



Youth Engagement: Building Community Through *Creativity in Action*



**Final Report Summary: Provincial Youth Community Service Projects
- Afghanistan -**

Embassy of the United States, Afghanistan

Youth Engagement: **Building Community Through *Creativity in Action***

Executive Summary

Afghanistan's youth have come of age in a country facing a challenging and uncertain future. The Youth Engagement: Building Community Through *Creativity in Action* project addresses this issue, providing the country's youth with opportunities to develop and utilize their leadership skills, build their capacity for positive action, and contribute to the development of their communities, while stimulating a culture of volunteerism, collaboration and interethnic cooperation.

With over half of the country's population under the age of 24, Afghanistan's youth represent an essential resource in bringing peace and stability to the country. Growing evidence indicates that effective programs must be locally derived, conceptualized, and implemented to counter the pull of extremist elements, which may offer the veneer of control, security, or sense of purpose. Programs that put youth in positive leadership positions are needed, as well as fora for discussion in settings that give individuals agency, equality and self-confidence.

Project Goals

1. To provide youth across Afghanistan with a safe environment (physical and virtual) to explore current issues and conditions that lead to sectarian dissonance and violence, and effective practices for conflict prevention, reconciliation, and social advancement.
2. To build a sustainable network of youth who are dedicated to exploring innovative approaches to social problems and sharing ideas with each other and their communities.
3. To improve Afghanistan's capacity for internal peacebuilding, and promote a sense of national unity, by sharing goals and experiences, exploring commonalities and differences, and providing opportunities for concerted efforts toward solutions.

To that end, the two-year project:

- Created Provincial Youth Leader groups in 25 provinces, training more than 400 youth in leadership, teambuilding, communication skills, concrete problem-solving, methods of advocacy, program design, and project implementation and reporting.
- Conducted 12 peer-to-peer youth exchanges in Kabul, bringing together youth from contrasting provinces, backgrounds and ethnicities to encourage cooperation and national cohesion.
- Implemented 25 community improvement campaigns in 25 provinces, designed and implemented by the youth groups with a methodology that is replicable and sustainable.
- Created an ongoing network of youth activists across the country to continue to address issues through actual and online fora.
- Organized public events in 25 provinces that directly engaged audiences, made strong connections between the youth and local stakeholders, and culminated in youth employment.



"We are going to bring a positive change to our country. We are going to improve. And we are going to have a bright future."

- Mahmood, Participant*

Background

Bond Street Theatre (BST), a registered NGO in Afghanistan, has been initiating innovative capacity-building programs for children, youth, women, police, refugees and other populations across the country since 2003. Founded in 1976, BST introduces theatre-based approaches to education, conflict resolution, and empowerment in areas of conflict and post-war recovery, through youth outreach, teacher training, and collaboration with local organizations. The company's mission is to use theatre as a means to promote peace and mutual understanding, disseminate effective approaches to social improvement, and stimulate others towards these ends through trainings, partnerships, and collaborations with local stakeholders. The company has been conducting educational and peacebuilding projects in Afghanistan since 2003 and in Afghan refugee areas in Pakistan since 2002.

Activities

Phase 1: Community Profiles

Fifteen youth from each province attended daily workshops for 6 days. Training focused on improving communication skills through roleplay and presentation exercises, leadership, cooperation, creative problem-solving, and other arts-based exercises. At the end of the training, each group created a community profile that gave a detailed picture of each community from all perspectives, with a range of positives, challenges and potential solutions.

Week-long training sessions were held at the BST facility in Kabul, attended by pairs of Provincial Youth Groups. Disparate groups with regional, ethnic, social, religious, or other differences were brought together for training; i.e., Kunar-Balkh and Parwan-Helmand. The participants were assigned shared rooms that mixed provinces, and any initial resistance quickly gave way to camaraderie. Each group presented their community profiles, discussed commonalities and differences, and learned advocacy, leadership, and planning skills. Through this training, each group created an individual Action Plan: a volunteer project addressing a specific need in their home province.

