

DUTCH SUPPORT FOR AGRICULTURAL TEACHER TRAINING IN AFGHANISTAN

‘Students are allowed to ask questions now’

In the space of five years and with the aid of Wageningen expertise, a college for agriculture teachers has been established in Kabul, Afghanistan. ‘If you can give thousands of people good training, it will have a lasting impact on agriculture.’

TEXT ALEXANDRA BRANDERHORST PHOTO ANP

The fields of the school farm are against the mountain slopes with breathtaking views over Kabul and the snow-topped peaks of the Hindu Kush. The air is cooler here than in the lower-lying city, which is often blanketed in smog. There are grapevines growing on the farm, as well as apricots, apple and almond trees. And the greenhouses are full of radishes, carrots and spinach. Further along there is a fishpond and a chicken run, still empty now in April, just after the cold winter. The fields are bare too. Soon the students will start planting tomatoes, aubergines, spinach, peppers and cauliflowers, explains farm manager Hazrat Gulab. ‘We give them free rein.

If it goes wrong, we explain their mistakes afterwards.’

The farm is part of the National Agricultural Educational College (NAEC), which started in 2012 and offers a two-year agricultural teacher-training course in Kabul. Students at the college are trained to teach in one of the 180 Agricultural High Schools in this war-torn and divided country. Nor is that reality far away: the idyllic school grounds with their fields and low blocks of student accommodation can only be entered through a gate with steel doors and watchmen and is surrounded by high walls topped with rolls of barbed wire. These are intended to prevent suicide bombers blowing themselves up in busy places. The complex was

built with Dutch government funding, the Netherlands having decided in 2009 to develop agricultural education in Afghanistan. Manager and development economist Hans van Otterloo and Wageningen UR’s Centre for Development Innovation (CDI) were asked to implement the plans.

ONLINE WORLD

The new white two-storey building of the NAEC looks smart and modern. The teaching wing is behind the administration wing, with offices for the managers and teachers. Groups of students stand around chatting. They are wearing the traditional kameez, a long shirt that comes below the knee, over trousers and under a short jacket. They >



board at the college throughout the course. The light and spacious library houses books on agriculture in Dari and Pashto, the main languages in Afghanistan. The school has a simple laboratory and a computer room, in which students can start finding their way around the digital and online world.

The students also experience a different educational approach to the one they are used to. Both involving students actively in the lesson and teaching them practical skills as well as theory are new ideas in Afghanistan, explains Shah Pour Abdulrahimzai, general director of the NAEC. The future agriculture teachers have classes in teaching methodology and communication skills, and learn to give presentations, write reports and carry out case studies. New subjects are offered as well. 'When farmers grow more vegetables or fruit, they need to know how to sell them too. Knowledge about storage and processing of agricultural products, and obtaining access to the market, is new here,' says Abdulrahimzai.

Rahimuldin Amini is one of the 411 graduates of the college so far. After graduating in 2014 he got a job as a teacher of plant sciences, farm management and zoology at the Dakoo Agricultural High School in his home province of Jowzan. 'The other teachers saw me using the new teaching methods and were interested. Their lessons were purely focused on transmitting theoretical knowledge. The students were passive and were not allowed to ask questions,' says Amini on the phone. At their own request, Amini trained his new colleagues in the teaching methods and practical skills he had picked up at the NAEC. 'Students are much more active in class now. And we also have more practical classes now.'

Not all the graduates land on their feet like this. One in five goes on to further studies, but the massive unemployment in Afghanistan – estimates range from 35 to 55 percent – makes it difficult for more than half the graduates to find work soon after

graduating. But their knowledge will not go to waste. Most of the male students come from farming families from rural areas and they apply what they have learned back in their communities, says the director. That is true of teacher Amini at Dakoo Agricultural High School. He grows aubergines, tomatoes and okra. 'In my district it is customary to burn animal dung but at the NAEC I learned how you can mix it with compost to fertilize the land. My harvests are bigger now.' First Amini taught his family this method, and then the neighbours asked how it worked. 'Now all the farmers in the area are making compost like that.'

TRAINED IN WAGENINGEN

Thirteen of the forty teachers at the college are Afghans who were trained in Wageningen. In 2011 they got their Master's degrees in Development Management or Agricultural Production Chain Management at VHL University of Applied Sciences. This group of teachers, which includes director Abdulrahimzai, provided the basis for the NAEC and developed curricula and teaching material.

