.

The dire security situation places limitations on everyday mobility and action, limits their future aspirations and results in problematic psychosocial and mental health issues.

Conceptualizations of violence

While this report emphasizes the omnipresence of violence in the life-worlds of young people, the idea of a totality of violence that characterizes, shapes or even determines all social interactions – as suggested by current approaches based on the concept of "spaces of violence" ("Gewalträume"; see, e.g., Baberowski & Metzler 2012) – proves inadequate for understanding the meaning(s) of violence among the youth of Afghanistan. It would certainly be more insightful to refer to Kaloma Beck's (2017) analysis of NGO-related topologies of everyday life in Kabul. She points out that actors must organize their everyday lives under the permanent threat of violence. She explores the question of how "security" is produced in various lifeworld contexts and what consequences arise from this at the meso and macro levels of societal interaction. In this regard, one interesting subject would be to better understand the meaning and implication of framing violence as security and how, in this respect, they actively and creatively construct and (re)negotiate "security" and "safe spaces" in their everyday interaction praxis. "Western" conceptualizations of violence – a prominent example is provided by Reemtsma (2012) – might not be applicable to the Afghan context, thus calling for the development of new theoretical approaches..

Baberowski, J., & Metzler, G. (Eds.). (2012). Gewalträume: Soziale Ordnungen im Ausnahmezustand (Vol. 20). Campus Verlag; Beck, T. K. (2017). Räume der Sicherheit–Räume der Gewalt. Topologien des Alltags in der afghanischen Hauptstadt Kabul. ZeFKo Zeitschrift für Friedens-und Konfliktforschung, 6(1), 6-36; Reemtsma, J. P. (2012). Trust and violence: An essay on a modern relationship. Princeton University Press.

While violence – often framed as a security issue – is omnipresent across the essays and interviews, it is noteworthy that are only few drawings in our sample that exhibit explicit violent content. Only 5 of 171 essay-related drawings depict violence directly by telling a story with an explicit message. A violent present day is set in contrast to a future peace. The majority of the drawings show landscapes, flowers and flags, references to education – which is not all too surprising considering the school settings where they were collected –, and the children portrayed themselves as teachers, nurses, doctors, engineers and architects. We do not take the marked absence of violence in most of the drawings as a sign of escapism; instead it might represent a sense of normalized fatality due to the omnipresence of violence itself and to future aspirations and programmatic calls for peace in this regard.

Figure 5. Drawing from the Afghan Youth Project
(Texts in Drawing 1: War is our misfortune. Drawing 2: Peace is our motto.
If peace is our motto, we will have victory.)

Figure 6. Drawing from the Afghan Youth Project
(Text in Drawing: We want peace.)

Figure 7. Drawing from the Afghan Youth Project
Text in Drawing: This is a flower that is blooming and needs water and soil for it as our country needs peace and is therefore thirsty for peace and freedom.)
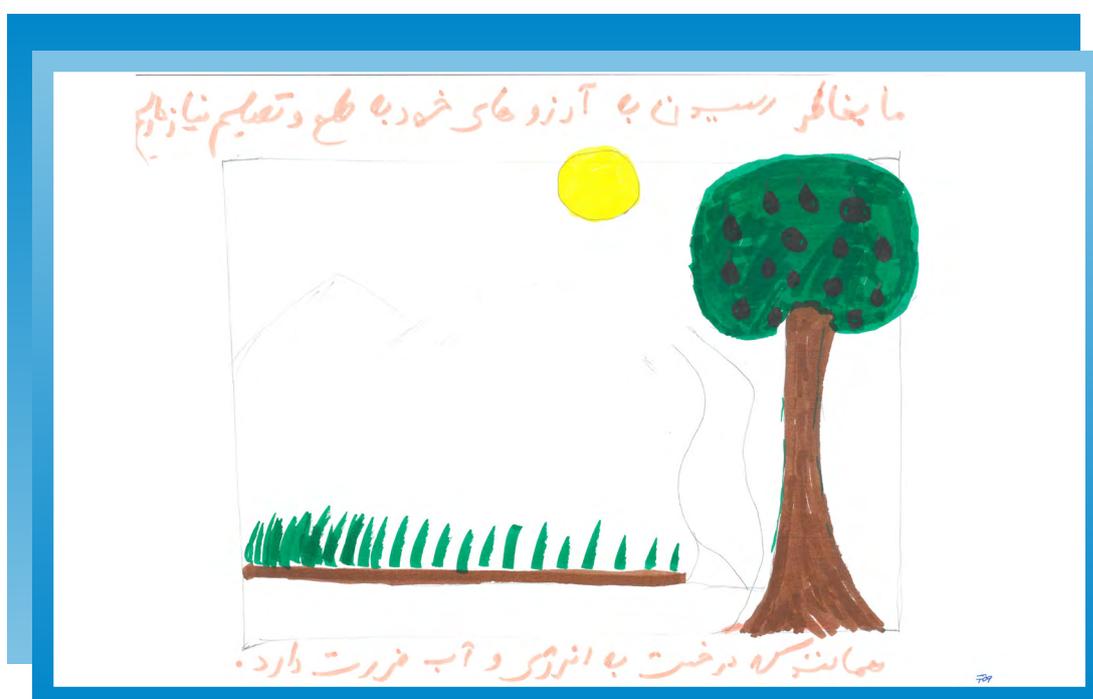
Figure 8. Drawing from the Afghan Youth Project
(Text in Drawing: We need peace and education for achieving our wishes, as trees need water and sun.)

Drawings in comparative perspective

The drawings that have been collected in the course of the Afghan Youth Project show similarity to the drawings Kamens, Constaninides and Flefel (2016) presented from children and young people in Palestine. We assume that this is related to the fact that children and young people in both countries are brought up in a context of chronic violence that has become an everyday normality. This stands in sharp contrast to drawings that children create in the aftermath of ruptures of extreme violence, such as after the genocides in Rwanda or among the Yezidis in Northern Iraq. In these contexts, violence is depicted directly and in extreme detail. A study about the experiences of former ISIS child soldiers in Northern Iraq is currently being conducted by Langer and Ahmad using methods of collective storytelling that also include drawings.

Buriel, A. (2017). Ethnographic study and Participatory Action-Research in Non-Formal Education, Artistic experiences and hope: identity issues of displaced children Ashti IDPs Camp, Sulaymaniyah, Kurdistan, Iraq June to September 2017. Doctoral dissertation. Paris: Institut des Relations Internationales et Stratégiques Dyregrov, A., Gupta, L., Gjestad, R., & Mukanoheli, E. (2000). Trauma exposure and psychological reactions to genocide among Rwandan children. Journal of Traumatic stress, 13(1), 3-21 Kamens, S. R., Constandinides, D., & Flefel, F. (2016). Drawing the future: Psychosocial correlates of Palestinian children's drawings. International Perspectives in Psychology: Research, Practice, Consultation, 5(3), 167.

Figure 9. Drawing by Yezidi survivors of the genocide committed by ISIS in Iraq (documented by Aisha-Nusrat Ahmad).

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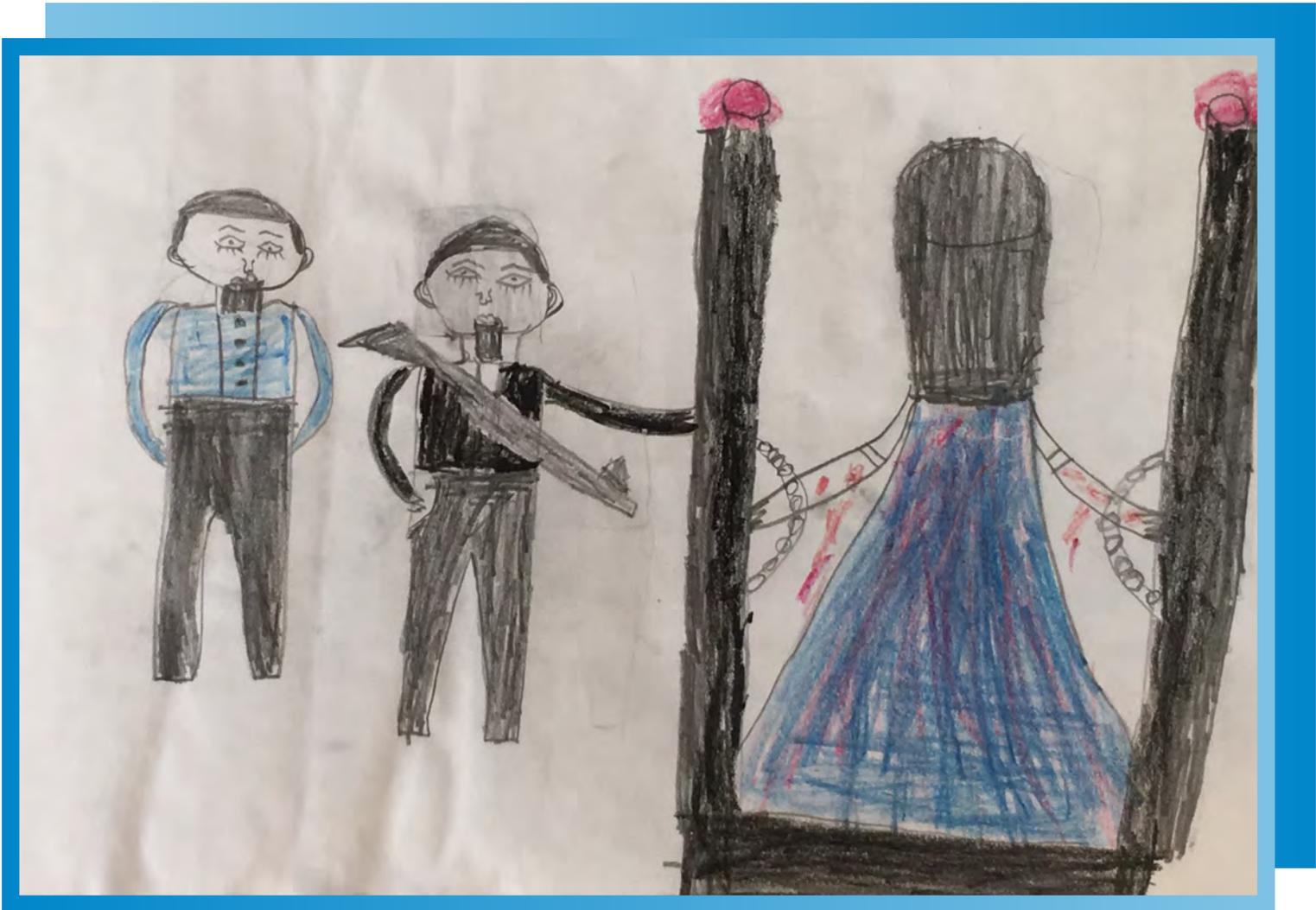
*Figure 10. Drawing by Yezidi survivors of the genocide committed by ISIS in Iraq
(documented by Aisha-Nusrat Ahmad).*

What do we learn from Afghan youth about the root causes of military violence? Often, apart from religious reasons, experiences of blatant social injustice caused by widespread corruption and nepotism, discrimination and moral decay are understood to inform young people's decision to join the Taliban and to contribute to the perpetuation of violence in the country. Violently fighting against a disappointing political establishment, an oppressive societal order and a lack of economic perspectives may seem to be a promising option for social and political change and perhaps even the sole means of personal survival. It is worth noting that young people's analysis of the current situation also includes pointed criticism of the international community, especially the presence of foreign armed forces and outside military interference by neighboring countries – a topic that has a long history in the cultural memory of Afghans.

They don't have job opportunities in Kunduz, especially at this time. Like in Kunduz, there are no job opportunities either. […] In order to find money and to feed their families, they have to join the Taliban. There are a lot of students that have graduated from different colleges and different universities but, because of not finding any jobs, they have to join [the Taliban].

Certainly, if a place is insecure, then boys and girls also cannot study and there will be no employment opportunities; some young people therefore go down the path of engaging in criminal activities such as kidnapping or human trafficking.

First of all, I want the American forces to leave Afghanistan because they are the root of war in Afghanistan. America comes for their own special aims in our country, not for ending the war. They have their hands in the pie when it comes to war, attacks and terrorist groups.

I want them to save our innocent people from these cruel people because our neighbouring country's people do not want our country to improve; they have sent terrorists to our country, spread animosity, hatred and interfered in our internal issues and they have brought all these fights to our dear country.

It is also interesting to note that, apart from military violence and overall insecurity as the factors driving other people to leave Afghanistan and seek refuge in other countries, Afghan youth also point to a lack of prospects. Here, experiences of violence go hand in hand with a perceived lack of educational and economic opportunities. Violence, however, is not restricted to – and often not even mainly understood in terms of – military violence: accounts of what one might call everyday structural violence relates to the public sphere, the school and the family. Moreover, discrimination and violence against ethnic and religious minorities is an immediate problem according to the young people, one that has led to the deaths of many. Violence against women, an issue particularly vocalized by female youth, constitutes a striking narrative of collective suffering and solidarity.

Most of our compatriots go abroad. Many of them go there illegally; some of them arrive there safely and some of them drown in the rivers of Turkey and Greece. It really hurts us when we hear such news. If we had peace in our country, no one would want to go away from their family and home because they are annoyed with them or they do not want to get themselves in danger. They are forced to travel to foreign countries.

You see violence of many sorts in the society, particularly sexual violence against women is very much such as stoning women.

Actually, in our country, Afghanistan, all women face some sort of violence, whether from relatives and kin; violence against women could be by husbands. Violence against women badly affects me, and are not able to further talk about it.

I am engaged. My father also forcefully tied the knot for another younger sister with someone in order to get money out of it. Our life is harsh and dreadful because we experience the torture of physical beating. I do not have any happiness in my life.