Phase 2: Action Plans

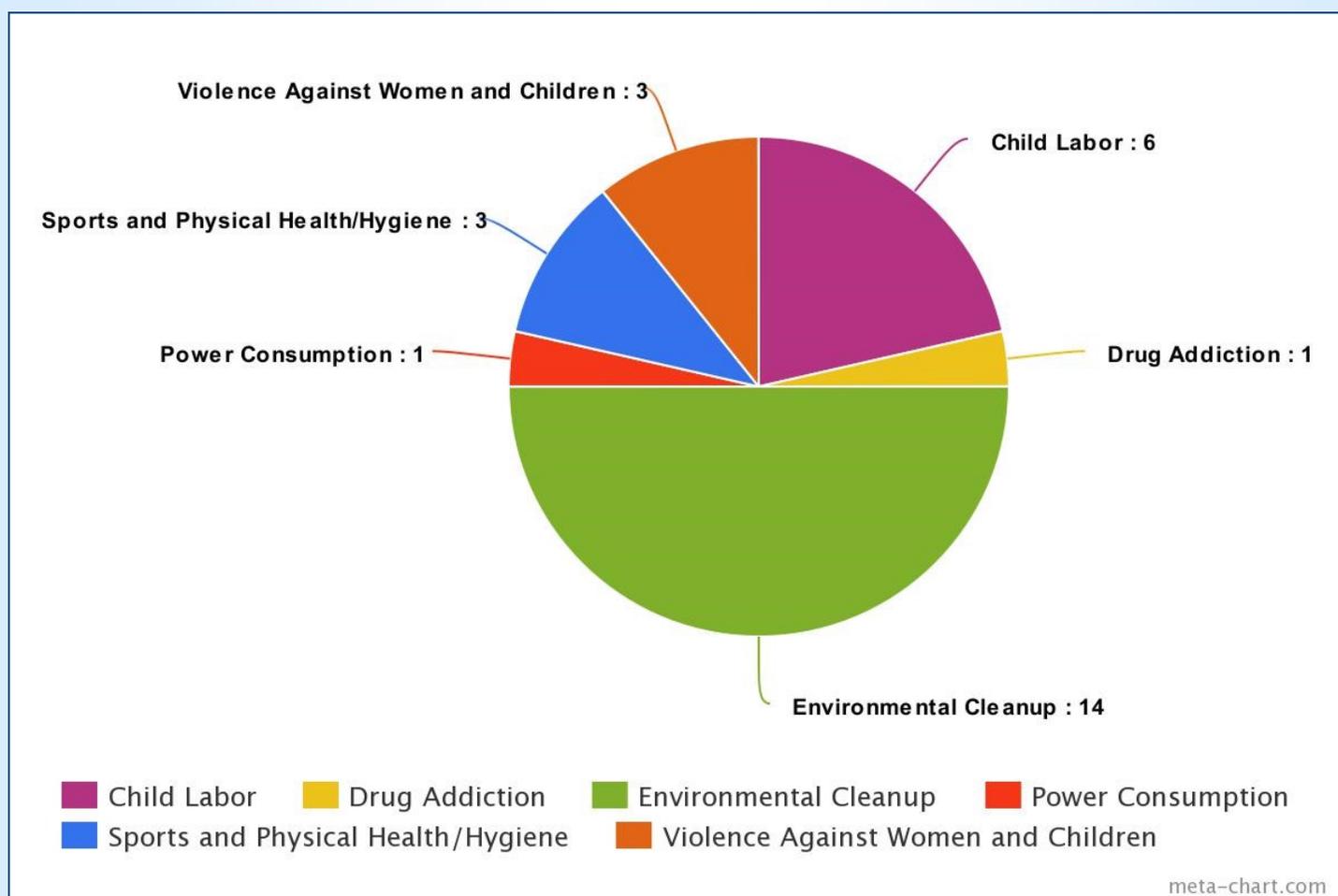
Phase 3: Action Plan Implementation

The Provincial Youth Groups returned to their respective provinces with their Action Plans. After allocating responsibilities and submitting a final proposal to the Project Director, each team began implementing their provincial volunteer project. Projects covered a range of topics, from environmental cleanup and protection, to women's rights, to power consumption. Teams organized a wide variety of initiatives, including meetings with government stakeholders and religious leaders, organizing public events, holding workshops in schools and shuras, and engaging local media.

