

Teacher training on scorched

The Dutch military are withdrawing from Afghanistan but Wageningen UR is still active there. In a green enclave in Kabul, a new agricultural teacher training college is setting up. Without armed guards. 'We are assuming that we are not a target for the Taliban.'

text: Albert Sikkema / **photo:** Hans van Otterloo

Out on the edge of the dusty grey metropolis of Kabul there is a little patch of green. It is the practice plot at Wageningen UR's teacher training college in Afghanistan. This two-year applied sciences programme prepares teachers to work at agricultural secondary schools in Afghanistan. Interest in the programme is growing fast. Last year about 100 students started at the National Agriculture Education College (NAEC) in Kabul. This year – the school year has just begun – numbers have more than tripled to 325. The school is managed by Hans van Otterloo of the Centre for Development Innovation. He was back in Wageningen briefly at the beginning of April.

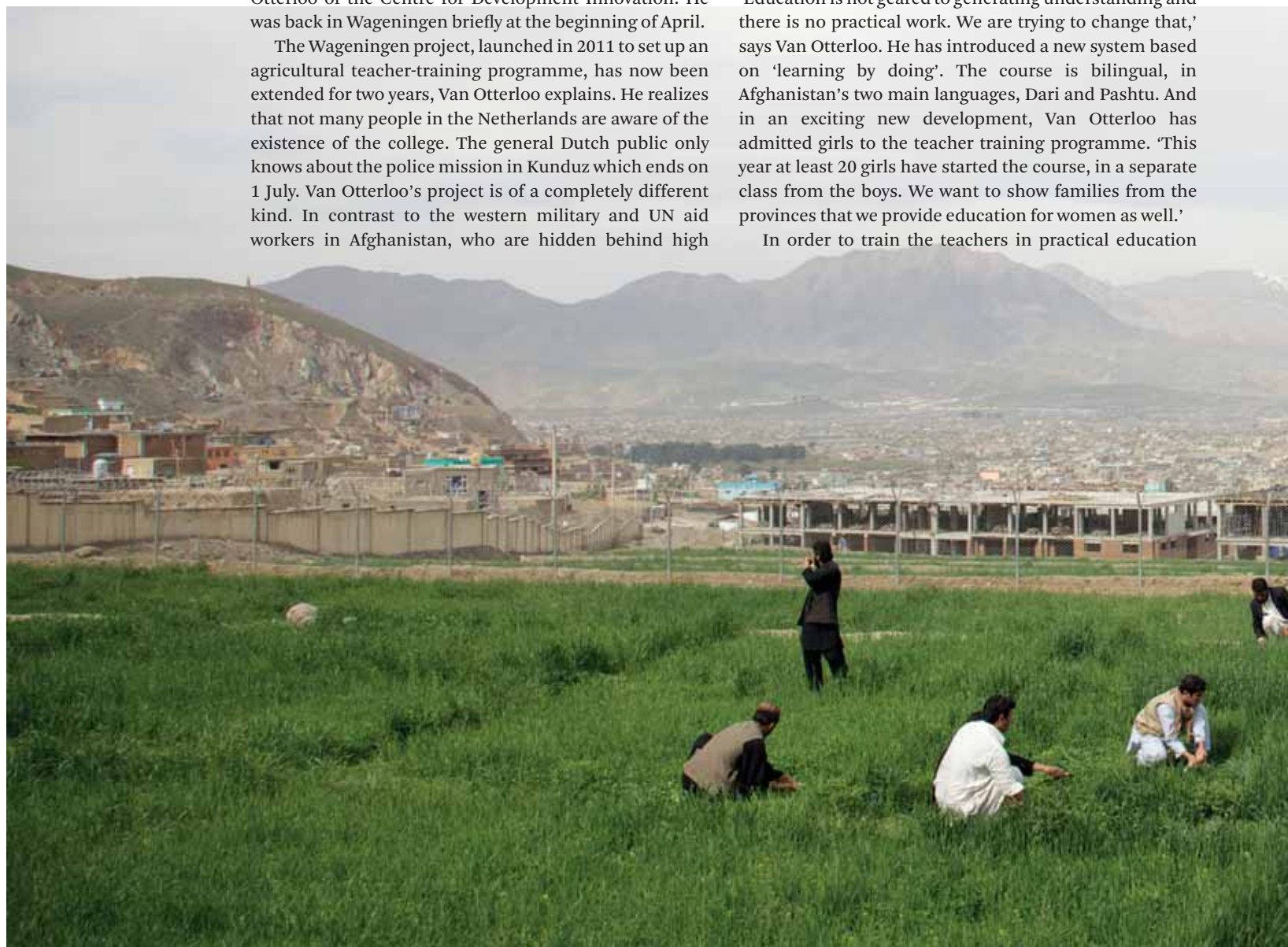
The Wageningen project, launched in 2011 to set up an agricultural teacher-training programme, has now been extended for two years, Van Otterloo explains. He realizes that not many people in the Netherlands are aware of the existence of the college. The general Dutch public only knows about the police mission in Kunduz which ends on 1 July. Van Otterloo's project is of a completely different kind. In contrast to the western military and UN aid workers in Afghanistan, who are hidden behind high