My wish for the next ten years is that discriminations should be over in the country because all the fights and violence are due to discrimination and ultimately cause death and killing in the country.
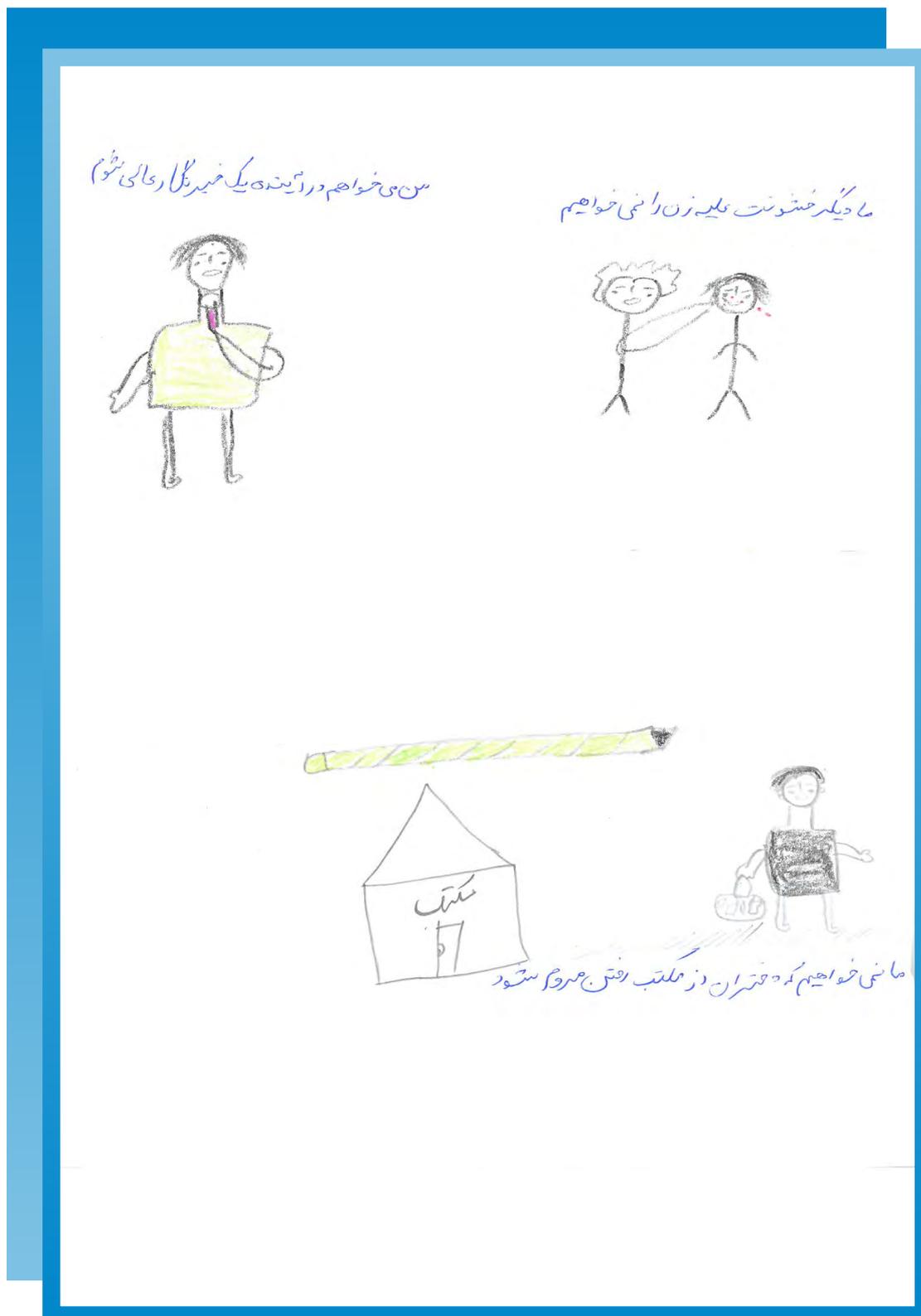
Figure 11. *Drawing from the Afghan Youth Project*
(Text in Drawing 1: I want to become an excellent reporter in the future.
Drawing 2: We do not want violence against women anymore.
Drawing 3: We do not want girls to be abandoned from schools.)

Considering the interwoven complexity of violence and its near omnipresence, the programmatic calls for peace in Afghanistan, which runs through everyone of the interviews, essays and drawings, ring as desperate, truthful and powerful.

We want to erase war forever in our country and to have peace instead, because everyone needs peace. Our religion is Islam, and Islam is peace and unity, not war.

The only ambition that I have in my mind is to have peace and security in our country.

We need peace. We need justice!

I am an Afghan child and I pray to God for bringing peace and security to Afghanistan.

We Afghans are thirsty for peace.

And we people need peace. Peace is very necessary for our country and we wish for the day in our country when peace comes.

I want peace in my country, so that everyone could live in peace and comfort.

In 2015, the United States and NATO officially handed over full responsibility for security matters in Afghanistan to the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF), thereby concluding *Operation Enduring Freedom*, ending the ISAF mission, and starting the *Resolute Support Mission* (RSM) in Afghanistan. This is considered an important point of transition in the recent Afghan history as it was accompanied by the withdrawal of most international forces. Prior to the transition phase, international forces mainly assisted the Afghan government in reconstructing institutions and in the fight against counter-terrorism and insurgency. Today, approximately 308,693 ANDSF personnel[3] are still supported by about 14,000 U.S. troops[4] (8,475 of whom are assigned to the NATO RS mission) and 16,919 NATO troops stationed in Afghanistan to train, advise and assist ANDSF.[5]

How did the transition phase go? The transition proved to be an overwhelming task for the Afghan government in terms of maintaining stability: the government and ANDSF were neither ready nor capable to assume responsibility, leading to widespread insecurity, heavy casualties among civilians and the security forces throughout the country, a stronger Taliban insurgency and the emergence of IS-Khorasan in Afghanistan. Moreover, a lack of cooperation and coordination between Afghan government officials and the security apparatus have further exacerbated the security situation in Afghanistan, providing the Taliban and IS-Khorasan an opportunity to take advantage of the situation to broaden their insurgent activities.[6]

What exactly does this amount to? According to RS, there were 18,295 enemy-initiated attacks (EIA) in Afghanistan from January 1 to October 31, 2018.[7]
From January 1 to November 16, 2018, there were 8,260 civilian casualties.[8] In addition, around 45,000 Afghan security personnel have been killed since September 2014 (an average of 849 per month), as stated by President Ashraf Ghani on 24 January 2019.[9] The growing insurgency and deteriorating security situation are also causing contestation between the government and insurgent groups over control and in- fluence of districts, populations and territory in Afghanistan. According to SIGAR, in October 2018, the Afghan government only controlled and influenced 53.8% of districts (74 districts under control, 145 under influence) and 63.5% of the population (an estimated 21.2 million people).[10] The insurgents controlled 12 and had influence over 38 districts, while 33.9% (138 districts) were neither controlled or influenced by the Afghan government nor the insurgents.[11] This trend has exacerbated the trust deficit felt among the Afghan population vis-à-vis the Afghan government and its international partners due to their inability to ensure security in Afghanistan while also contributing to forced displacements and migration out of Afghanistan.

Total Civilian Deaths & Injured
Janurary to December 2009 - 2018
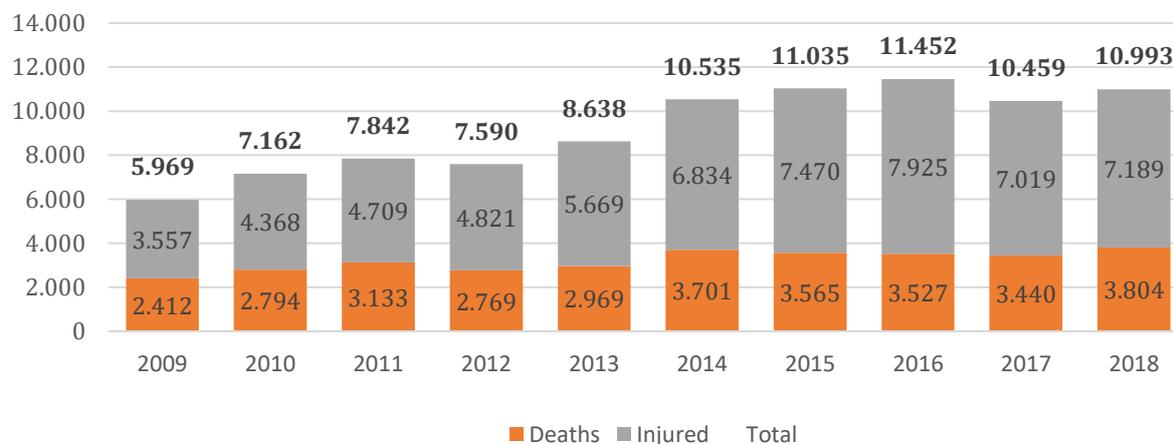
Figure 12. Total civilian deaths and injuries 2009-2018[12]

There are also diverse manifestations of ethnic tension and discrimination against religious minorities that are causing internal conflicts and killings in Afghanistan. Societal discrimination against the Shiites, Hazaras and other minority groups, for instance, continue along class, race, and religious lines in the form of money extortion through illegal taxation, forced recruitment, forced labor, physical abuse, detention and killings.[13] As the HRW report (2018) states, ISKP (Islamic State of Khorasan Province), also known as IS, has carried out a number of particularly deadly suicide attacks in urban areas that have killed and wounded more than 2,000 people across the country; a growing number of these attacks have targeted Afghanistan's Shiites Hazara.[14]

Women and girls in Afghanistan continue to face widespread discrimination and human rights abuses, and Afghanistan ranks 153 on the UN world gender inequality index – one of the least favorable in the world.[15] Violence against women and girls is widespread in Afghanistan. While most cases of violence against women go unreported, Afghanistan's independent human rights commission (AIHRC) investigated 5,575 cases of violence against women in late 2016.[16] The report shows that deaths and injuries among women in the conflict sharply increased in 2017, with 298 deaths and 709 injured counted in the first nine months of the year alone.[17]

In view of the objective pursued by the Afghan Youth Project's, it is important to note that children have been seriously affected by skyrocketing rates of violence. UNAMA notes that: "In the first six months of 2018, the suffering of children in armed conflict bore many faces in Afghanistan, with Afghan boys and girls killed, maimed, sexually assaulted, abused, recruited and used by parties to the conflict. Around 28% of all civilian casualties were children in 2018. In addition, conflict related violence continued to erode the rights of children to education, healthcare, freedom of movement and other fundamental rights, as well as family life, playing outdoors and simply enjoying a childhood free of the brutal consequences of war."[18]

The demand for unity and political stability

وحدت و ثبات

> Afghanistan needs to have a leader, but we see that every tribe has their own leader, for instance; the Pashtuns have Mr. Ashraf Ghani, the Tajik community has Mr. Abdullah, the Hazara community Mohaqiq, the Uzbek community Dostom – so every community has identified a leader and considers him as their own leader. Actually, it should not happen like this and there should be one leader for all.

Afghanistan's young people criticize and expresses discontent towards the government, the political system and the judiciary. They claim that the political system is unjust and ruled by a corrupt political elite that is only interested in maximizing its profits and benefits instead of serving the Afghan people. Moreover, those in government positions are not deemed to have the capability to perform their duties. The Afghan government is not seen as a united force but one of the factors contributing to and fueling ongoing tribal and ethnic conflicts. Young people also consider those in leading government positions to be strangers to the life-worlds of most Afghans as these officials have spent most of their lives outside of the country and live privileged lives. Young people in Afghanistan bemoan the lack of freedom of speech, especially when criticizing the current political system or those in powerful positions. They hold the government responsible for ongoing violence and for failing to achieve peace in the country. Additionally, they criticize the government for its dependency on foreign aid and forces as well as the presence and intervention of foreign forces in the country – especially as the latter increases insecurity and as foreign countries are accused of primarily seeking their self-interests in Afghanistan. Young people also point to a lack of respect for the rule of law. Similarly, the judicial system is met with disapproval for its inability to provide justice, for rampant corruption, and, in some cases, for the fact that those responsible for providing justice are ill-equipped to perform their duties.

I would like for my country to be self-sufficient so that we can produce and prepare all the necessary items ourselves. I don't like depending on others. If you look from the perspective of natural resources, Afghanistan has many, but no one has the knowledge. We have some skilled graduate students that have some technical skills, yet opportunities are not provided for them because the government is not self-reliant and rather dependent on foreign countries.

The due rights of the people are not given.

No young person can achieve their aims with such a government full of corruption, racism, prejudice, etc. We have a country in conflict and we need a strong and powerful government that is free of corruption, etc.

If the government tries hard, then peace will come; if the government does not want to, then it will not come.

The promises that we got from the government, we were really sure of them, we believed in them. We were sure that it would never come the same day [takeover of Kunduz by the Taliban], that we have to suffer, like a year ago, and, yeah, it came about like that and now no one trusts the government.