At the project's conclusion, a Capstone Event was arranged in cooperation with Kabul University to promote the idea of voluntary community service to an array of youth from all provinces, and to celebrate the success of the participants. BST staff selected 15 groups from the 25 projects based on a self-assessment form filled out by each of the groups, plus an evaluation form for staff. A total of 26 youth presented projects at the Capstone Event, which was attended by over 300 guests, including University students, youth leaders from the provinces, celebrities, and guests from various youth organizations, CSOs and NGOs.

Phase 4: Capstone Event

Youth teams conducted projects in the following thematic areas:



Monitoring & Evaluation

The following monitoring instruments were used throughout the program:

- **Pre-program Surveys:** All candidates, both those selected and those not selected, filled out surveys, so that comparisons could be made at the close of the program between participants and nonparticipants. Surveys addressed personal perspectives on social issues, relationship to the community, level of desire to improve local conditions, vision for their personal future, and program expectations.
- **Interim Questionnaires:** At the end of each Kabul training, participants were surveyed regarding: program highlights and challenges, experience of working directly with youth from other provinces, expectations of community response to projects, self-assessment of communication and leadership abilities, and assessment of collaborative abilities of youth in Afghanistan as a whole.
- **Post-program Surveys:** At the program's close, the same individuals, as possible, filled out post-program surveys to allow evaluators to directly measure changes in attitudes as a result of the program between those participating and the control group of non-participants.
- **Pre- and Post-Program Discussions:** An open discussion at the beginning and end of each phase of the project provided a safe space for the participants to freely express attitudes, expectations and concluding opinions. The final group discussion addressed the full process of the project for the benefit of BST staff to improve the next iteration of the program.
- **Pre- and Post-Program Interviews:** Interviews with community stakeholders introduced the program environment, and gathered responses to the outcome of the youth projects. The interviews indicated the likelihood of continued support for the youth, volunteerism and their projects.
- **Outside Independent Evaluations:** At the conclusion of each project implementation, an Afghan Independent Evaluator traveled to the province to review results, through interviews with Provincial Youth Leaders, meetings with key local stakeholders directly engaged in the project, and discussions with community residents and elders.

Quantitative Results

Measures that yielded **statistically significant differences** between pre- and post-program scores include:

Empathy Tolerance Peaceful Attitudes Emotional Well-Being
Self Confidence Civic Efficacy Youth Efficacy

- An Independent Evaluator and Researcher also assessed the differences between average scores on post-program surveys for **participants in comparison to non-participants**.
- Participants **scored significantly higher than** non-participants on post-program surveys for all of the above-mentioned measures.
- It is also worth noting that there are a few measures where **participants scored significantly lower than non-participants** on average, including **Emotional Well-Being** measures, such as, *I feel supported by my parents, I feel supported by my family, I feel supported by the elders in the community, and I feel good about myself*.

Participants also rated their experiences about the BST program highly, with highest scores for the prompts:

Overall, participation in this program has been a good experience for me
(average score= 4.77 on a 5 point scale)

The volunteer activities were useful to me **(avg. score= 4.67)**

The proposal writing activities were useful to me **(=4.67)**

The artistic workshop activities were useful to me **(=4.56)**

Participating in a workshop with youth from another province was useful to me **(=4.56)**

I have a greater desire to work to improve my community after participating in this program **(=4.55)**

I have a greater understanding of youth that are different from me after participating in this program **(=4.53)**

- The prompt: *We encountered many difficulties in implementing our community project*, garnered an average score of **3.91**, indicating that many groups faced major challenges while conducting their volunteerism activities.

