



the Hollings Center
for international dialogue

RETHINKING HIGHER EDUCATION FOR AFGHANISTAN THROUGH SOCIAL BUSINESS AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP **SUMMARY REPORT**

WEBINAR SERIES DIALOGUE

SEPTEMBER 2023

Preface

Deepest gratitude to everyone who contributed to the invaluable discussions during the webinar series. Your insights, expertise, and dedication have been instrumental in shaping the findings presented here. It is through your collective efforts that we have been able to better understand the current state of higher education in Afghanistan and identify the critical areas that require our attention and action.

It is with singular purpose that the Yunus Center at the Asian Institute of Technology has developed the Yunus Professional Masters – Special Program for Afghanistan (YPA-SPA) for Afghan students and professionals. Our aim is to respond meaningfully to the pressing challenges that confront students in Afghanistan who wish to continue their education, in the shape of limited access to education and learning technologies. The insights offered by our distinguished experts during the webinar series serve as motivation, particularly in our effort to increase educational and leadership opportunities for women. The path ahead is clearly strewn with obstacles, and success may not come immediately. But inaction is not an option.

Our program's strength lies in its adaptability to specific contexts, and our focus on personalized case-by-case support and mentoring. Our program is tailored to the unique circumstances of each student, meeting both their personal aspirations and their professional skills as emerging social business leaders, entrepreneurs, and changemakers. Through our program, we strive to create educated, empowered, and economically resilient individuals.

The webinar series focused on cross-regional collaborations for enabling Afghan students to achieve their educational and career goals. Initiatives such as the YPA-SPA are an example of how the Asian Institute of Technology helps shape regional development through its alumni, who are exceptionally bright people without exception, but many of whom represent society's most vulnerable groups.

As the Yunus Center at the Asian Institute of Technology continues to further its mission of improving the quality of life through promoting enterprise-led development approaches, we remain passionate about leveraging technology and hybrid education models. Through showcasing the work of our students and partners, we continue to highlight the transformative impact of a Yunus education, which is geared to producing leaders capable of positive change.



Dr. Faiz Shah
Executive Director
Yunus Center AIT

Summary Report

Rethinking Higher Education in Afghanistan

Between March and August 2023, the Yunus Center at the Asian Institute of Technology (YCA) and Sustainable Smiles hosted a series of webinars to explore ways of rethinking higher education in Afghanistan. Supported by the Hollings Center for International Dialogue, this initiative brought together a range of stakeholders from different backgrounds, disciplines and nationalities, representing education, academia, development, business, human rights, as well as specialists in teaching and learning, gender, technology, energy, waste management, and food systems.

The primary objective of the webinar series was to explore the prospects for social business and entrepreneurship programming for higher education in Afghanistan, particularly in light of the recent destabilization due to the Taliban's rule over the past two years. Secondly, the outcomes of the webinar series aimed to inform the program and curriculum design of the Yunus Professional Masters – Special Program for Afghanistan at the YCA.

YCA is dedicated to creating social business leaders and entrepreneurs through highly tailored and customized certificate and master's programs. In collaboration with Sustainable Smiles, YCA has developed an innovative adaptation of the Yunus Professional Masters in Social Business and Entrepreneurship for Afghan professionals, visualized by Nobel Peace Laureate Professor Muhammad Yunus. This adaptation of the program, known as the Yunus Professional Masters – Special Program for Afghanistan (YPM-SPA), is for early to mid-career Afghan professionals, with a special focus on empowering women. The focus of the webinar series revolved around four identified leverage areas of the YPM-SPA with potential for social business opportunities in Afghanistan:

1. Access to education and training, collaborative learning, and multi-stakeholder engagement
2. Gender and technology, with a focus on application of innovative technology in the Afghan context and increasing women's participation in tech development, entrepreneurship, and scientific fields
3. Community-based management of energy, waste, water, sanitation, and hygiene
4. Integrated approaches for localized sustainable food systems to improve health, nutrition, agriculture, biodiversity, and climate resilience

This report provides a summary of the dialogues and offers valuable perspectives on the current challenges and state of higher education in Afghanistan and the areas that require additional attention and action to further higher education, social business, and entrepreneurship in the current country context. The subsequent conclusions summarize the key aspects discussed during the webinar series, highlighting challenges, and proposing potential solutions and leverage points to enhance access to education and collaborative learning for Afghan students through social business education.