If we talk about our problems on the radio, we will not be alive the next day, because we do not have rights provide our opinion about them.
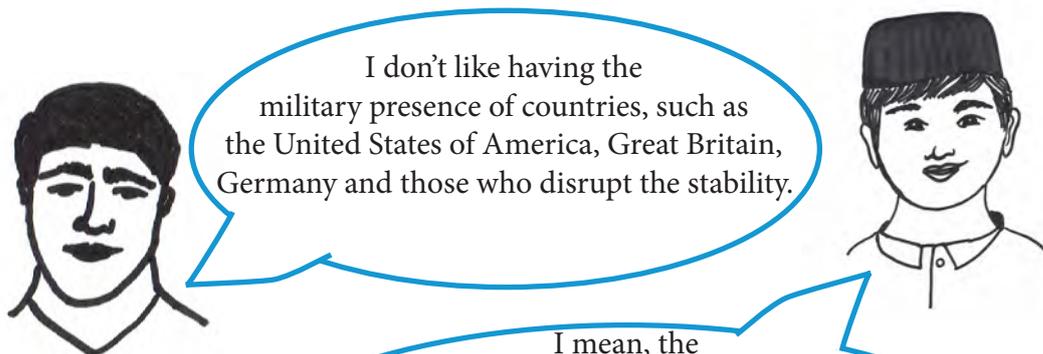
I don't like having the military presence of countries, such as the United States of America, Great Britain, Germany and those who disrupt the stability.
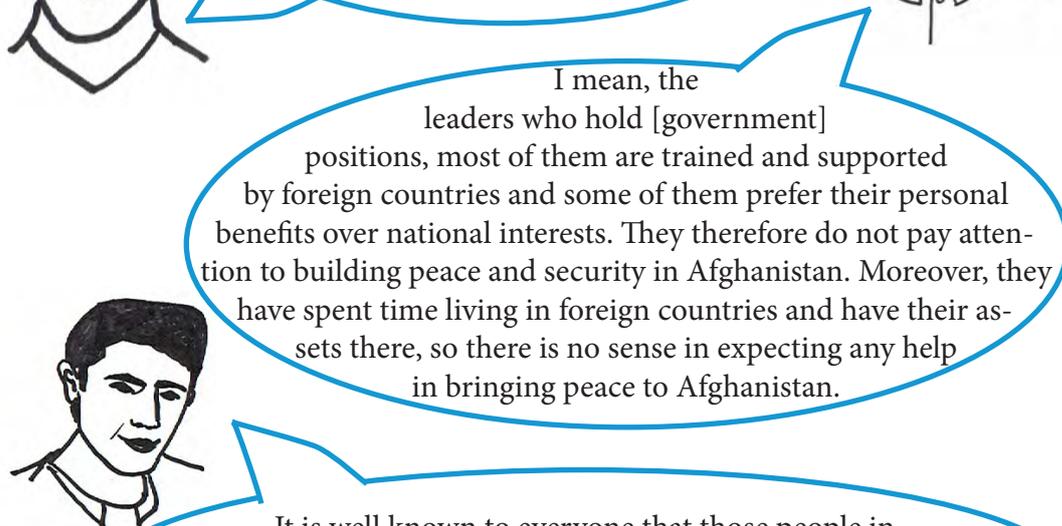
I mean, the leaders who hold [government] positions, most of them are trained and supported by foreign countries and some of them prefer their personal benefits over national interests. They therefore do not pay attention to building peace and security in Afghanistan. Moreover, they have spent time living in foreign countries and have their assets there, so there is no sense in expecting any help in bringing peace to Afghanistan.
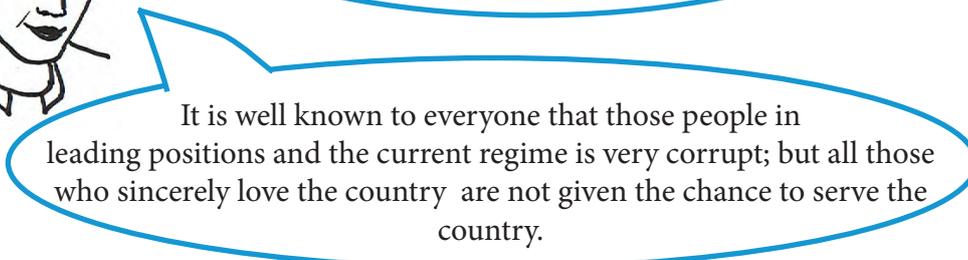
It is well known to everyone that those people in leading positions and the current regime is very corrupt; but all those who sincerely love the country are not given the chance to serve the country.
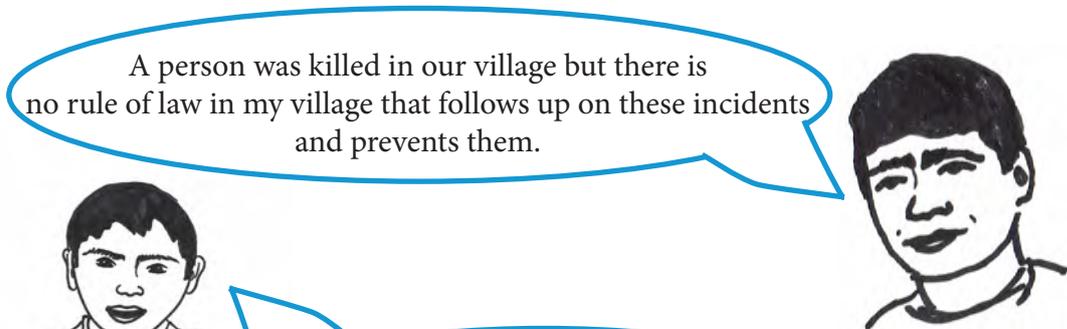
A person was killed in our village but there is no rule of law in my village that follows up on these incidents and prevents them.
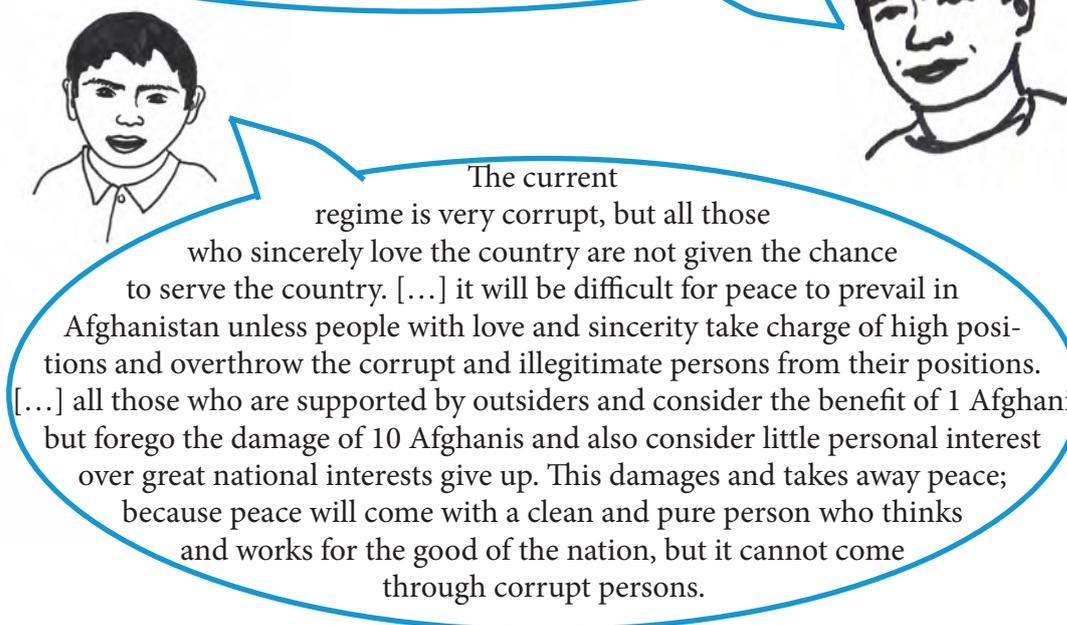
The current regime is very corrupt, but all those who sincerely love the country are not given the chance to serve the country. […] it will be difficult for peace to prevail in Afghanistan unless people with love and sincerity take charge of high positions and overthrow the corrupt and illegitimate persons from their positions. […] all those who are supported by outsiders and consider the benefit of 1 Afghani but forego the damage of 10 Afghanis and also consider little personal interest over great national interests give up. This damages and takes away peace; because peace will come with a clean and pure person who thinks and works for the good of the nation, but it cannot come through corrupt persons.

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The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan is considered a democratic state with the respective institutions that were officially established in 2001. Formally, it is a presidential system, with the last presidential election having taken place in 2014. The results of this election, however, failed to produce a decisive victor as both candidates – Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah – claimed victory amid accusations of fraud. The U.S. subsequently mediated an agreement between the two candidates and formed the so-called National Unity Government (NUG), led by President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah. Many Afghans are still skeptical about the democratic process during the post-election period and during the recent parliamentary election in 2018. In-fighting between the leaders of the Unity Government in the context of satisfying the clientelist networks supporting each of the two government factions leads to division between institutions and inconsistent policy implementation across the subnational governance realms of various provinces.[19] The government faces tremendous difficulties in enforcing good governance as well as in decreasing instability and corruption in Afghanistan. Due to disagreements over the makeup of supervisory bodies, little progress has been made since the NUG assumed power. These factors are increasing trust deficits among the fragmented population and its political leaders in relation to the government.

The judicial system in Afghanistan is highly politicized and criticized for being slow, corrupt and incompetent. Various political and cultural factors, a lack of capacity and corruption have made the judicial system all but defunct in Afghanistan. Today, most Afghans have lost their trust in the formal judiciary and instead rely on informal and traditional institutions of justice. Yet, even traditional institutions are called out as corrupt, accused of favoring people with more power and resources. This has consequently provided more space and opportunity for the Taliban and Daʾesh/IS to promote and propagate their justice ideals across society.[20]

The Afghan Constitution guarantees the rights of association and assembly and there are 2,334 active associations in Afghanistan. On account of internal conflicts, cultural barriers and pressure from the government and informal actors, most of these civic associations along with other diverse civil groups cannot fully exercise their constitutional rights.[21] In government-controlled areas, their activities are often undermined by politicians, bureaucrats and other government officials while the security forces suppress anti-government protests and apply violence in many cases. In insurgent areas, there are no rights of association, assembly or freedom of expression at all. The Afghan Constitution also guarantees freedom of expression, but many have criticized the government for silencing critical voices and failing to provide the required protections for those journalists and civil society activists that are targeted by insurgents.[22]

Even though there are around 70 registered political parties operating in Afghanistan, they are perceived as the least-democratic institutions.[23] Political parties in the country revolve around influential political figures, warlords or religious leaders and they are often considered to be personalized organizations rather than official bodies representing the interests represented in collective political and social agendas. Personality cults still dominate political culture and shape political agenda-setting for development and democracy – yet another factor that impedes the democratic transformation in the country.[24] As factionalism still dominates the political landscape of Afghanistan, many political parties have played a divisive role in asserting their political interests within society.

Various surveys show that Afghans' trust in political institutions is increasingly waning and people's perception of the performance of government institutions and their international partners is deteriorating due to their failure to improve public access to resources, to decrease violence and to take account of the will of the people.[25] In addition, the lack of transparency that marked the parliamentary election in 2018, accompanied by delay and uncertainty surrounding the upcoming presidential election, is further decreasing people's faith in their political institutions and, in turn, increasing the sense that the new election will not improve the country's overall situation.

In November 2018, the Geneva Conference on Afghanistan gathered to measure the progress of the country's reform and development in relation to the 15.2 billion USD committed to Afghanistan by the international community in 2016.[26] The Afghan government met with various non-governmental and civil-society organization "to demonstrate progress and commitment and maintain the momentum for elections and an opportunity for peace".[27] The participants agreed to issue a Geneva Mutual Accountability Framework (GMAF) for 2019-2020[28] as well as focus on fair and effective elections to bolster the government's legitimacy and foster public support for governing institutions.[29] The Geneva Conference has also provided a new opportunity to seek peace with the Taliban. Currently, the United States is negotiating with the Taliban to explore possibilities for peace; they are, however, doing so without the involvement of the Afghan government and in the face of considerable protest from women and youth activists in Afghanistan.[30]

Scorching criticism of corruption and nepotism

فساد و واسطه

They just check who the person is that sends the application. They see which tribe you belong. And, if the chief of the department is Pashtun, and they see that your tribe is Pashtun, then they will choose you or just select you without any question, you know? And if that is not the case, like if you are Tajik, Hazara or something else and the chief is Pashtun, then corruption raises, you know? Then they ask for money. You have to pay again maybe fifty thousand Afghani for just getting that position.

Young people regard widespread corruption and nepotism (known as Wasita in Dari) as one of the most pressing issues in Afghanistan that profoundly affects all sectors of life. The quote from 19-year-old Maryiam from Kunduz province exemplifies one prevalent criticism, lamenting that job positions are often given to those who are not qualified simply due to Wasita. The observation that excellent results for school and university entry exams can be obtained by bribes, corruption and nepotism not only limits upward social mobility for young people but also undermines their hopes and efforts of attaining a better life. This clear analysis by young people also shows how nepotism and corruption are highly interwoven with ethnic and tribal discrimination.

We have discrimination in Kunduz, like much Tajik with Uzbek and Pashtun with Hazara, you know? […] For example, if the chief of the department is Uzbek, then you see all of his employees are Uzbek, you know? And with no capability, no qualification, nothing; just based on the tribe. They just, you know, choose and have more, uh, kind of, you know, reinforcement and they need to have a backup for tomorrow. Like, if someone complains about them, they will have backup from their own tribe, you know?

The second main issue [is] institutional corruption, so I bear pain from these two issues. Thereby I would not be able to achieve my wishes.

Yeah, actually, they take bribery in offices.

If the country pays serious attention to the education field, then our country could reach its highest [potential]. Until there is change in the fraud of conquer exam until corruption is not removed. And, as for the executions, we need to fire the ones who are in the government.

If we talk about wasita, I would rather not study.

I want to study but my family does not believe that I will be in a high position one day because I do not have wasita. When you do not have wasita, nothing is useful. I believe that I will achieve my hopes.