Fifteen of the teams employed theatre as an awareness-raising strategy, reaching a combined total of **35,900** community members through informative and entertaining shows illuminating issues related to their program.

Qualitative Results: Responses From Youth

Most participants highlighted the fact that this program is the first they have attended with both a **creative approach** and **practical outcome**. They also noted that the Kabul gathering was a first-time opportunity for youth who would not ordinarily meet, from different regions, tribes, ethnicities and social strata, to come together to share their ideas and cultures in a friendly environment in which they could move past preconceived notions, become friends, and enjoy the process of working with other youth toward mutual goals.

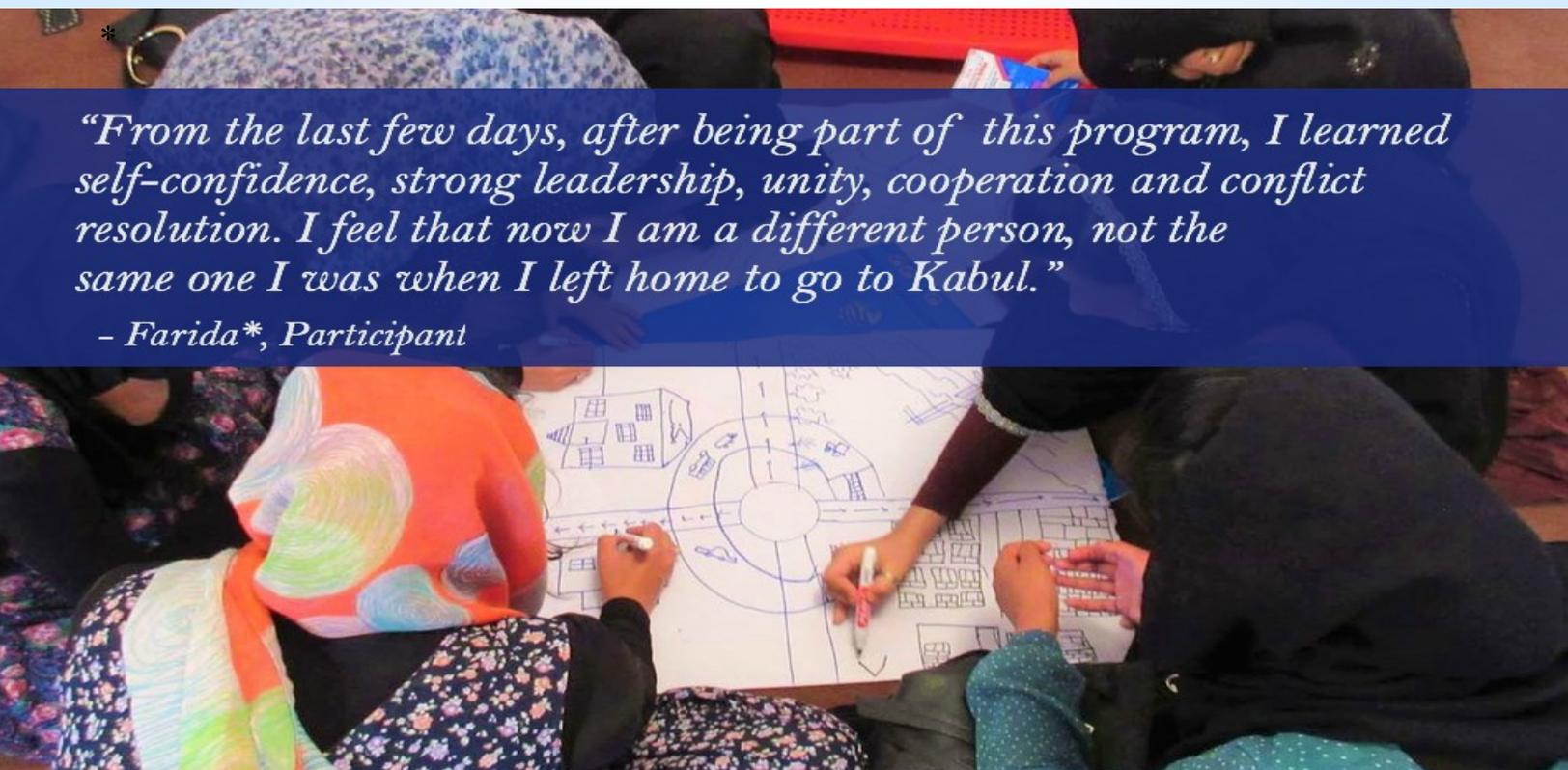
“I feel so proud! This kind of opportunity for girls in Samangan is very rare. Usually there is no chance for women to participate in big programs.” (Saba*, Samangan)