Collaborative partnerships and international support for higher education in Afghanistan

Higher education remains vital for the future development of Afghanistan. The past two decades witnessed significant development in higher education in Afghanistan with support from the international community. Webinar participants emphasized that the international community has a responsibility and a key role to play in ensuring the achievements, progress, and investments in knowledge-building during the 20-year period are not lost. These significant gains should be acknowledged and utilized as a foundation for future development to ensure the intellectual assets within the country are retained. This includes supporting students, lecturers, and professors, who are committed to education, despite the immense challenges they face. Addressing the multidimensional problems in the country's higher education system requires sustained efforts and support from the international community. Participants emphasized the importance of maintaining and establishing new partnerships:

- Establishing partnerships between academic institutions in Afghanistan and abroad can serve as lifelines for higher education. Carefully crafted agreements and collaborations can address hesitations from international actors and contribute to the development of higher education in Afghanistan.
- Establishing partnerships between Afghanistan and regional countries can help provide Afghan students, who have a strong desire for educational opportunities abroad, with connections to educational institutions worldwide.
- Given limited resources, coordination between different initiatives supporting Afghan students is essential. The Higher Education Working Group in Afghanistan that was developed by the Education Development Partner Group is one platform to collaborate on educational opportunities.
- Local involvement and collaboration, including engaging with local leaders and empowering women to advocate for educational opportunities, may play a significant role in fostering effective institutions.
- Utilizing the expertise of Afghan scholars in the international diaspora to mentor students in Afghanistan can help foster connections and maintain their academic progress.
- Strategic partnerships and scholarship programs for Afghan students are essential to support the bright minds and thought leaders of Afghanistan.
- Building local, national, and international partnerships for institutional knowledge sharing to support innovative approaches in education to respond to the unique challenges Afghanistan faces and to foster leadership and entrepreneurship.

Empowering Afghan students: A collaborative initiative for social business leadership

In a testament to the power of collaborative partnerships, the Yunus Center AIT, Albukhary International University, and Sustainable Smiles have joined forces to support Afghan students in their pursuit of higher education. This unique partnership brings together the expertise and resources of each institution to create tailored educational opportunities for Afghan students. The partnership not only prioritizes Afghan students in their educational initiatives but also seeks to cultivate a new generation of social business leaders and entrepreneurs. The program is carefully designed to equip Afghan students with the skills, knowledge, and mindset to drive positive change within their communities, countering the brain drain phenomenon that is happening in the country. This collaboration showcases the potential for cross-border cooperation in building a brighter future for Afghan students.

Enhancing educational access through technology and online learning

The Taliban's restrictions on women's education pose significant challenges. A strong emphasis of the webinar discussions was on the potential of providing Afghan students, especially female students, access to education through online learning. However, in Afghanistan, a nation grappling with limited access to reliable electricity, providing educational opportunities through online learning remains a challenge, particularly in rural areas, where reliable electricity access is lacking. Despite initiatives to expand access, it is estimated that only 35 percent of Afghans are currently connected to the national grid. This poses a significant obstacle to providing essential services, especially education, in regions where electricity access is limited. Participants emphasized that it is crucial to leverage the available infrastructure and internet access to provide educational opportunities. This includes using basic tools like VPN, encrypted messaging, and e-sim cards to ensure security and enable continued education, particularly in remote areas with technical limitations. Moreover, opportunities for remote learning and accreditation were mentioned:

- The existence of various asynchronous course delivery models, such as Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs), presents a valuable opportunity for providing continued learning opportunities for students.
- Online education initiatives can play a crucial role. However, addressing issues of internet access and providing training for teachers in online education are necessary steps.
- Ensuring the recognition, accreditation, and acceptance of certificates from online education programs is critical.



“We were working on the online education system [prior to the Taliban takeover] and we successfully devised solutions to navigate these obstacles. Today, we can build upon this experience to continue providing quality online education that is recognized.”

Dr. Abas Basir, Former Minister of Higher Education, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan

Social business approaches in conflict-affected contexts

The webinar series discussions highlighted how ground-up social business initiatives can help address employment and sustainability issues, even in challenging contexts like Afghanistan, showcasing the potential for positive impact in environments with institutional and political instability and economic volatility. The core belief of social business is that everyone possesses an entrepreneurial spirit; the key lies in fostering the right conditions to ignite it. Despite facing significant challenges, with some support and financial backing, individuals can create initiatives that wield substantial positive influence on both communities and societies at large.