Afghanistan ranks 172 out of 180 in Transparency International's global corruption index, placing it is among the countries with the highest levels of corruption in the world.[31] This high level of corruption across public sectors is a troubling situation for the Afghan government, for society and for its international partners. Decades of war and conflict have resulted an instable economy and weak traditional norms that mostly privilege informal power-holders who resist attempts to formalize and legalize the exercise of power and who support and normalize abuses of power and wealth.[32] Furthermore, the international community, which is touted as one of the drivers of anti-corruption, has, in fact, played a major role in causing widespread corruption throughout the country. In post-2001 Afghanistan, the international community embraced the problematic warlords who have committed numerous human rights abuses for the sake of shortterm military battlefield advantages, thereby contributing to widespread corruption in Afghanistan.[33] The international community often choses to ignore corruption by justifying stability as a priority and tolerating it for the sake of other goals based on the justification that "Afghans are used to corruption anyway".[34]

Today, corruption and nepotism have a major impact on all Afghans who suffer from economic and employment inequality and who are required to pay bribes in nearly every aspect of their daily lives. According to a survey by the Asia Foundation, a record 70.6% of Afghans in 2018 identified corruption as a major problem in their daily lives.[35] According to the 2017 Asia Foundation Survey, Afghans generally give the largest bribes, 347 USD on average, to the judiciary/courts, 172 USD when applying for a job, and 133 USD to the provincial governor's office.[36]

Due to international and national pressure in 2017 and early 2018, the NUG placed high priority on its anti-corruption reform agenda, including the implementation of the Government's Anti-Corruption strategy, the adoption and enforcement of the Penal Code, the approval of a reformed budget and the ACJC (Anti-Corruption and Justice Center).[37] Many Afghans believe that the NUG's failure to effectively fight corruption and hold high officials accountable for corruption has indirectly nourished continued insurgency in the country. Studies from other post-conflict countries show that widespread corruption undermines the authority of the state and its institutions while also paving the way for insurgents and criminal networks to operate and develop; it also limits access to justice for the poor and vulnerable groups and exacerbates security crises within society.[38]

Afghanistan is a multiethnic country and each of its ethnic groups is generally distinguishable from the others in terms of its cultural practices. Of estimated an 31.6 million Afghan residents, approximately 42% are Pashtun, 27% Tajik, 9% Hazara, 9% Uzbek, 4% Aimak, 3% Turkmen, 2% Baloch and 4% fall into unspecified other groups.[39] Ethnic heritage plays a major role in identity and determines access to social networks and social capital. In rural areas, communities often function based on complex patronage and clientele-systems, shaping social and power structures in certain areas of the country. Afghan society is permeated by social networks based on ethnic origin; these networks are often used to establish informal contacts that provide access to services, goods, job opportunities and institutions. Opportunities for social mobility are therefore frequently connected to informal relationships mediated by these networks. Discrimination by ethnicity and corruption is a serious issue in the Afghan society.

The fatal reality of poverty and unemployment

فقر و بیکاری

> However, there are some people who have access to wealth and money, but they also try to engage with their own country for the sake of personal benefits. Many people subsequently end up living in abject poverty.

Younger generations describe the overall economic situation as highly precarious and unstable, noting that it exacerbates daily stress factors and results in experiences of social injustice and inequality that particularly affect children and young people and further increase their vulnerability. Many very young children and young people are forced to join the workforce in order to support their families. A large deficit of employment opportunities is a source of profound worries and they explain how this fact promotes forced migration. At the same time, the issue of migration is highly contested among young Afghans. While some express their own wishes to migrate, and especially to pursue higher education, others criticize those leaving Afghanistan as they deem themselves to be the very future of the country. Young people explain how poverty and the lack of job opportunities severely limit their agency.

> What could I do when I myself am a poor and helpless person? So, how could I help poor people now?

> Whenever I think about the future in order to become a good person, the hindrance that I see in my future is the insecurity, poverty and poor economic conditions. Because, if someone's economic situation is not good and there is no security in the province and in the country, then it won't be possible to achieve my wishes.

> Yeah, there is a lot of violence facing young and poor people. […] I have seen this because there are thousands of homeless children.

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Unfortunately, due to the poor economy of Afghanistan, many young people are unemployed as a result, and they either end up fleeing Afghanistan to foreign countries for a better future and or joining rebel groups of Taliban. There are also unemployed young people who had nothing to do but become drug addicts. For instance, when a young person is unemployed, he does not have a source to get himself busy in any work, so he becomes pressured and coerced to think of alternatives for what else can be done. Consequently, either he attempts to carry out a robbery and or to engage in drugs. These actions are, of course, not positive for these young people nor for the economy because they cause insecurity, too.

I didn't go to school, I have attended a few literacy courses. I was financially responsible for the family and I had to bring three meals home and take care of them. I have been working for seven-and-a-half years now in different positions […] But, for financial reasons, I can't afford to have my own business and use the capabilities I have. There are lots of problems that make [young people] become responsible for the families and then you can do things for yourselves.

I witness children that are away from their parents, who cannot study and whatever they want to become remains a far-off dream. This really hurts me as I'm also considered to be a child. Moreover, these are the children who could be the future-makers of Afghanistan and support Afghanistan.

Leaving the country has become a trend because the work that is in foreign countries is not available here.

Well, unfortunately, as I've already said, I'm part of the family and I'm 19 years old and the younger brother that I have works in bread bakery. We look for him, for when he returns home to bring us food. You can just imagine how our family circumstances could be?

Years of war and political instability have deteriorated the country's economic system. After over a decade of international support and efforts to improve Afghanistan's economy, the country still remains one of the poorest in the world. After the fall of the Taliban regime, the international community established an unstable and dependent economic system that made Afghanistan economically reliant on support from the international community; hardly any significant policies were implemented to foster a more sustainable economy. This economic dependency became obvious itself after the transition of responsibilities from the international community to the Afghan government in 2014. Since then, Afghanistan has experienced severely slow economic growth due to the combined effects of the withdrawal of international security forces, a sharp fall in associated international military spending, reductions in international aid, worsening security and political instability. These factors also contributed to the increasing vulnerability of the Afghan population, resulting in a sharp increase in poverty from 39.1% in 2013-2014 to 54.5% in 2016-2017.[40] While the Afghan economy did experience temporary momentum with 2.7% real GDP growth in 2017, increasing election-related violence, decreasing business confidence, worsening drought conditions and a slowdown in economic activities undermined this momentum and ultimately led to a fall in real GDP to 2.4% in 2018.[41]

According to Afghanistan Poverty Status Update report, the poorest Afghans were the least able to navigate the crisis: they lack the resources to cope with shocks, especially since the crisis was most severe in the rural areas where most poor people live. Additionally, the withdrawal of international forces and declining international spending caused the severe job losses in these areas.[42] The poverty rate in rural areas is measured at 58.6%, though it also affects the urban population.[43] Today, 18% of Afghanistan's poor live in urban areas.[44] Furthermore, food insecurity in Afghanistan worsened from 30% in 2011/12 to 45% in 2016/17.[45]

Poverty is also correlated with education levels in Afghanistan: 73% of the population under the poverty line belong to households in which the head of the household has no education.[46] In addition, conflict and instability are interconnected with an increase in the poverty rate. Since 2015, the conflict has intensified and spread through the country, causing internal displacement to reach a new height of more than 1.7 million Afghans, further exacerbating structural poverty and labor market challenges.[47] Moreover, poverty has been accentuated by the return of more than 2 million refugees and migrants to Afghanistan since 2015, mostly from Pakistan and Iran.[48]

Mental health perspectives

The dominant approach to assessing the mental health consequences of conflict-related violence is the measurement of PTSD on both the individual and collective level. We acknowledge the value of these approaches and corresponding studies (e.g., Catani et al. 2009; Panter-Brick et al. 2015; Scholte et al. 2004) in regard to their therapeutic implications and political calls for action. However, we would also like to highlight the problematic tendency of narrowing down traumatic experiences to an increasingly individualized, psychopathologized and depoliticized concept of PTSD. We would like to stress more contextualized approaches to understanding trauma in its psychosocial and political dimensions (see, e.g., Miller & Rasmussen 2019; Mlodoch 2017; Nguyen 2011). In this respect, taking into account agency, hope and faith-related approaches when interpreting qualitative data from conflict and war contexts seems essential (see, e.g., Kanji, Drummond & Cameron 2007; Panter-Brick & Eggerman 2010). Studying children in Palestine, Arafat and Musleh (2006) state: "Palestinian children continue to exhibit resilience as evidenced by their enduring sense of self-efficacy and optimism about their own futures. A majority of them continue to feel that they can improve their own lives by developing academically, personally and socially. Indeed, it is striking that they continue to channel their energy into positive, constructive and peaceful activities, and that the personal, academic, and social development of the general population of Palestinian children, it is also important to identify and assist the much smaller percentage of these children who are vulnerable to violent ideation."

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Afghanistan's Job Crisis: The scale of the crisis which unfolded during the transition period decreased the demand for labor, preventing the market from creating enough jobs to accommodate over 400,000 Afghans who enter the labor market every year.[49] The crisis also caused most of the jobs that were created during the pre-transition phase to be eliminated, leaving approximately 1.9 million Afghans unemployed in 2014.[50] Today, the unemployment rate in Afghanistan is 23.9%.[51]

Young Afghans (aged 15-24) face a high unemployment rate of 31%; 42% of them are neither employed nor in education or training (NEET), 68% of whom are young and female.[52] The share of youth NEET provides a measure of young people who are at especially high risk of labor- market and social exclusion. Youth employment is characterized by a high level of job insecurity, low quality of employment and difficult labor market transition.
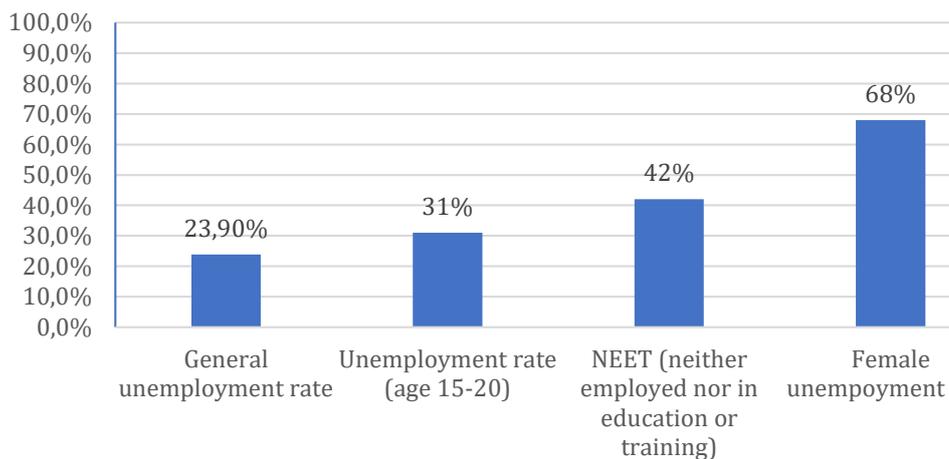
Figure 13. The unemployment rate in Afghanistan.[53]

Unemployment rates are higher among women and women are strongly segregated from more skilled occupations. Job opportunities for young people, and especially for women, are scarce and the crisis has made this scarcity even more acute. Due to large differences in economic activity levels between men and women, the gender composition of Afghanistan's labor force is very unequal, comprising 6.4 million men (75.4%) as compared to 2.1 million women (24.6%).[54] Often due to cultural factors and insecurity, women are not allowed or able to perform specific jobs.

The ever-increasing number of young people reaching working age place unabated pressure on the labor market. An expected 3.9 million young people will reach working age over the next five years, 1.6 million of whom will enter the labor market and 540 thousand of whom will remain unemployed in line with current rates of labor force participation and unemployment.[55] The combination of high labor market pressure caused by a growing population, the inability to provide jobs of sufficient quality, and inadequate levels of education will prevent the country from fully reaping the benefits of economic growth that a demographic dividend may provide.

Furthermore, the job-depressing effects of the crisis were not evenly distributed, with youth in rural areas and illiterate workers (most of whom live in rural areas) suffering the heaviest losses. Half of the Afghans who were unemployed during the transition phase were below the age of 25, 9 out of 10 jobs that disappeared were in rural areas, and 4 out of 5 these jobs were previously held by illiterate workers.[56]

The unemployment rate among rural youth is 29.6%, as compared to 39.1% among urban youth.[57] The economic and security crisis during the transition phase resulted in the forced displacement of many Afghans in rural areas, also in terms of diversifying the risk and supporting financially families left behind. While displaced households in urban centers suffer from poverty and labor market vulnerability, this has contributed to creeping levels of unemployment in urban areas. For families whose members migrate to find jobs outside of Afghanistan, remittances are considered a primary source of income for them.

A report by the U.S. Department of State highlights that these minorities suffer from lack of equal job opportunities and political participation; individuals from the majority Pashtun ethnic group, for instance, have more seats in both houses of parliament than any other ethnic group.[58] The government often assigns Hazara ANP officers to symbolic positions with little authority within the Ministry of Interior Affairs.[59] Around 900 members of the Sikh and Hindu community in Afghanistan frequently face discrimination, harassment, verbal and physical abuse and suffer from unequal access to government jobs.[60]

Education matters!

تعليم و تربيه

> All of us Afghans want to have improved schools.
> Schools are the backbone of a country.

While Afghanistan's youth considers education to be key to a prosperous future, both for themselves and fort their country, they describe the current education system as dysfunctional and faced with numerous challenges. Schools, especially in rural areas, lack basic infrastructural necessities while, in others places, hardly any educational facilities exist at all. Young people criticize a lack of capacity among teaching staff who, at times, do not even come to school for work when the government fails to pay their salaries. With regard to higher education, young people see a great necessity for capacity building, in particular. Many express a desire to go abroad so that they can pursue their higher education. One of the issues most often cited by young people concerning education in Afghanistan is the gender gap. They explain that, due to the precarious security situation, many families do not allow their children, and especially daughters, to attend school while others restrict girls from attending schools owing to traditional and allegedly religious reasons. Young females particularly criticize this view and demand access to education for all girls and women while maligning the patriarchal structures that prevent girls from exercising their rights to education. Additionally, overall poverty accentuates early school dropout rates and even forces some young people to opt out of attending school at all since their labor is needed to provide for the survival of themselves and their families – they perceive education to be unnecessary. Young people vividly describe how these interwoven structural and traditional issues restrict their capability for action.

If we don't study and go to school, Afghanistan will become a ruined country and will retain old beliefs. Our life is very local and simple, and I want us to have a modern and improved life.

I want the schools to be equipped and the universities have a high-class teaching system, and Afghanistan would be free of the fight. We want our teachers to be fine.

Our school books are sometimes not enough for us. A well-equipped school can allow us to study very well without any problems.