“The theatre games help us get to know each other and be friendly with other young people who we don’t know, who are from a different culture of Afghanistan.” (Nabila*, Ghor)

“The thing that I found different in this workshop was the participation of youth from different backgrounds. By the end of the workshop, we didn’t remember who had which qualifications and who was illiterate. Everyone was so involved; it was really new for everyone.” (Adel*, Herat)

“For me theatre has always been fun and I thought it was just for entertainment but, after participating in this workshop, I completely understand how strong it is. We can convey the most important messages through theatre shows.” (Maryam*, Jowzjan)

“I never thought about my responsibilities as a resident of a province. After attending this training, I see my community in a new way. I am motivated to be a change agent in my community and, as a youth, assume my correct responsibilities.” (Emad*, Kunar)



“From the last few days, after being part of this program, I learned self-confidence, strong leadership, unity, cooperation and conflict resolution. I feel that now I am a different person, not the same one I was when I left home to go to Kabul.”

- Farida, Participant*

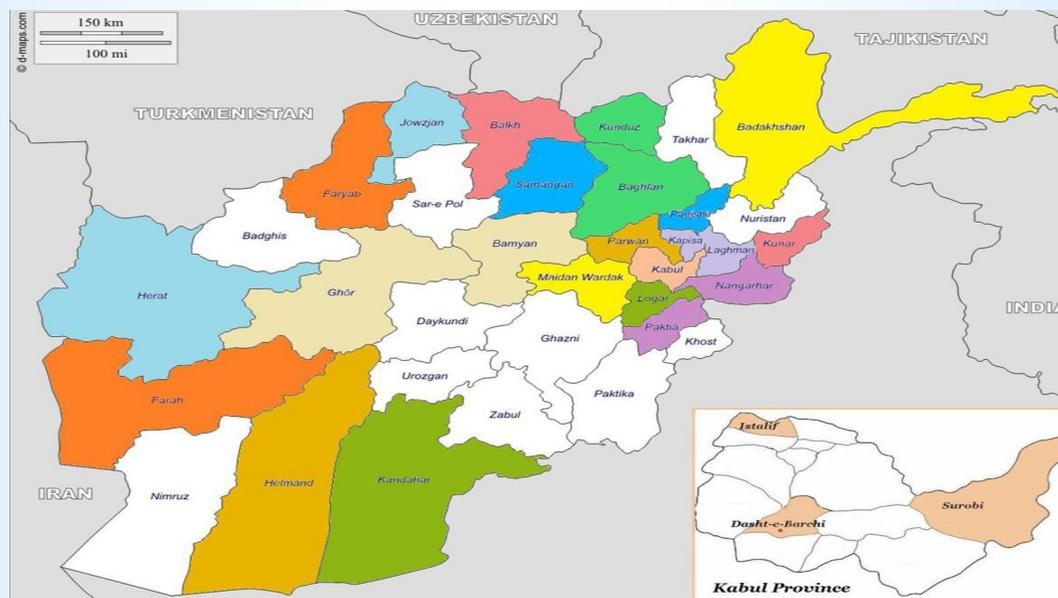
Program Highlights

- All of the groups met with mullahs to request that they share messages as part of Friday prayers. This strategy proved highly effective, with 57 mosques participating in the project.
- The youth of **Samangan** established 7 environmental protection committees in local schools on a weekly basis.
- In **Kunar**, the youth went door to door and convinced 17 families to re-enroll their girls in school after previously taking them out of school.