Achieving progress in Afghanistan through social business may involve a gradual process, which necessitates a multi-pronged approach. This includes advocating for scholarship and education programs, actively engaging with community members who are open to these ideas, and identifying effective channels of communication. It's acknowledged that discomfort and resistance may be inevitable, but a strategy encompassing financial and academic empowerment, coupled with tangible opportunities, can encourage aspiring Afghan entrepreneurs to take strides towards leadership and economic independence. Moreover, webinar participants emphasized:

- Social business opportunities should be emphasized, particularly for women who are the primary source of support for their families.
- Embracing hybrid education models that emphasize job creation, leadership development, and entrepreneurship can help address employment challenges in Afghanistan. It is important to equip students with the skills and mindset to become job creators, rather than merely job seekers.
- By identifying social business champions and maintaining adaptability, impactful strides can be made in empowering women within their communities.

Innovative social business approaches: An example of empowering communities and reducing food waste

Social business leaders in the region illustrated the transformative power of social business approaches. For example, Rizq, a social enterprise based in Pakistan, uses a multi-pronged strategy to address the food waste and hunger crisis by redirecting surplus food to provide affordable, nutritious meals. They accomplish this by providing freshly cooked, subsidized meals through a mega kitchen and a network of food carts and food entrepreneurs. Their approach emphasizes the value of offering affordable, freshly cooked and nutritious meals through various channels, preserving dignity and humanity, rather than simply providing free handouts. Additionally, they support actors along the food supply chain by empowering small farmers through interest-free loans, improved access to machinery and inputs, and comprehensive training which breaks the cycle of exploitative loans. This integrated approach showcases the effectiveness of diverse social enterprises working together and reinforcing one another to drive meaningful change.



Creating female social business leaders

A key focus of the webinar series was to discuss ways to increase Afghan women's participation in education, technology, and social business within the changing context of women's rights coming under threat. We have seen over the past years that Afghan women have been denied access to education, public spaces, and the ability to own their own businesses. Key questions addressed included: What are the primary obstacles currently hindering Afghan girls and women from pursuing education and careers in technology and social business? What strategies are organizations using to create more inclusive academic environments so women can pursue or advance their careers in tech and entrepreneurship?

Barriers and challenges to female education

- Women in Afghanistan face significant challenges in accessing tech, science, and entrepreneurship jobs, both locally and globally. These challenges include political, practical, technical, financial, skills-development, certification, and learning opportunities.
- The current school curriculum in Afghanistan lacks alignment with market needs, particularly in the STEM fields.
- Gender disparities exist in access to resources like laptops, limiting women's participation in education and tech-related fields. Other obstacles such as lack of physical structures for studying, limited Wi-Fi connectivity, famine, and poverty pose additional challenges to women's education.
- Security and safety also present a significant barrier. While women may have the desire and even the opportunity to continue their education or pursue a career, this may present risks to their safety and security. Traveling abroad has its own complexities for women in Afghanistan, who often are required to travel with male companions. Moreover, studying in Afghanistan, even in covert, online environments, could pose a potential risk to their safety and security. In many instances, by nature of pursuing education or work, women are put in a position of choosing between the safety of their own lives and their education or career.



“The Taliban have issued decrees imposing restrictions on co-education, secondary, and higher education for girls and women. They mandated the inclusion of additional religious subjects in school curriculum, banned female university students from studying majors in journalism, law, agriculture, and economy, banned mix-gender faculty meetings, excluded girls from the annual university entrance exam, and imposed restrictions on female lecturers’ access to university campuses. . . Day by day the situation is getting worse. As the situation deteriorates, we have a saying that no matter how high the peak of the mountain is, there is always a way to reach it (کوه هر قدر بلند باشد بالای خود راه دارد) . . . Distance education is one opportunity, yet it is hindered by limited internet accessibility and students’ access to electronic devices. Providing scholarships for female students also presents a viable interim solution.”

Dr. Habiba Sarabi, Former Negotiator & Governor, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan

Empowerment and inclusivity

- Women-led cooperatives at the grassroots level, akin to the Grameen Bank model, demonstrate the power of community self-organization. These initiatives allow women to generate income, support each other, and exert influence on policy matters. The collective voice of these communities carries significant weight in policy advocacy and negotiating power dynamics. Globally, there are notable success stories showcasing how women serve as pivotal drivers of positive change within their communities.
- Basic access to laptops and phones is essential for women's participation in education.
- Partnerships, employment opportunities, fundraising, and resource provision can be facilitated through collaboration with regional developers and international support.
- E-mentorship programs can support students in understanding concepts and help them start or extend their businesses, including connecting with funders.
- Role models in science and tech can inspire and motivate women to pursue careers in these areas and expose them to examples of successful women in social business.

