Synopsis of Dr. Sakena Yacoobi’s Lecture: Aid Through Action: Reconstructing Education and Health Systems in Afghanistan

Dr. Yacoobi began her talk by remarking on her work founding and developing the Afghan Institute for Learning (AIL) over the past 20 years. Today, the AIL reaches 11 million people and employs 23,000 teachers. She stated that she is driven by the notion that every person desires to be educated. She believes that those who are poor and starving have an even greater passion for education since they have experience firsthand the problems that arise from ignorance. People in Afghanistan are enthusiastic about learning, and motivating their children to learn, because of their experiences under the Taliban when all rights and freedoms were taken from them. The only form of education that existed under the Taliban, and the Soviet Union that preceded them, involved rout memorization. Dr. Yacoobi has turned towards a student-centered educational model and wants students to think critically, ask questions and learn from interacting with one another.

Dr. Yacoobi emphasized that when starting the AIL, their limited resources did not deter students from early participation. She remarked that they didn’t need a classroom, or books, and that the simple opportunity to interact with and share with others proved to be most impactful. She is a strong supporter of the notion that educational activities and structures must be tailored to specific societies and situations. For example, when the AIL has to work more covertly in times of threats and opposition, they readjust their programs to remain effective but fit immediate situational needs. Dr. Yacoobi feels that it is essential to ask a population what they need before implementing aid structures. With youth comprising around 70 percent of Afghanistan’s population, it is essential to listen to what these young people want, what they are most lacking and what they need to learn to be effective leaders in the future. For example, some students have requested to learn more about democracy and its’ correct implementation. AIL aims to emphasize that democracy should not be equated with freedom to avoid following the law, but rather the close adherence to rule of law and fairness.

Dr. Yacoobi pointed to the extreme lack of health services available to Afghan people, especially women and children. Because the focus of the AIL is education, they have implemented programs and trainings to teach people about proper ways to care fore themselves in terms of nutrition and hygiene. Many of these programs are targeted at expecting mothers to ensure that they maintain their health throughout the pregnancy and seek reputable delivery methods. Dr. Yacoobi touched on how these services and programs have a deeper moral, religious component and seek to tap into the Islamic notion of service to humanity.

She followed up this discussion of the religious, spiritual imperative to care for ones fellow human beings with the mention of a fairly new program in the AIL – the street children program. She mentioned that many children play on the streets with weapons, such as hand guns, and eventually become involved in the rather unsavory aspects of Afghan society. AIL’s program takes children off the streets and gives them an identity card and trains them in a skill, such as carpentry, and then allows them to takes classes and study in the afternoon. This program is part of Dr. Yacoobi’s ultimate mission to teach every person in the community to feel that they have the ability to contribute and eventually develop the imperative to make the country better. She believes that Afghanistan currently has one of the best constitutions in all the Islamic countries and wants it to be well utilized. She firmly believes that by educating the next generation, they will have the capabilities and motivation to put these new principles into practice.

Dr. Yacoobi closed with her frustration with being unable to expand the AIL to all 33 provinces of Afghanistan. Security risks, unfortunately, do not allow for such expansion. It’s even necessary to fly to some provinces since many people are kidnapped or killed when driving from region to region by car. Women’s right to exercise their freedoms are also limited by the culture of some provinces and they often risk their lives in pursuit of these freedoms. She mentioned that in one province, women were not allowed to ever leave their homes. Once the AIL came into town and a reputable man admired by the males in the community became the center’s manager, women slowly began leaving their homes to participate in AIL programs with the permission of their husbands.

One of the last points that Dr. Yacoobi wanted to drive home to conclude the lecture was the she is motivated by God’s love to help people. It is impossible for her to stand by helplessly as the people of the country die.