Approximately 60-70% of Youth Leaders have received contract jobs in their communities as a direct result of this project, each for varying lengths of time.

At the start of the project, 375 youth were trained by BST. By the project's end, they had trained an addition 670 youth volunteers to help with their efforts.

- In **Ghor**, the youth created and performed shows in government ministries regarding the lack of enforcement of underage marriage laws.
- The **Istalif** youth obtained assistance from 100 other youth to level and build a football field.
- The **Maidan Wardak** team organized a well-attended conference on healthy environment attended by local youth, community elders, government officials and CSOs.
- In **Kandahar**, the youth introduced the topic of child labor to students through theatre shows and workshops, and encouraged students to write and speak about the topic themselves.
- Two teams (**Nangarhar** and **Herat**) created 30-minute documentaries illustrating the importance of a clean environment. The films also featured the idea of volunteerism and public participation in keeping a clean environment



Map of provinces in which the project was implemented

Key Challenges

Bribery: Government officials were skeptical that the youth would take on a large project on a volunteer basis. As a result, the youth faced requests for bribes at every level of government in order to gain permission to implement their projects. Bribes were also requested by high school principals and police who were certain the youth were well-paid for their efforts. In each situation, the youth found ways to circumvent obstacles, often through allies within the government or through the assistance of local elders and religious leaders. Some groups faced derision from community members at the idea of volunteer work, especially in the public clean-up programs. The groups ignored the derision and continued their program, which, in the end, raised their status in the community for their resourcefulness and hard work.



“I found the real meaning of national unity from BST. Here youth from all tribes – Pashtoon, Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek, Aymaq and Pashayee – came together and worked together. Now I do not say that I am a Pashayee, I say I am an Afghan.”

- Abdullah, Participant*

Sensitive topics: Certain issues, such as programs for addicts, met with resistance from some officials who were either complicit in profits or fearful of mafia retaliation. In Ghor, the youth team faced significant opposition from men in implementing their project advocating against forced marriage. This opposition was countered by vigorous support from local mothers.

Funds: All groups mentioned the challenge of ongoing monetary support for their programs since many were tackling deeply entrenched issues, which will take continued effort over time to change. They each requested continued funding from BST as well as introductions to other donors. To that end, BST continues to seek support for the youth groups, either through BST or via the youth groups themselves. BST’s training featured program design, proposal writing, and advocacy so that the groups would be equipped to seek support from donors, and regularly posts grant opportunities on the PYL Facebook page. The BST Kabul staff also advises and answers questions about fundraising and potential donors.

Inter-regional Tensions: Two points of contention were most prominent in the Kabul sessions between youth groups from two diverse provinces: religious tensions between Sunni and Shia, and the personal habits of the rural groups versus those from urban centers. Overall, important bonds were made across cultural barriers, and commonalities overcame differences.

Impact

The Youth Engagement: Building Community Through *Creativity in Action* project introduced a new concept of volunteerism, and the skills to transform energy to action, to a wide range of youth, and enjoyed considerable achievements at both personal and community levels.

The project prompted the creation of an active culture of volunteerism across Afghanistan, community awareness and action on key social issues, the countering of extremism and building a community of youth peacebuilders, and the existence of national cohesion across cultural divides.

The project also presented a new paradigm for successful change, rooted in local solutions and leadership-building, that has altered perceptions of what is possible in community-oriented project design among youth participants and community members, and will hopefully continue to alter perceptions for future donors and governments as well.



“BST is the first organization we have met that is thinking about sustainability by truly empowering youth. Other organizations are just completing projects.”

- Rasheed, Participant*

* Throughout the report, names have been changed to protect participant identities