Due to economic problems, I could not go to school. Because my father works in the hospital as a guard, he has to pay the rent of the house and he could not afford to pay for books, stationery and school expenses. We should have well-equipped schools with all books so that all young people can serve the country.

There are bad effects since they cannot study, cannot go to courses, fear from sudden suicide explosions.

Youths should take a pen in their hands, not weapons.

There are a lot of problems for the children. Whenever a child works half a day, like cleaning the boots of the others, and then goes to school in the afternoon, his mind will surely always be busy with his family and the responsibility he has. One day, he will not earn much and the whole time he will be thinking what should I do to take this much money home and feed the family tonight? So, these are the problems that cause children not to have the peace of mind to study – even though we have literacy courses, schools and universities. And small children, when they see that their parents and older siblings are working this hard and suffering a lot, this disturbs them from studying because they think all the time about how their parents and siblings are suffering. These are all the problems that disturb children when studying.

Because it is shameful if the girls go to school for them. They say that Allah and the prophet have said that girls should not go to school. If I say that to my father, then he would say the same thing, that it is not written in the book [Quran].

In our society, men and women do not have equal rights and men do not want them to study because if they study, they will be aware of their rights. And, for example, if I go to school, then for sure I will go to university too and after university, I will start working shoulder to shoulder with men. And men do not want us to become capable.

If there is no peace in Afghanistan, we cannot receive an education. It is peace that enables education.

*Figure 14. Drawing from the Afghan Youth Project
(Text in Drawing: Graduation from a medical university. Peace,
Greenness and achieving one's wishes of graduating from the
medical university.)*
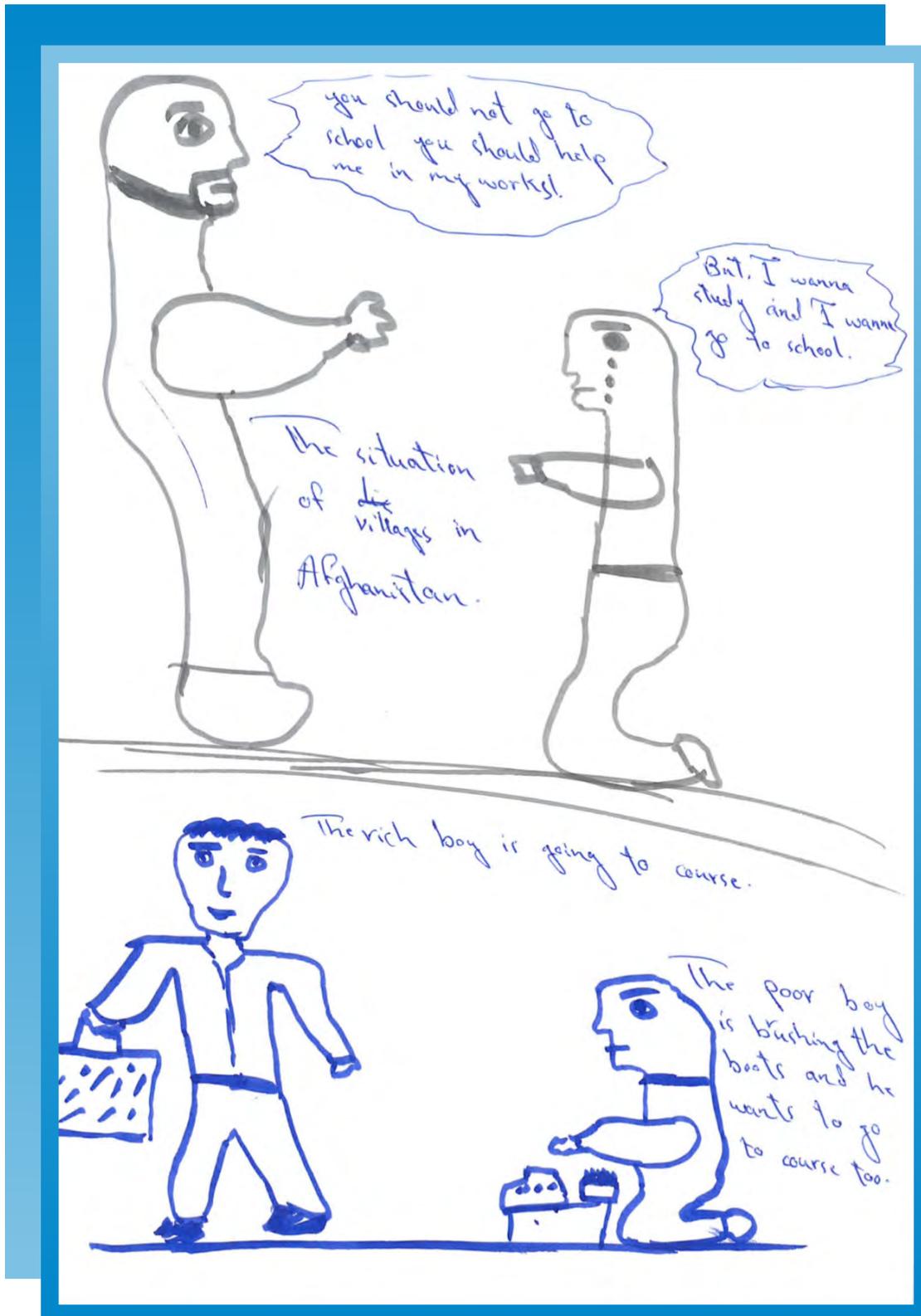
Figure 15. Drawing from the Afghan Youth Project.
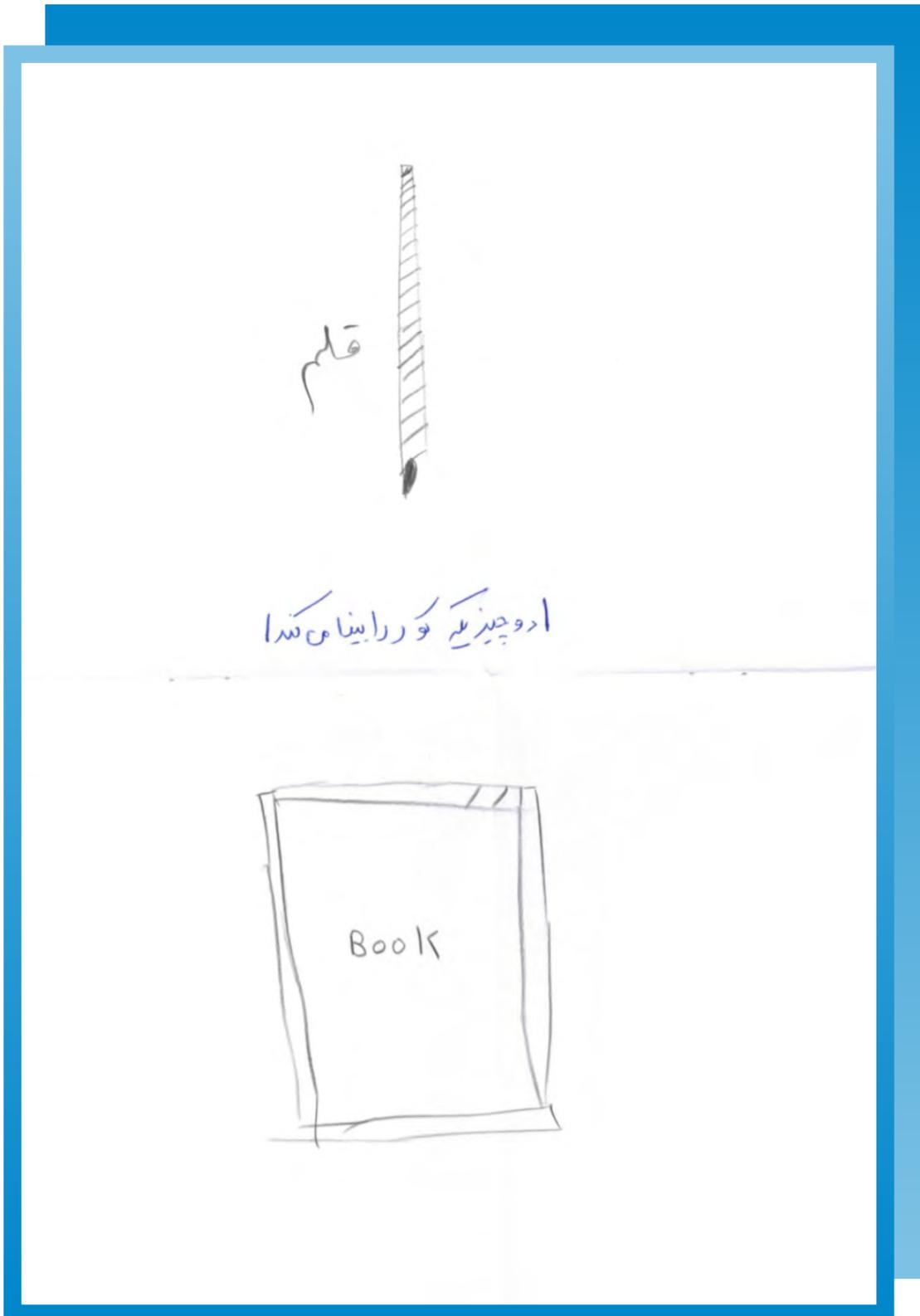
Figure 16. Drawing from the Afghan Youth Project.
(Text in drawing: Two things that can even give sight to those
who are blind: a pen and a book.)

The educational system in Afghanistan has been devastated by more than three decades of sustained conflict. Since 2001, however, the country has adopted many UN resolutions on universal rights to education and the international community has devoted billions of dollars to improving educational services and ensuring everyone's right to access education. Yet, hardly any significant improvements in this field are visible today: the educational system, and especially access to education, still remains a challenging issue in Afghanistan. For many Afghan children, completing primary school and, in some cases, accessing school at all remains a distant dream, especially in rural areas and especially for girls. Enrolment levels vary greatly in the poorest and most remote areas of the country, and girls still lack equal access.

A UNICEF report from 2017 estimates that there were 17,482 schools and 14,728 CBE (community-based education) centers in Afghanistan at the end of 2016, with a total enrollment of 9,627,912 students, including 393,453 at CBE centers, 3,445,776 females and with 216,680 teachers employed (including at CBE centers).[61] The report also shows that an estimated 3.5 million children were out of school and 60% (around 2.2 million) of these were girls.[62] Furthermore, of the 3.5 million children out of school, an estimated 1.5 million were officially enrolled but marked as permanently absent.[63] According to the Afghan living condition survey from 2016-2017, the attendance rate is 56.1% in primary education, 35.7% in secondary education and 9.7% in tertiary education.[64] The adult literacy rate (age 15 years and over) is 34.8%.[65] The percentage of school-starters who drop out before reaching grade six is 13.6%.[66] The reasons for not starting school differ from those for terminating education. According to an ALCS survey from 2016-2017, the most common motives for not starting school are long commutes to school and a general reluctance to send children to school – as mentioned by 37% of respondents who did not start school. The need for child labor and a perception that further education is unnecessary are additional common motives for not attending school – as mentioned by 25% of respondents who have never attended school.[67]

The gender gap within education is another significant challenge in Afghanistan. Girls of all ages are less likely to start and continue school than boys. According to the 2016-2017ALCS survey, the main reason for girls not starting school is family disapproval (39.6%) – as compared to 3.2% for boys. Additionally, objection from the family is considered an essential motive for not continuing education among girls (30.9%) and less so for boys (1.5%).[68] Moreover, certain sociocultural factors and traditional and religious beliefs also undermine girls' access to education, such as marrying at a very young age. The ALCS SDG indicator shows that the proportion of women aged 20 to 24 who were married before age 15 is 4.2%, and 28.3% before the age of 18.[69] Additionally, school classes in Afghanistan are divided by gender and, in most cases, girls may attend all-girls schools that have female teachers. A shortage of all-girls schools, female teachers (especially in rural areas) and proper sanitation facilities (41% of schools have no buildings, lack boundary walls, water and toilets) further intensifies the barriers of access to education among girls.[70] In some parts of the country, a shortage of schools, insufficient transportation, geographical barriers (especially in mountainous areas) and a lack of professional teachers are additional obstacles to accessing education. The increasing number of children entering primary-school age is yet another challenge facing the education sectors: the number of children of primary school age will increase to 18% over the next six years.[71]

Moreover, insecurity is another issue for accessing education. Education personnel, as well as students, continuously face direct attacks and threats from anti-government elements since education is provided by the government. Anti-government elements restrict access to education for women and girls by prohibiting girls' education beyond grades 4 and 6, closing down all-girls' schools, and placing complete bans on education for women and girls. UNAMA has recorded many incidents of teachers being killed, beaten, abducted or threatened by anti-government elements due to accusations of pro-government alignment.[72] Accessing education and continuating education remains a distant dream for young people in Afghanistan.

Their visions of the future

آینده

Faced with the present situation marked by high levels of violence, insecurity, poverty, nepotism and corruption, and discrimination and inequality, young people have developed collective counternarratives of their hopes and desires that depict a different, peaceful Afghanistan. Considering the dire security situation, attaining sustainable peace in Afghanistan is everyone's desire and one taken to be fundamental for achieving any sort of progress in the country. The counternarratives include conceptions of a society that is fair, just, meritocratic and provides for its people, especially those who are vulnerable and in need. Unity and solidarity are strongly emphasized in these counternarratives. Young people express a strong desire to abolish discrimination. They also outline conditions for the government and set high demands for themselves to contribute to a peaceful and stable Afghanistan. Education is highly associated with social change.

"If I were president of Afghanistan…"

"اگر من ریس جمهور افغانستان میبودم"

When considering this question, young people voiced ideas about what needs to change and what they would do if they were in power. While ensuring peace, security and stability are central elements of this task, young people also aspire to establish the rule of law and a just judicial system: they demand that those in leading governmental positions serve society as role models. Young people also heavily focus on improving the education system, providing job opportunities and fighting poverty. The eradication of corruption and nepotism and the establishment of a merit- based system is a central concern for Afghan youth, one that should be tackled by the government. Fighting ethnic and tribal discrimination and fostering unity among the people is seen as a core task for those in power. Young women, in particular, emphasize the need to fight against gender-based violence and discrimination at the macro-level.