New teachers are trained internally and are sometimes sent on a course overseas to bridge the gap. 'At the NAEC I learned how to plan a curriculum and I got to know

various different teaching methods,' says Zainab Noori, one of the new teachers. She graduated as a vet at the University of Kerman in Iran, taught for a short while at a private university in Kabul, and now teaches Animal Sciences at the NAEC. 'We are unique in having women staff who are in senior positions and are respected. That is not standard practice in Afghan organizations.' This goes beyond having women teachers. During breaks groups of women students can be seen standing and sitting around on the second floor of the NAEC. As always in Afghanistan, they wear headscarves and coats or jackets that come down to their knees. But you don't see here the long black cloaks or blue burkas worn by many women on the streets. Male students do not come onto this floor. Except for the final semester, classes are single-sex. The NAEC has over 500 students, 20 percent of them girls. Most of them come from Kabul and are bussed in. The Dutch government, which finances and supports the NAEC, wants women to be educated too. The chances of their going on to teach in the provinces are small, because they cannot go there without their families. In any case, most women stay at home once they get engaged or married. But there are exceptions, such as Nahid



PHOTOS: NAEC

Ahmady. With her NAEC degree in the bag, she is now teaching groups of women farmers in the vicinity of Kabul about dairy farming, animal feeds and business management. Many farming families have one or two cows, which are looked after by the women. ‘We use a lot of photos and pictures on the training courses. What I tell them is very practical. For example, we teach women to make silage,’ says Ahmady. The training courses are part of an FAO programme to develop the dairy sector. Ahmady was selected because of her knowledge and experience, she explains, even though some of the other candidates had university degrees. ‘I can give presentations and use different teaching methods.’

PROJECT EXTENSION

The Dutch embassy in Kabul is impressed by the NAEC too, says first secretary Bart de Bruijn. The Dutch minister of Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation Liliane Ploumen, who visited the NAEC for the second time in March this year, is enthusiastic about the progress of the project. So the Netherlands wants to extend the project period by a few years, says De Bruijn, although he does mention that the Dutch contribution is for a specified period. ‘The school needs to become self-supporting in the next few years. It is important that the NAEC looks for ways of generating its own income through consultancies or another donor,’ says De Bruijn. ‘That is very difficult. A lot depends on the peace process for Afghanistan. An agreement with the Taliban could take the sting out of the conflict. If security improves, Afghanistan can attract investments from outside.’

For the time being, security is still an issue, and one that affects the Dutch project leader too. Until two years ago Van Otterloo went shopping in Kabul on foot. He cannot do that now. ‘At the beginning of 2014 there were several attacks on foreigners. Since then the risk of being robbed or kidnapped

AGRICULTURAL EDUCATION IN AFGHANISTAN

The establishment of the National Agricultural Educational College (NAEC), which trains agriculture teachers at higher education level, is a Dutch project aimed at strengthening and modernizing agricultural vocational education in Afghanistan. The ten-year project started in 2011 and is led by Wageningen UR’s Centre for Development Innovation (CDI). The ministries of Foreign Affairs and Economic Affairs are financing the establishment and development of the teacher-training programme with a budget of 21.6 million euros. The money is spent on building educational facilities and developing new, practically oriented teaching material for the 180 Agricultural High Schools in the country, currently working with 40-year-old material. One of the project’s aims is to promote the inclusion of girls in agricultural vocational education. The NAEC already has 20 percent women students. In order to offer girls in the provinces an agricultural training course, the NAEC wants to launch a pilot project in the province of Baghlan in 2017, combining skills training, correspondence classes and classes broadcast on the radio.

‘Education is a catalyst for development’

has increased.’ Security precautions such as an armoured car with a driver are not excessive. But Van Otterloo keeps his cool. ‘You can’t go around wondering if every car you see is about to be blown up by a car bomb. You won’t have a life if you do that here.’ He gets his satisfaction from his work. ‘If in ten years you can provide 1000 people with a solid training, that will have a lasting impact on agriculture,’ says Van Otterloo. ‘Education is a catalyst for development. It makes people more resilient and able to stand up for themselves better, not just in an economic sense. What people learn can never be taken away from them.’ ■

www.wageningenur.nl/education-afghanistan