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Afghanistan Theatre Troupes Bring Messages of Law and Peace to Shuras, Prisons

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A two-year project involving theater organizations in Afghanistan to convey lessons on the rule of law and conflict resolution brought the arts to remote locations, safe houses for youth and even women's prisons. It spurred one mullah to invite a troupe to perform in his mosque, and another to allow his daughter to participate.



The USIP grant project for New York-based [Bond Street Theater](#) aimed to strengthen four established theater organizations in Afghanistan with business skills and contacts to help revive the performing arts and create connections that would help them spread knowledge and ideas needed for stability and peace.



While live theater isn't well-known in Afghanistan, it builds on the country's tradition of storytelling at a time when programs for young people are scarce and the participation of women and girls still lags. Radio and television still aren't universally available in Afghanistan. Bond Street, which specializes in wielding performance arts for education, conflict resolution and empowerment in conflict zones and transitional countries, worked on the program with organizations based in Kabul, Jalalabad, Kandahar, and Herat.

Called Theater for Social Development-Afghanistan, the program wrapped up in December and a resulting training manual for the groups and the public is due to be available this spring. The joint effort produced eight new plays on issues of conflict prevention and rule of law, including Islamic law. Four of the plays featured all-male casts and four all-female to focus on the message rather than cultural sensitivities.

The theater groups staged 46 performances in schools, women's shuras, drug-rehabilitation centers, juvenile correction centers, national police trainings, legal aid centers, family compounds and a variety of other locations. Five U.S. artist-educators also participated.

The program went beyond the performances to train the theater groups in program design, marketing, proposal writing and evaluation methods so they could continue their work independently. The project also formed contacts among local non-governmental groups, government ministries and others to demonstrate the [value of theater](#) for communicating vital messages and the importance of mutual support.



The project wasn't without obstacles. The new, all-female troupes dissolved as the members got married, so the troupes started training programs for girls in schools to improve communication and leadership skills and bolster self-esteem. Some of the theater groups still relied more on family ties for business relationships even after being introduced to other contacts in their communities. And efforts to solidify acceptance of theater performances ran into resistance in some areas.

Bond Street hopes to extend the effect of the program by publishing the training manual to provide a step-by-step guide for artists, nonprofit groups, aid workers and others on how to use theater-based techniques constructively to meet their own goals. The organization also is proposing follow-on projects that would tackle issues such as civic education on elections in advance of the planned April 2014 presidential balloting and rehabilitation for women and juveniles in Afghanistan's detention facilities.

Have you seen theater used to convey social messages? Tell us about it by submitting your comment below.

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