67

The main task that I would like to do is restore security; security matters need to be considered so that people can live peacefully, and then attention would be on improving the economy so that people have work and can focus with a good, peaceful mind on their work.

The first actions that I would like to concentrate on are the development of education. I would like to build schools, madrasas, universities so the level of knowledge of the country increases and makes progress in the future. Then I would like to focus on peace and security.

If I become president in the future or governor of a province, I need to be like the saying "if the water is dirty from the beginning, then the rest will naturally be", so if a leader is corrupt then obviously the followers will become corrupt, too. [...] If I were president, then I would seek to practice the rule of law enshrined in Islam so it would be in consideration to any action followed by biased off decisions and in this way. InshAllah there will be stability in Afghanistan. If the president is just, the minister are just, and then the people in following positions would not dare to commit any injustice; thus, justice should start from the top. In case the president or provincial security took bribes from a zone officer, then he would take from the public.

So then, the first action of mine would be improving the justice system in order to restore better justice so that people could manage to access their rights; and the second task that I would like to do is for work/jobs to be given on the basis of merit and should not consider any personal network for misuse. Work should be given to the deserving ones and I should not only give promises to people and make promises that I could do it.

My first action would be to remove gender-based discrimination in society. Gender discrimination is like, a boy can study and has a free will to do anything but a girl cannot, she stays at home...moreover, mothers tell daughters to let boys first eat the food at home and then girls can have it. So, girls are always considered in the second layer and girls cannot even express their concern or voices that I also would like to eat this and that thing or I want to go to this place.

As the first step, I would like to bring peace and security so that people can live in peace and security; and secondly, I would improve the livelihood and economy of people so there is an opportunity for people to work, so, through this, people could live; thirdly, I would create opportunities of education so people have it and their level of education can increase and to have a peaceful, stable and developed Afghanistan.

For improvement, we need knowledge and security. The improvement of a country is linked to knowledge. Everyone wants to be provided with the best facilities to study. We want the government to improve the level of knowledge in the country until we do not need to go abroad to study.

The first thing that I would like to do is ensure the rights of women so women and men have equal rights.

Firstly, I would give girls the right to study and work in society and the law should be applied to all and also to bring peace to Afghanistan.

If I become the President. I will serve my country by restoring peace and stability to Afghanistan.

Firstly, I would improve the economy as well as implement the rule of law.

Supposing I become president of Afghanistan, first, I would like to concentrate on creating employment opportunities and building factories to overcome poverty. Second, I would like to create good coordination among department lines as well as recruit people based on merit as well as consideration of work experiences in order to gain benefit from their experiences.
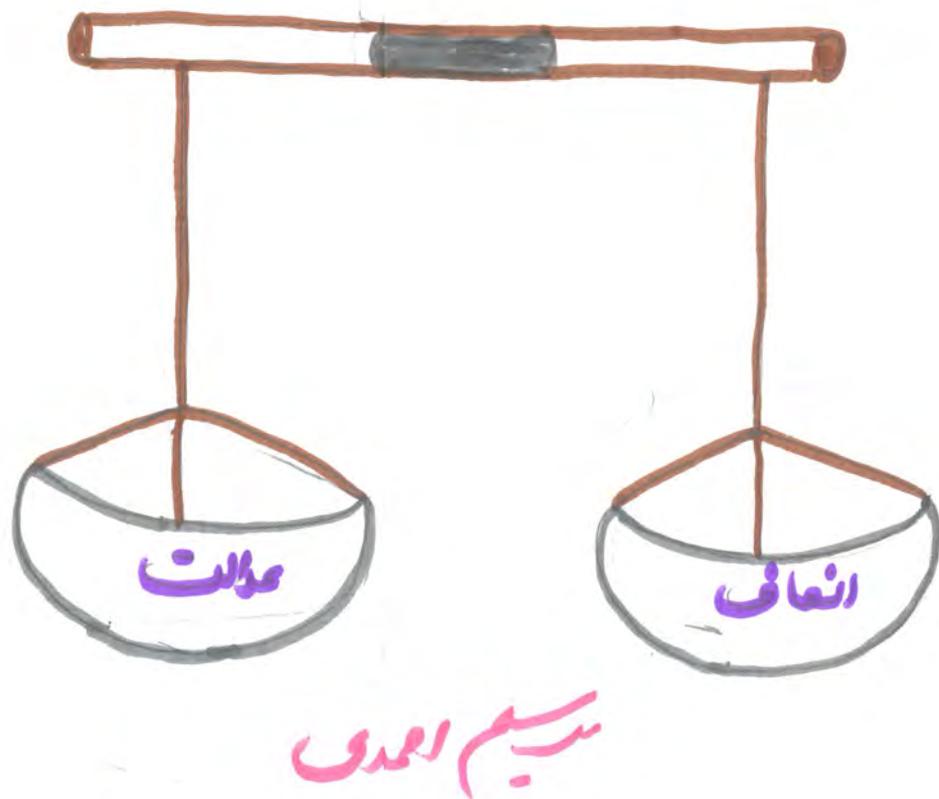
*Figure 17. Drawing from the Afghan Youth Project.
(Text in Drawing: One of Afghanistan's constitution's specifications
is the existence of judgment and no discrimination.)*

Conceptions of society

مفاهیم جامعه

Afghanistan is a rosy garden but there are some people who root out
our flowers and there are some people who cut the flowers
before they blossom; but I hope they reach their blooms one day.
By cutting, they do not have anything, so let's come forward
and fill up with flowers.

Young people offer an image of society that is characterized by solidarity and unity among its people and a high sense of morality. They envision a society in which everyone enjoys equal rights and has access to those rights. It is not surprising that, after more than three decades of war and conflict, Afghanistan's youth proposes the idea of living in society as a family when envisioning an ideal society: the family has been the only stable and constant institution providing social trust and support in Afghanistan during these years. The importance of family is emphasized time and again by young people. They also state that poverty should be diminished and that all children and young people should be able to enjoy their right to free education with high standards. Those in need and in vulnerable positions should be supported by their fellow countrymen.

First of all, what is of importance to me is securing the security, overall peace. Then I would like to live in a wonderful society full of good approaches and a lot of intellectual people. I am one of those diligent youngsters with a lot of ideas for my society. In the next ten years, we could transform our society into a country that is comfortable and pleasing for everyone.

My first imagination and want is that I could save my country and my compatriots from the current ongoing crises in the country and my second wish is to be an effective and helpful person for my society so that I can serve my people and society; and my services are the following:
1. I want to be a scholar and have lots of knowledge to serve and develop my country and my desperate people through it.
2. I want to provide educational centers for people who are illiterate so that they can get benefits from having knowledge, too.
3. I want to take addicted people to health facilities so that experienced and capable doctors treat them because addicted people are one of the crucial problems in our country.
4. I want to develop agriculture in the country and provide facilities for our farmers so that our country has development in agriculture, too; and, at the end, I want to promote our real and historical cultures between the people of our country because, in the last couple years, our cultures have been invaded and we want to abolish this cultural invasion.

Thereby, let's have unity and a sincere intention for peace, in solidarity with all the people of Pashtuns, Hazara, Uzbek, Tajik – we all are the colorful flowers of Afghanistan and we all are one flower in the garden of Afghanistan as we are Muslim brothers – seeking to live brotherly and equally.

Peace means coming together and standing together, forming unity, eliminating hatred in society.

My message to the parents is to allow their children to go to school so they study and become good people and serve society. My message to my age group is to study hard, reach good positions, build our country and have peace and development in our country.

So that I can do my job without risk and I can tassel the ones who give and take corruption money. And I support the people that are honest and innocent. I want to defend women's rights when I am in the job. I want to serve Afghanistan so that God and my parents are satisfied with me. And I want to prevent those who migrate to other countries and I want to provide jobs in our own country because the foreign countries distance Afghani people from their families and their religion. I want to stay a faithful girl and be with God.

And help the innocent children that are away from education and their family's love.

Faith & hope

ایمـان و امید

References to religion, and specifically to Islam, are recurrent among young people. For them, faith is the source of non-violence, equality and, first and foremost, hope and strength to cope, despite severe daily suffering and challenges. These young people continuously emphasize the importance of being religiously righteous and acting morally. While they emphasize the need to give their all in order to do so, young people also state that some things are beyond their control and subject to Allah's will.

I am hopeful inshAllah that peace prevails. Maybe it will come bit by bit, but I do have a wish for Afghanistan to be under the shadow of peace and security and that all are united, cordial and friendly to each other.

So, I am hopeful that, day by day, my hope increases and I have the wish for more; that hope is there until I reach my goal, until I secure a good place inshAllah

As per my view, I am hopeful inshAllah that Peace for the righteous path will come, but we need to initiate peace from within ourselves; should I have hope inshAllah that peace would prevail with blessings.

Well, it depends upon the efforts of human beings. As Allah states that you should not be hopeless, but Satan is. Therefore, the Muslims should uphold hope. Allah also says in other places that his world is like a hell for human beings, meaning that it is a test whether human beings remain patient and submit to Allah or, in hardship, they give up and only complain. So, Allah also has the strength to overcome it as Allah is the wisest and knows the pains of Afghanistan. So, I would like to come to the question you asked me: "whether to achieve or not". Well, a human being cannot predict the invisible, as even the Prophet could not, but still, we can imagine our future. As the Taliban and Da'esh/IS militants are on the verge of getting defeated. We are hopeful to have peace, stability and prosperity in our Afghanistan inshAllah.

I simply cannot predict it but still, I would like to have a good workshop, a good house and I would like from Allah to have a high position.

Let's hope! Allah is kind.

I think about my future with much seriousness, so I perform my responsibilities very well towards my family, society and myself as well as in front of Allah, as we are created as representative in this world. I would really like to tell you that sometimes I fear that the person I want to be does not become mean or commit injustices in society, or, by reaching to my goal, change my view in favor of personal interest – so this is my fear.

I do not have any fear in my life except Allah.

I have decided,
with the hope and wish of Allah,
I am confident I will achieve.

I do have the wish.
InshAllah with the hope of Allah and through the police and national forces peace will be established in our country.

Well, everyone thinks and worries about the future, and so do I. I pray my future will be good with the help of Allah. InshAllah, I will try my best just as those who work hard – then I will have a friendly and good future. And, I should also mention that everyone may not get it; for, as it is said: "those who work, so shall be paid". Thus, those who work hard and overcome the difficult times will be those who will have a developed and prosperous living. It is also if a person just does not do anything but only eats and sleeps; but then what is the purpose of creating a human being by Allah? Therefore, we are not born unknowingly/ ignorantly, so, whenever we want to have a good future, then we should have a life purpose. So, we need to understand that, if a person lacks life purpose, then he would not expect to achieve something in the future; so, I will try, and with the hope of Allah, for a good future.
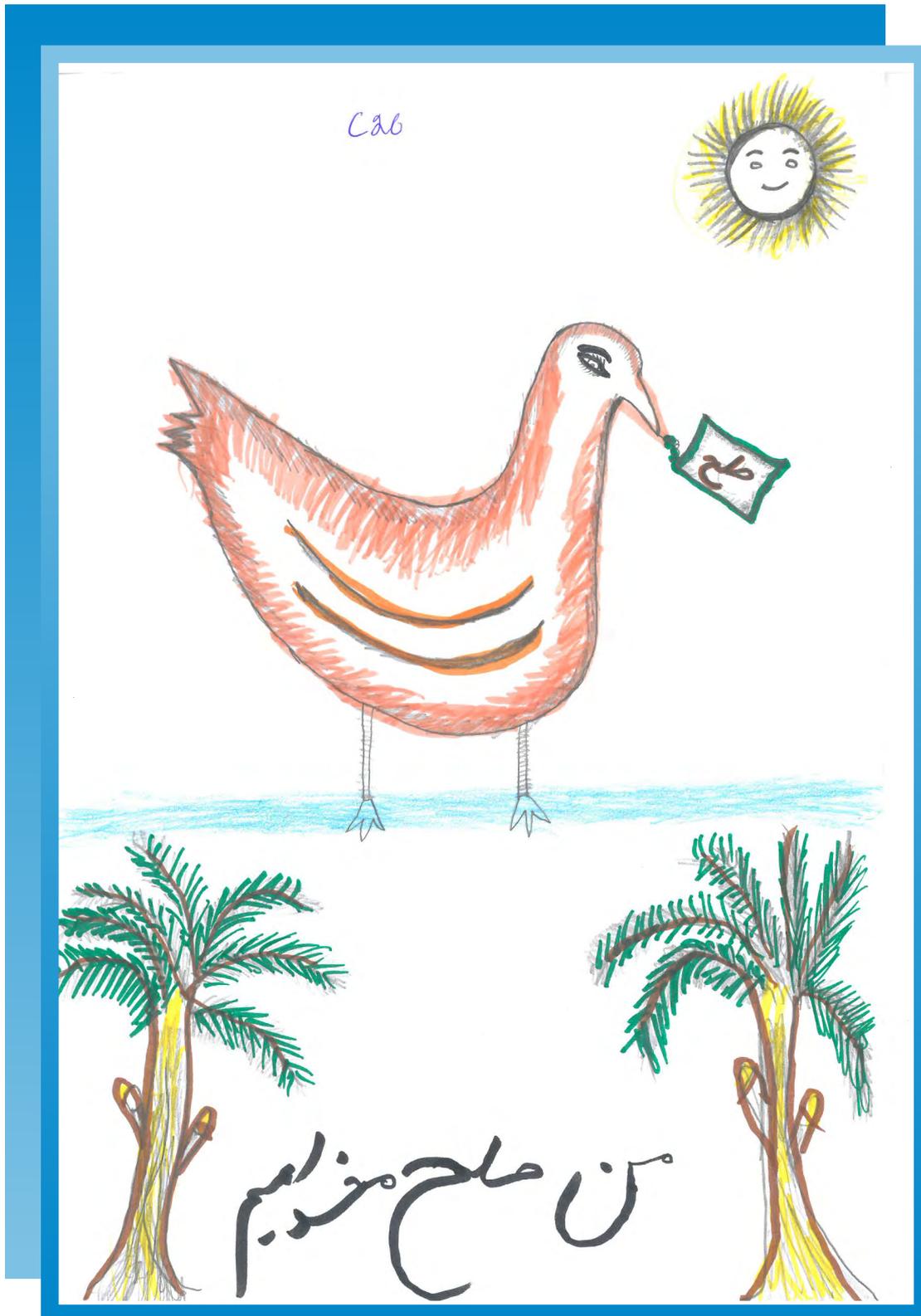
Figure 18. *Drawing from the Afghan Youth Project. (Text in Drawing: I want peace).*

The mission of the youth

وظیفه جوانان

In this project, Afghan youth expressed their messages and mandates for themselves and their peers. Serving Afghanistan and its people and being a useful part of society is of central importance to them. Young people vocally stress that their peers should not migrate to other countries but stay in Afghanistan and help in the rebuilding process – for they see themselves as the future makers of the country. It is remarkable that, despite the ongoing conflict, young people focus on their own social development as well as the development of their country in a very constructive manner. Education is perceived as the key element: they vividly describe how education could change society and the country, underlining that education is essential for social progress. However, they also state that this will only be possible with sustainable peace and through equal opportunities. Education also serves as an interface between the collective and individual level: the desire to serve the country and the Afghan people using one's acquired education is connected to the desire for recognition and social advancement. Regardless of their gender or socioeconomic position, almost every young person expresses their will to serve their country and society, with the aim of eventually turning Afghanistan into a more prosperous society. The notion of solidarity is very accentuated among young females.