Student spotlight: Fostering change through social entrepreneurship

During the webinar series one of the YPM-SPA students shared her innovative social business plan:



“My social business plan focuses on the production of bio briquettes, a low tech solution derived from agriculture residue. Bio briquettes are an eco-friendly alternative to traditional fuels and utilize agricultural waste to create a sustainable energy source. By addressing both environmental and social concerns, this venture has the potential to make a significant impact on the communities in Afghanistan and beyond. Through the rest of my time with the Yunus program, I hope I will acquire more knowledge and skills – from understanding the market dynamics to conducting feasibility studies and developing a robust business model that will be instrumental in shaping and refining my social business plan and allow me to take on the challenges that lie ahead.”

Noor Bibi Gouhari, Yunus Professional Master's Student

Learning approaches and competencies

Another key focus of the webinar series was to discuss the specific learning approaches and competencies that are crucial for preparing Afghan students to become entrepreneurs and social business leaders. The emphasis was on exploring teaching and learning approaches for developing programs that actively contribute to the country's development, ensuring that education programs feed back into Afghanistan's growth. This includes considering opportunities for experiential learning, such as service learning, and distance learning options.

- Solutions should encompass factors that motivate students to engage in social business and entrepreneurship, including providing essential training in business management, financial literacy, and business plan creation. This comprehensive approach aims to equip students with both technical skills and creative thinking capabilities.
- Selection of appropriate networks and aims-based programs is necessary, considering curriculum alignment, resources, and the potential for real-world application.
- Highly tailored and flexible curricula, with human-centered pedagogical approaches are needed to meet the diverse needs of students and their learning environments.
- Promoting a mindset that views the environment as an opportunity rather than a hindrance is important for entrepreneurship and social business.
- Focus on English classes is essential for effective international communication for entrepreneurs.
- Key competencies for women preparing for careers in social entrepreneurship and social business include persistence, a nurturing approach, utilizing local resources, and adopting a ground-up approach.
- Learning approaches should consider curriculum design, up-to-date content, practical application of knowledge, language and communication, assessment methods, available resources, and cultural and psychological factors.

Through this dialogue series, key input was gathered from a range of stakeholders to help inform decision-makers, educators, and other key stakeholders about the unique challenges Afghanistan is facing, as well as how the academic community can support Afghanistan in this time of crisis. Education is a key leverage point and therefore must be a primary area of concern and investment. Leadership, entrepreneurship, and collective efforts to build stability, resilience, and prosperity will be necessary to help the country adapt and transition, in light of the political and economic instability, which is worsening.

The webinar series demonstrated the importance of continued dialogues and partnerships to further the gains made in higher education in Afghanistan over the past 20 years. The international community has a responsibility to continue to support Afghanistan to rebuild and stabilize, and Afghanistan needs the support and investment of the international community more than ever before.

Summary Report by : Prof. Faiz Shah, Executive Director, Yunus Center AIT

Dr. Kelly Franklin, CEO, Sustainable Smiles

Aoife Franklyn, Environmental Policy & Sustainable Food Systems
Researcher and Consultant

Dr. Abdul Aziz Mohibbi, Research Scholar, Trinity College & Maynooth
University

Summary report jointly prepared by the Yunus Center at the Asian Institute of Technology and Sustainable Smiles, with support from the Hollings Center for International Dialogue.

The Yunus Center at the Asian Institute of Technology (YCA) in Bangkok, Thailand, is a dynamic hub dedicated to fostering social business, entrepreneurship and sustainable development in the Asia-Pacific region. Co-founded and chaired Nobel Laureate Professor Muhammad Yunus, YCA develops social business entrepreneurs, conducts research, and facilitates innovative enterprise solutions for pressing societal challenges. Through its transformative Yunus Masters program, internships, and collaborative initiatives, YCA contributes to a poverty-free world where entrepreneurship and innovation drive positive change for underserved members of society.

Visit us at: www.yunusmasters.ait.asia

Sustainable Smiles is a nonprofit organization based in Montana, USA, dedicated to working with educators, students, and communities to create and maintain a more sustainable and peaceful world through innovation in teaching, learning, and collaborative action. Sustainable Smiles approach to learning incorporates a place-based, learner-centered, open, and adaptable vision of education. Since 2015, Sustainable Smiles has been working to support higher education in Afghanistan through integrating community service learning into higher education curricula. This initiative has empowered students and educators to actively engage with their communities while advancing their academic pursuits.

To learn more visit: www.sustainablesmiles.com



the Hollings Center
for international dialogue