

Women agriculture students in Kabul still ‘on hold’

The men of their year have long since graduated. But the 36 women students at the WUR-supported Afghan agricultural college NAEC are still living with uncertainty as to how, and by now whether, they will ever be able to complete their education. How could this situation arise? And is a solution still possible?

In early November, Afghan women students urgently appealed to the Lower House of the Dutch parliament, prompting critical questions addressed to ministers Schreinemacher (Foreign Trade & Development Cooperation) and Hoekstra (Foreign Affairs). Hans van Otterloo, until recently NAEC project manager in Kabul on behalf of WUR, has a lot of questions too. He keeps in close touch with NAEC staff, although he no longer lives in Afghanistan. ‘Minister Schreinemacher stated that the security risks are too high for the women to complete the course. But that is not consistent with the information I get from Kabul.’

In March, a solution for the women seemed to be in sight, and it even had the consent of the Afghan authorities. But implementation was slow: the Taliban changed their minds and withdrew their consent, while the Dutch organizations were sluggish. The project’s end date was approaching and there was still no solution for the women. Hedwig Bruggeman of Wageningen Centre for Development Innovation (see inset) on that impasse: ‘Early this year,

everything was in place for offering the women blended education. Those plans were put on hold, in consultation with all concerned, when the Taliban authorities announced that a decision would be taken “soon” on whether this form of education for women would be allowed. There is still no decision.’

WUR has had no formal, contractual relationship with NAEC since 31 October. Meanwhile, the plight of the Afghan women has not changed since this time last year. They have two semesters to go to get their qualification. WDCI tells us that NAEC has issued the women with a certificate for the education they have successfully completed. They will also get a letter of recommendation from WUR, so they can continue their studies if NAEC opens again or at another institution that starts training women again. That is cold comfort, says Van Otterloo.

Is there nothing that can be done to let the women finish their education?

Van Otterloo: ‘The minister, Elisabeth Schreinemacher, says the situation is

currently too dangerous. Of course there are risks, but my Afghan contacts say the level of threat has not really changed since March. The question is what information the minister is basing her decision on. An article in the *Volkskrant* newspaper implies it comes from WUR.’

So are the risks not that great in reality?

‘I know the Afghans involved well; they are perfectly normal citizens, and not foolhardy. Safety has always come first on the project. If they say it can be done, who are we to decide that it can’t? The women have clearly expressed their wish to go back to college. Their families have given their consent, and they really won’t recklessly let their daughters go out on the streets. I think it’s arrogant of the Dutch authorities to believe they know better about the risks. Women are being deprived of a choice, “just to be on the safe side”. Even though they’ll be running the security risk, not us. Politicians



Text Marieke Enter



Munition left behind by Taliban in fields in Balkh, northern Afghanistan. • Photo Shutterstock

seem to be more concerned about keeping their hands clean than about the fate of these 36 women.’

Is there anything else WUR can or should do?

‘Not in a formal sense, no. The contract ended on 31 October, and that was the end of WUR’s role, officially. Personally, I think WUR also has a moral duty to help the women, but that’s not how the game is played. I never thought Wageningen was very enthusiastic about this project, and the chaotic conditions in Afghanistan haven’t improved matters.’

According to the development organization Spark, 150,000 euros would be enough to enable the women to finish their training.

‘What needs to happen now is for the ministry of Foreign Affairs to sign a contract with the college in Afghanistan directly. Or, if that is too tricky, with an

NGO that is willing to be a go-between financially – and they can be found. Schreinemacher wants to identify the options by the end of this year. But that means another two months before the women know where they stand.’

What will be lost if NAEC does have to stop?

‘For the 36 women, it will be a dramatic loss, let that be clear. As for the institute, it has achieved a lot. In the past 10 years, countless people have been trained and a

new curriculum has been spread among 150 schools. And yet something important will be lost if NAEC stops, and that is Afghanistan’s capacity to improve its agricultural education itself. This doesn’t have to happen: the Islamic Development Bank has already expressed its willingness to co-finance a new start, provided the Netherlands stays on board. I hope that happens. Although in my experience, loyalty to the people we claim to be working for is not the Netherlands’ strongest point.’ ■

NAEC & WCDI

The National Agriculture Education College (NAEC) is an Afghan agricultural teacher training college set up in 2009 with funding from Dutch ministries (Foreign Affairs and Agriculture). At the time, the project was managed by Van Hall Larenstein, which was then part of WUR. Later, it was taken over by Wageningen Centre for Development Innovation (WCDI). As of 31 October, WUR/WCDI no longer has contractual relations with NAEC. WCDI says it still has weekly meetings with the NAEC board to finalize everything properly. ‘Another point of discussion is how WCDI can support students. We have a constructive relationship with the NAEC board. And we are trying to work with Foreign Affairs in a solution-oriented way,’ says WCDI’s Hedwig Bruggeman.