And, after finishing my higher education, I should have a good position in society, such as president. I chose this field because I suffer very much from my society's pain. And, by having this position, I want to bring security, stability and build up my country. We youths are the witnesses that our dear country is burning in the fire of fights. And no one is there to help this innocent country and inshallah a day will come that all Jihadis will be out of power and the young generation will have the power and will work to bring peace and facilities. Also, today the youths are leaving the country due to having no job, no security, etc. They will rely on other societies. According to my opinion, they are making their biggest mistake of their life. If there is death it will be everywhere, in Afghanistan or in Europe.

Every person in the country should protect our country. The future of our country is in our hands. We should protect our country so that our country changes into a beautiful and pretty land. I serve my country. We should try to have a secure, calm and facilitated society in our country.

I want to become a teacher in the future so that I can serve society. I would like very much to be a teacher. I want to become a future-maker teacher in the future, and I want to be a future-maker of Afghanistan. I was very much interested in the teaching profession from my childhood and I wanted to become a teacher so that I could train good and future-makers of Afghanistan, like engineers, teachers, in the agriculture field, so that they then serve Afghanistan.

My message to my peer group is to take a distance from fighting and other bad things and instead go towards acquiring the knowledge of education.

I am very happy today that I am able to express and reach my pains as well of youth and peers to others, I wished from Allah to provide me with the chance to share whatever is in my heart to others, I am thankful to Allah. I request that all the youth do not say anything about others, always keep on moving; whatever comes across, put it aside, study and search and do not listen to people [meaning: do not be discouraged what others say about you and/or others] and always be in search of education so to stand on your own feet.

My message to all the youth is to be united and allied with each other, focus on studies and strive hard so you become useful to society.

I am young now and I wish to become a doctor in the future and serve Afghanistan and my family.

And I wish to be a doctor and a brave man to serve my country and be in charge of my country and the people; and I want to be a good doctor so that every type of patient will not need to go to other countries for treatment and their treatment should be done in our country.

I want to study in the nursing field and help and solve the problems of our sisters and mothers who have suffered a lot and to serve them. [...] I want to finish university and want to serve females honestly.

I want to become a midwife for those women who cannot approach the hospitals or who do not have any clinics or hospitals nearby so I can go there and help during the delivery.

آیینه من

قابله

*Figure 19. Drawing from the Afghan Youth Project
(Text in Drawing: My future as a nurse.)*
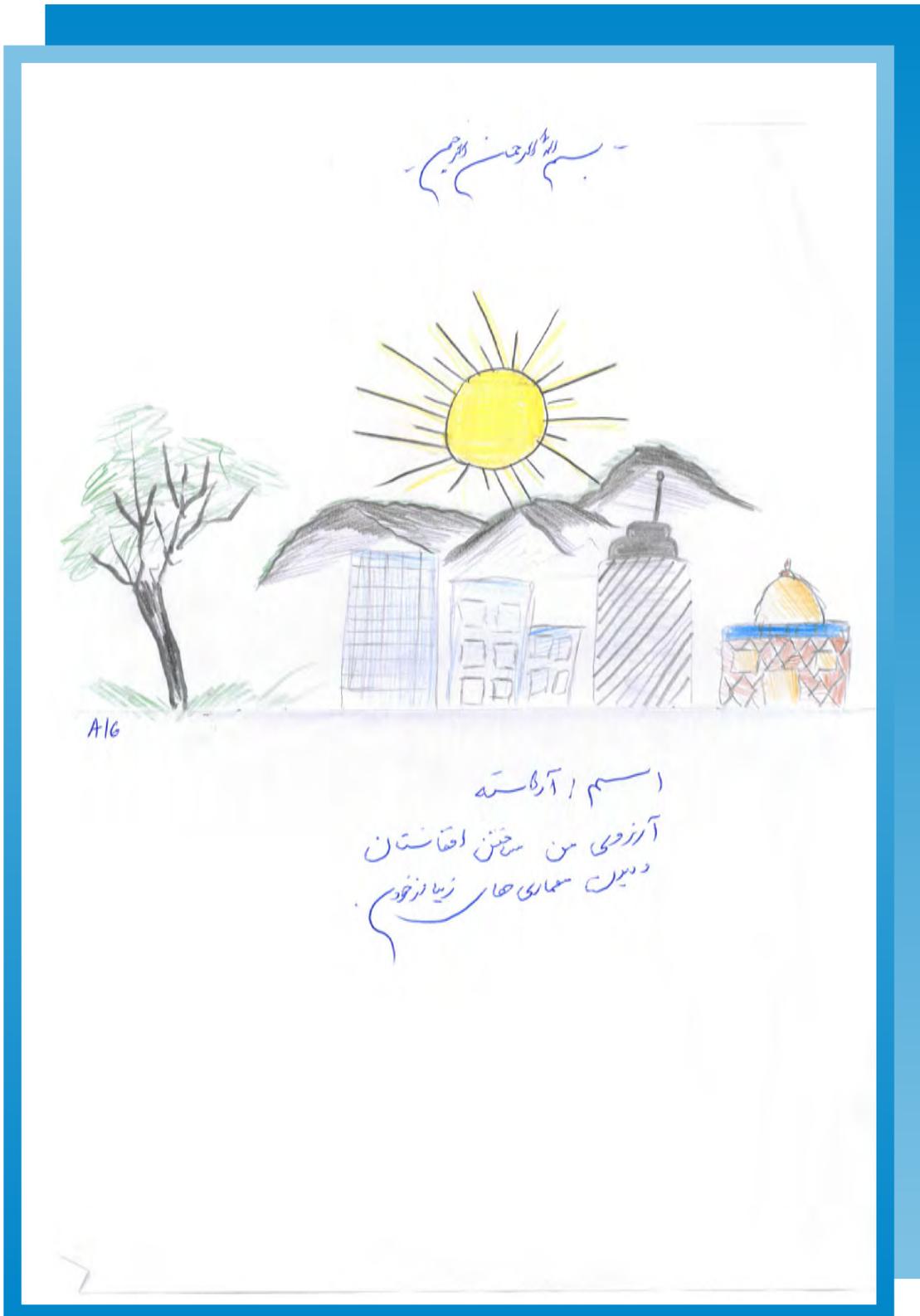
Figure 20. Drawing from the Afghan Youth Project.
(Text in Drawing: My ambitions to build Afghanistan
and to see the architects that I made.)

On hope & agency

Hope is a puzzling concept. There is no common understanding of this notion among scholars discussing hope in contemporary times (McGeer 2004). Hope is generally labeled, among other things, as an emotion, a cognitive process, a mode of being, a disposition, an impulse or intuition, an existential stance or multi-faced affective-cognitive-behavioral phenomenon. Two contrasting perspectives of hope compound these conceptual obscurities: one regards hope as an unchangeable core of human anthropological specificity (Mandel, 2002) while the other sees hope as a socially constructed pattern of behavior. However, "a more nuanced approach could see hope as both biologically rooted and socially constructed" (Webb, 2007: 67). In this account from the individual level, hope is represented in numerous psychological facades, such as attitude, disposition, activity and emotion. Hope involves a complex dynamic of all these factors as it is also a grounding and unifying force for human agency. Shade (2000) points out that hope arises in those situations in which one's own agency is seen as limited in relation to the objects or conditions that are desired. Insofar, hope signifies a recognition that what is desired is currently beyond one's capacity and, at the same time, a way of positively and expansively inhabiting agency in thought or in deed. As such, human agency entails imaginatively exploring one's own powers as much as using them. (McGeer 2004).

Hope and agency are two concepts that are intertwined with one another. Agency has received widespread attention among scholars, activists and policy makers for conceptualizing and addressing marginalized or oppressed subjects as agents rather than victims. Attention has been directed to those who seem powerless but nevertheless creatively exercise their options for subversion and resistance, which can exist in the most unfavorable conditions. The theoretical frameworks and political conclusions connected to agency do, however, vary. In political theory or philosophy debates (yet not, e.g., social or cultural theory), agency and autonomy are used nearly interchangeably. This conceptually blurred equation has problematic consequences: in recent years, scholars have contested notions of agency and coercion that

rely on a dichotomy between the global North and the global South, where the South is characterized by coercion and oppression and the North by its privileged position of agency and progress (Madhok, Philipps & Wilson, 2013). However, this discourse is not established in mainstream discussions about agency that are based on liberal ideals of autonomy and self-hood.

Particularly in the context of Afghanistan, politics, media and humanitarian agencies have portrayed women and girls as helpless victims waiting for a western geopolitical savior while their agency, power and position within Afghan politics, community and kinship remain marginalized (Fluri, 2012). In Ahmad (2019), the agency of young Afghan women is the subject of discussion using empirical data and concepts of agency that allow us to think about agency without being bound to the evaluative lens of a liberating discourse (Madhok 2013) and in connection to concepts of solidarity.

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What makes change so difficult…

چی تغیرات را دشوار میسازد

All young people in Afghanistan are facing a complex dual transition process: their own transition into adulthood and their country's political and military transition over the past decades, one that has been accompanied by tension and social change. They do not only bear the task of attending to their own plans for the future but also of fulfilling the expectations of their parents and the older generation. In this process, the younger generations have become the recipients and carriers of social and political transformation in Afghan society. Young people in Afghanistan are not a homogenous group, meaning that growing up in Afghanistan is challenging in diverse ways. In order to understand the different life-worlds of the younger generations and the structural, socioeconomic and identity-related challenges they face, we must understand young people in the context of the political, social and cultural landscapes in which they live.

Afghanistan has 31.6 million inhabitants, 14.1 million (47.5 %) of whom are under the age of 15. Taken globally, Afghanistan shares this demographic feature – called the *youth bulge*[73] – with many other countries. The age group of 15-24 is the largest population worldwide, especially among countries in the global South, accounting for 85% of inhabitants here.[74] Many sources suggest that this youth bulge is a key concern for the development and stability of poor nations.[75] According to the Central Statistics Organization's (CSO) of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Afghanistan has a total dependency ratio of 101%, with child dependency accounting for 96%.[76] This means that, for every 100 people of the working age of 15-64, there are 99 people in the less productive ages – under 15 and over 64. Such a high ratio can be a serious impediment to economic development. Afghanistan's scarce resources have to be spent on education, health care and social development for its young population; at the same time, only a relatively small proportion of the population is available for economically productive activities.[77] It is therefore not surprising that the Afghan Survey conducted by the Asia Foundation in 2018 showed that 74.7% of respondents reported unemployment and 40.3% reported a lack of educational opportunities as the most common local problems for young people.[78] Personal and mental-health issues (primarily drug addiction) are mentioned by 17.0% of respondents[79]; economic concerns (including the high cost of living and a poor economy) are reported by 15.1% of respondents[80]; and violence and insecurity are cited by 8.9% of respondents as a local problem for young people.[81]

This data suggests that high poverty rates, a poor security situation, high unemployment and a lack of social infrastructure – related to capacities and access to educational opportunities as well as social and healthcare services – are the precarious ground on which young people will have to maneuver into the future. A rural-urban-gap also

divides the socioeconomic structures of Afghan society. The lives of young people in rural areas are different from those who live in the main urban centers, and rural poverty remains consistently higher than urban poverty.[82] The 2017-2018 ALCS reports that the poverty gap rate is 15.0 %. [83] Both security and social infrastructure are poor. While Afghan youth in cities enjoys better access to education, social media, health facilities, social services and more diversified employment opportunities, those who live in rural areas often have reduced access to basic services and limited job options (almost exclusively in the agriculture sector).[84] In addition to cultural, structural and economic hurdles, discrimination based on gender and ethnicity, intergenerational conflicts and issues related to education and unemployment are the primary sources of tension for younger generations with regard to their future.

