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Mobile Theatre Makes an Impact on Afghan Elections

Entertaining performances brought voting issues to life for rural Afghans.

New York, NY, April 8, 2014. Six Afghan theatre troupes - including three all-women's groups - brought news about voting rights to villages in six provinces in Afghanistan over the last nine months to promote the April 5th elections. Performing for thousands of citizens in a wide range of locations, even in homes, the groups presented entertaining plays that demonstrated the value of every vote. Now the troupes report on their experiences traveling and performing in the heartland.

Bond Street Theatre's **Voter Education and Fraud Mitigation Project** sponsored by the [United States Institute for Peace](#), focused on reaching communities where there is little access to information via radio or television and generally high rates of illiteracy. In many cases, the mobile theatre shows provided their only source of comprehensive information on the elections.

The troupes presented 210 performances in the Kandahar, Nangarhar, Kunar, Laghman, Kunduz and Bamiyan provinces, reaching more than 120,000 people. The plays succeeded in changing people's minds from skepticism to enthusiasm for the elections.

Afghanistan's 2009 election was marred by fraud and corruption, causing many Afghans to lose faith in the election process. When the Voter Education Project started last August, only 40% said they planned to vote in the 2014 presidential election.

In the last four months preceding the elections, the percentage of "yes, I will vote" responses following performances increased by 133% in Kunduz, 130% in Nangarhar, and 221% in Kandahar.

The Secret to Success

The secret of the theatre groups' success is two-fold: one, the shows are laced with comedy, especially in the opening to encourage passers-by to stay and watch. Second, after each show, the audience has the opportunity to step into the role of a character to offer their opinion - their chance to demonstrate what they would do in a situation.

Many citizens were unaware of voting rights and procedures, especially in rural areas and among young voters and women. The plays provided information about who has the right to vote, how to register, signs of fraud, and where to report it, in an engaging format.

Since women are limited in their ability to travel, the three all-female troupes played in centers for women: girls' schools, shuras (local councils), shelters and women's prisons. They even gathered neighborhood women in private homes to present their play. Women stand to gain or lose the most with the new leadership.



"I thought that because I am a woman, my vote does not have value. But now I learned that the votes of men and women are equal and there is no difference. So these things encourage me to vote and motivate other women," said Robina in Kandahar.

Youth Voting for the First Time

Thousands of youth prepared to vote for the first time this year, and the six theatre troupes headed to high schools. The groups led workshops in which students staged *mock elections*: choosing candidates, deciding a platform, conducting debates, and casting votes. The mock elections were so popular that teachers incorporated them into their other classes.

Meanwhile, the three men's troupes performed for men in public parks, markets and schools.

In Kunar, a Taliban stronghold on the Pakistan border, the Governor and village elders attended a performance despite their misgivings. After the show, one elder stated, "*This is a very good way to make people aware of many things. We request that if you have a performance about any issue, please don't forget us.*" He then requested that the troupe perform for "*our daughters and sisters in our Girl's High School*". They did.

The Voter Education & Fraud Mitigation Project is funded by the [United States Institute for Peace](#), an organization promoting peace and stability in Afghanistan since 2002, and working toward peaceful dispute resolution, peace education, and promotion of rule of law.

[Bond Street Theatre](#) has been working for social improvement in Afghanistan since 2002 through programs that build the capacity of local organizations and promote creative thinking and problem-solving, especially focusing on women and youth. The election project builds on their Theatre for Social Development program, which prepares local theatre groups to use their skills for public education.

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**For further information or interview requests, please contact
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[Bond Street Theatre](#), founded in 1978, initiates theatre-based projects for education, conflict resolution, and healing in areas of conflict and poverty globally. The company collaborates with local artists to enjoy the benefits of artistic exchange and promotes the value of the arts in shaping a peaceful future. Recipient of a MacArthur Award, the company has also received support from the Trust for Mutual Understanding, ArtsLink, Theatre Communications Group, Mellon Foundation, Ford Foundation, Association for Performing Arts Presenters, Asian Cultural Council, National Endowment for the Arts, US Institute for Peace, US Bureau of Educational & Cultural Affairs, US Embassies, and others.

Bond Street Theatre is a not-for-profit organization and an NGO in association with the UN-DPI.

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