reinforced concrete walls, the school compound is fairly open. 'We are an educational institution; there are no armed guards walking around,' says Van Otterloo. 'We are supported by the Afghanistan government. Anyway, agricultural education is not one of the Taliban's targets. We are assuming we are not a target. And if they really mean business, there is no holding them back.' You cannot exclude all risks in Afghanistan, says Van Otterloo. 'If Geert Wilders comes up with another strange film, we might have to stay at home for a week. Whenever there is a public outcry we are cautious.' By 'we' he means the four westerners on the staff of the agricultural teachers' college, as well as their German neighbours who are setting up a technical college.

LEARNING BY DOING

The Wageningen Afghanistan team has already drawn up a new curriculum for the agricultural college. It requires quite a change of mentality among the teachers-to-be. Rote learning is standard practice in Afghanistan, with the pupils repeating their lessons after the teacher. 'Education is not geared to generating understanding and there is no practical work. We are trying to change that,' says Van Otterloo. He has introduced a new system based on 'learning by doing'. The course is bilingual, in Afghanistan's two main languages, Dari and Pashtu. And in an exciting new development, Van Otterloo has admitted girls to the teacher training programme. 'This year at least 20 girls have started the course, in a separate class from the boys. We want to show families from the provinces that we provide education for women as well.'

In order to train the teachers in practical education



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methods, the college has a greenhouse and a practice plot. The teacher training college is expected to grow until it takes 400 students per year but in the current building there is not enough sleeping accommodation. New accommodation is therefore due to be built shortly. 'The students come from all over the place,' says Van Otterloo. 'We have students from 23 of the 35 provinces.' The standard of its facilities make the Wageningen school exceptional in Afghanistan. At the vocational schools where Van Otterloo's students will soon be teaching, conditions are often primitive. 'There may be more than 100 schools but the pupils at them often do not even have a roof over their heads.'

In a situation like this, agricultural education has to be developed from scratch. Wageningen delivers basic knowledge about water, livestock and arable farming. As an example: what is soil, what different the compositions and layers are there in soils, what minerals do they contain and why are some soils are red and others brown? 'The teaching material is meant for students of between 15 and 18 who have a basic knowledge of biology and maths but do not know anything about agriculture yet,' says curriculum developer Matilda Rizopulos in Wageningen. Only in the last year of the course do the students get classes in irrigation, plant breeding, animal management and business economics.

HARD TIMES

Agricultural knowledge is desperately needed in Afghanistan. After years of war, the production chains between farmers and consumers have been broken, says Van Otterloo. Most farmers are hard-pressed to feed

themselves and only in the vicinity of a few cities is farming relatively modernized. Only one percent of the farmers are visited by an agricultural extension worker every year. The country is far from being self-sufficient in grain, vegetables and meat. Thirty percent of the population is said to be dependent on food aid.

So what future does Van Otterloo see for the teacher training college? The crucial factor will be whether the different factions in Afghanistan can see eye to eye after the Americans leave. 'If Afghanistan doesn't collapse, this project stands a good chance.' But there are hard times

'If Afghanistan doesn't collapse, this project stands a good chance'

ahead. The Afghan government is 80 to 90 percent dependent on foreign aid funding and with the approaching departure of western troops this support will fall off rapidly, observes Van Otterloo. In 2015 the Afghan government will have to decide for itself how much money to spend on education. 'The agricultural schools in the provinces are already behind with paying teachers' salaries now.'

As a consequence, Van Otterloo predicts, the National Agriculture Education College, currently funded entirely by the Netherlands, may become a semi-commercial institution from 2015 to avoid being solely dependent on the government for its funding. In that case he will have to require the students to pay tuition fees. 'Whichever approach is taken, for me the most important thing is to significantly raise the standard of education in Afghanistan.' 