In addition to these socio-economic hurdles that young people face, they must also deal with the social transformation of Afghan society, caused by the political and economic circumstances in the last decades. This not only impacts society at the macro-level but also affects the core of society in that it is changing the function and meaning of social support systems such as the family. Afghanistan is a country with a vivid and complex political history. Since 1900, the Afghan population has experienced rapid and extreme changes in the political leadership of the country. Decades of war and natural disasters led to the migration and displacement of millions of Afghans. The Afghan community that emigrated and spent much of their lives in other countries, raising or bearing children in exile, were exposed to different cultural influences and understand their identity as "Afghans" differently from those who remained in the country. A study by AREU[85] suggests that migration and the formation of transnational networks can be understood as a key livelihood strategy for people in Afghanistan, one that is considered more of a way of life than mere a temporary condition, providing opportunities for a safer life and economic security. The country's ethnic diversity also implies a multitude of different values and lifestyles. The rural-urban gap not only represents class differences and different lifestyles but also a divide in terms of attitudes towards the values and norms of different parts of the population. Hence, the country's history and the diversity of its population have had an impact on the social structure of the society, challenging and changing over time the traditional ways of life and concepts of identity as well as the functioning and meaning of family and social networks. Since 1930, people's lives have been affected by the overthrows of political systems. Every government or ruling elite has tried to address the social unity of the family in their political agenda. The issues of family politics have always served as a battleground for the implementing political ideologies; debates centered around the family have functioned as projection screen for tensions between political, religious or ethnic groups.

Since its history as a nation-state, Afghanistan has been young and conflictual; socialization, education, social and financial support, security and protection have not been sustained by the government but rather consistently provided and gained through the social institution of the extended family. To understand "the Afghan identity", one must understand what family means in the context of Afghan society. The family is the cornerstone of social life and of the social order in Afghan society. In transnational networks, in particular, kinship serves as an important source of support. As in all societies, the kinship system in Afghanistan functions in terms of socialization, inheritance regulation and succession, i.e. the transfer of social status and economic possessions to the next generation, thus ensuring social continuity through kinship. Nancy Dupree emphasizes that social status in Afghanistan is connected to the term "honor", represented through the institution of family.[86] Any infringement on this institution is regarded as unacceptable and must be resisted. Woman are seen as central to the family, embodying the standard of morality, and they are the guardians of social values and a symbol of "honor". As such, patrilineal and patriarchal structures in the Afghan kinship system not only support male control over woman but also link this dynamic to the cultural conception of "honor".

In the case of Afghanistan, one could say that the structure and order of the family essentially mirrors the structure of society. Rights and obligations, as well as Afghan identity, are therefore strongly connected to kinship systems and the position in the family. Reciprocal family rights and obligations are clearly defined and readily acknowledged while the code of conduct in the family hierarchy is binding and abides by clear norms and values. For example, the relationship between young people and elders are understood in terms of a rigid hierarchy, with a strong power imbalance between these two parties. This cultural understanding of the relation between young generation and the elder generation manifests itself on nearly every level of social interactions. The cultural understanding of this relationship whereby elders hold hegemonic power of the intergenerational discourse and force youth into certain roles is mediated through cultural concepts that take the form of labels and narratives. Young people are raised with narratives of strong moral ideals such as "respect", "service", "politeness" and "discipline" towards elders. However, such behavior is not only tied to cultural aspects of Afghan society but, in most cases, it is connected with Islamic teachings and principles as well. Consequently, these cultural and religious principles further foster a dependency of the younger on the old generations, resulting in practices of obedience towards elders in society. In such circumstances, young people entirely rely on the old generation to decide upon each aspect of their lives, further expanding dominance over young Afghans. Throughout the country's history, older generations have always been the dominant force in society

and younger generations have either been excluded or limited in their roles within social, political, and economic spheres. The old generations use various colloquial expressions in respect to youth participation in social, political and economic spheres of the society:

- younger people lack experience and cannot be a dominant force in the society
- we fought the Jihad and sacrificed not the young generation and we are the saviors of Afghanistan
- young generation is like gravel in the society
- their mouth smells like milk

نسل جوان کم تجربه است و نمیتوانند حاکمیت کشور را بدست داشته باشند

ما جهاد کردیم و قربانی دادیم نه نسل جوان و ما راه نجات افغانستان هستیم

نسل جوان مثل جغله است در جامعه

از دهن آنها بوی شیر می آید

These moral values represent a normative conceptualization of personhood and, at the same time, provide an affective script which is enacted and perpetuated on a micro-social level, i.e. that of the family and community.

Through these intergenerational structures, young people are embedded in the narratives of their families and culture. Merrill and Fivush (2014) point out that "narratives are culturally canonical linguistic forms that simultaneously shape how individuals understand their lived experience and structure the sharing of experiences with, to, and from others."[87] Here, it is helpful to understand how the process of generativity is enacted and mediated through specific narrative concepts.
This encompasses the ways in which older generations interacts with younger ones and how elders try to pass on their own ideals and personal narratives to young generations through certain acts of speaking and ways of acting. The process of generativity and how it is shaped influences the way young people understand themselves in terms of their position in the family system and society. This process influences their personal narratives, i.e. how they understand themselves as a person and as a member of the family, and, especially in Afghan culture, as member of the society as well.

As such, the way that elders address and approach young people through certain cultural practices is an important moment in understanding the quality and gestalt of intergenerational relations and, ultimately, how young people understand themselves as individuals in contrast to or in accordance with this. The mostly explicit moral values and rules of conduct imposed on young people by the community stand in contrast to the social reality in which they live[88]. Coming of age (pehaps becoming

a person at all) means finding one's own personal narratives by detaching from and reconnecting oneself to older generations and to one's own. Therefore "personal narratives coalesce the past, present and future into a coherent narrative identity in order to create a sense of unity and purpose across time." [89] At the same time, we must consider that young people in Afghanistan grow up in military and civil conflicts and often experience general structural discrimination in their everyday lives. Corruption and discrimination based on gender, ethnicity and (especially) age suggest to a certain existence of ageism in the Afghan society.

One of the aims of this project is to offer another view on how the category of youth is reshaped by settings in which young people are positioned in liminal spaces, i.e. on the front lines of wars and in the entanglement of migration through which they move within and between territorialized nation-states while remaining tied to centralized locations of power and engaged with everyday life worlds. As Mira and Soep (2004) write, such young people "find themselves caught between various models of childhood and human rights that are often manipulated by state and nongovernmental agencies for political and material ends." [90] It should be emphasized that, unlike older generations, young Afghans have to orientate themselves in a globalized world that has been introduced to them through migration, new information platforms, state policies influenced by development agendas and the media. All of these factors contribute to their awareness of how their country is enmeshed in international politics while also broadening their perspective on and visions of their own future. These insights can contrast and challenge perceptions of their own society and personal environment.

It would seem that young Afghans are per se positioned at the nexus of this changing society and culture as the dynamics and composition of Afghan society are so manifold. Young Afghans find themselves in border areas: between nations, between different sets of norms and values, between communities and, last but not least, between generations, forcing them to find an adequate translation for the norms and values imposed by older generations and fit them into their own biographies in line with the living conditions of their realities. In the end, the youth bulge in Afghanistan gives rise to and intensifies conflicts and challenges at an intergenerational level.

Young Afghans attempt to embody cultural ideals narrated to them by their parents. They weave certain idealistic features into their personal narration and identity, trying to act as role models for themselves – which they can hardly find in their social environment. In dealing with this ambivalence, young Afghans create and rely on "collective moral narratives" regarding their own generation. Describing themselves and their generation as servants to society and the ones who will build up Afghanistan and restore peace. This narrative addresses abstract social entities such as "society" and "nation". In this way, youngsters preserve the (positive) cultural norms and values passed onto them through intergenerational dialogue while also counterbalancing the ambivalent experience that these virtues are hard to find in their social environment.

Impacts on adolescence

The findings from the Afghan Youth Project have implications for a re-conceptualization of youth and adolescence. War and war-like conditions leave deep scars in understandings of community and collective identity for groups or nations, affecting social conventions of perception and (inter)action. In this context, young people and children face the challenge of creating "cultural and moral national narratives" (Barber 2009, p. 17, also see Rafman 2004) in order to regain coherence in their own identity as part of a collective. In Afghanistan, young people are in a particularly precarious position due to structural change marked by decades of erosion of economic and social structures: the preservation of traditional values and biographies, and the social mandate of leading the country into a new future, partly oriented in line with western values and development models. This reinforces the ambivalent and transient nature of adolescence, not only forcing young people to cope with the transition from child to adulthood as well as from a traditional to a (not necessarily "western") modern life purpose. Political and sociocultural camp formation within one's own society and a lack of education and support structures bear additional massive challenges for young people, demanding from them negotiation skills and ambivalent tolerance. Adolescents rarely break with the social narrative of humility and respect for older generations, even if they recognize their shortcomings in certain life situations. Young people speak of their generation as a generation that must help itself, and moral values seem to offer a firm anchor that stabilizes identity and shapes ideal-ego ideas that are projected onto the future while giving meaning to the present. They discuss cohesion and helpfulness aimed at their peers who do not have any chance of going to school and grow up within restrictive structures. A deeper examination of the interviews shows that young people create opportunities for action in astonishing ways and reinterpret cultural as well as spaces for social action.

Barber, B. K. (2009). Make Sense and No Sense of War. Issues of Identity and Meaning in Adolescents' Experiences with Political Conflict. In B. K. Barber (Hrsg.), Adolescents and War: How Youth Deal with Political Violence (S. 281–313). New York: Oxford University Press. Rafman, S. (2004). Where the Political and the Psychological Meet: Moral Disruption and Children's Understanding of War. International Relations 18(4), 467–479.

How we can support their aims

چطور میتوان آنها را حمایت کرد

The challenge that remains is how to economically and politically integrate young people and young adults – who constitute most of the population –in the long-term, how to support them in taking action, and how to help them participate in politics and civil society.

Afghanistan's younger generations represent a key figure for developing the country in the context of (re)building the state and promoting the peacebuilding process following the civil and armed conflict; these young people constitute the majority of society and, in socioeconomic terms, they provide the country with its human capital. At the same time, young people should not be subsumed into fixed age categories and merely taken to matter for future economic and political trajectories, otherwise passively controlled by adults and institutional structures; instead, they should be recognized as individuals who are civically involved and invested in their communities.[91] Due to demographic developments worldwide, the focus of interventions undertaken by the international community is constantly shifting towards younger populations. UN Resolution 2250 Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) from 2015 has been one of the driving forces behind this paradigmatic shift. From the perspective of Critical Development Studies and Critical Youth Studies, this shift is rather ambivalent, especially when western concepts implicitly inform the logic of intervention policies. Analyses of how the youth bulge impacts the development of societies must avoid conceptual traps that merely understand young people as victims or perpetrators; moreover, they should avoid landing in unidirectional scenarios such as those that conceptualize the younger generation as a risk factor prone to violence and radicalization.[92] An intersectional perspective is necessary for considering the realities and agency of young people's lives – particularly in the analysis of vulnerable groups such as youth in rural areas, girls, orphans etc.

As one report by the UNOY[93] points out, younger generations often possess an innate drive to contribute to their communities and an intense will to change their environment for the better. One crucial element is a need for feeling that their engagement is meaningful for their own personal and professional development. When this is present, young people often exhibit inner motivation. Many studies suggest that younger generations in post-war societies often hold a collective narrative of

their generation based on solidarity and an emphasis on moral values in regard to enabling peace in society[94][95]. In such contexts, one common debate resolves around supporting young people in their identity-building process. Yet, this can be misleading as identity processes are, in essence, never complete: young people are not necessarily less bounded in their identities than adults. Young people frequently have less power and resources on account of their age and position in society. This emphasis on identity is often guided by a western understanding of the concept, one that is bound to a certain notion of youth in the context of developmental psychology, or to a concept of identity based on the nation. But identity is not necessarily tied to concepts such as the nation: it may refer to a multitude of characteristics that are negotiated individually. Especially in the context of Afghanistan, a wide range of lived realities exist alongside one another. As such, young people need to find forms of representation and participation that suit their lived experiences. It is therefore crucial to positively involve young people in the rebuilding of the country and give them a stake in their societies during the transition periods following violent conflict, as this is crucial for long-term peace and security. Interventions and programs for the younger generation must satisfy various criteria, such as[96]:

- support youth strategies and programs that promote youth-led initiatives beyond capital elites
- foster intergenerational dialogue and collaboration
- utilize and mandate the use of theories of change – in donor strategies
- institute procurement tenders and program-building that are evidence-based, holistic and multi-sectoral as much as possible.

Young people need an affirmative attitude from their social environment with regard to social engagement. Family, communities and social networks are important motivators and enablers. Additional enabling factors include respect for civil and political rights (such as freedom of expression), safe spaces, and support and opportunities offered by civil society organizations, facilitated by young people, and, to a lesser extent, supported by the government. For example, according to the BTI country survey, young people in Afghanistan had been very enthusiastic about registering themselves as members of political parties before the 2014 election; but, due to the infectiveness among these parties in society and in implementing their

political agendas and interests, this enthusiasm has decreased while trust in political parties and institutions has waned.[97] Structural hurdles such as discrimination and corruption are central factors that prevent and discourage young people from participating in political and societal processes. Nepotism and patronage systems result in experiences of exclusion, discrimination and injustice among young people – they restrict participation and opportunities for action by preventing options for social advancement and by rendering social and political participation impossible.

One of the most important interventions would therefore entail creating institutional structures that provide long-lasting support for younger generations. One such structure could be a central state institution exclusively mandated with solving structural problems faced by young people in Afghan society, for example, a Ministry for Youth. Additionally, programs for intergenerational dialogue is needed. Young generations need to feel that their opinions and ideas for the future of their country are taken serious by older generations. In the case of Afghanistan, letting young people participate in the rebuilding of the state means providing them with the respective opportunities and overcoming paternalistic attitudes of the older generations towards young people.

For some young people, it is difficult to engage in peace and reconciliation activities at all since they still struggle to overcome individual traumas of conflict and a loss of socioeconomic support systems. Young people can and do assume a variety of different, shifting roles in the context of peacebuilding and societal transition.[98] These roles can range widely, from dissidents or rejectionists of the peace process, political activists, criminals and vigilantes to negotiators and mediators, key security and justice actors and peacemakers. Supporting them in finding suitable roles and satisfying their urge to contribute means providing them with a space for self-efficacy and for negotiating the contradictorily living circumstances that they are exposed to.

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