



### Nation regeneration

Empires have fought over Afghanistan for centuries. It's not surprising considering its neighbours: Russia, India, Iran, Pakistan and China. Modern history is no different - tonight you can almost guarantee that the nation will hit the headlines for all the wrong reasons.

The current conflict started with communism. The Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979 and fought for ten years to establish communist rule. Millions of Afghans fled over the border; the majority are still refugees. When the Soviets finally left, civil war erupted.

By 2000, the Taliban controlled 95% of the country. Originally a group of Islamic scholars, they quickly imposed their extreme version of Islam on their people. They banned education and employment

for women, and forced them to wear the Burkha. Minority groups suffered unimaginable human atrocities.

The domestic war turned international after 9/11. The US accused the Taliban of masterminding the New York attacks and the bombings of their African embassies. When the Taliban refused to hand over Osama Bin Laden, the reported founder of al-Qaeda, the US launched air attacks against them. Although the air strikes had many casualties, they did help opposition groups to overthrow the Taliban and establish a provincial government.

Although the Taliban are no longer in power, they are still working hard to destroy democracy. Civil war still runs riot in the south. Suicide bombings, explosions and kidnappings affect the entire country. Women and children, rather than protected, are major targets: the Taliban has burnt

down 226 schools in the past year and Afghan women working for foreign NGOs regularly receive death threats.

The long history of conflict has left many women in debt, earning tiny wages and unable to afford essentials like flour and wood. They desperately need a way to support themselves and their children, particularly those who have lost their husbands to combat.

ASET (Afghan Support Education and Training) aims to do exactly that; to support women and train them to become self-sufficient. Dan Browne founded the charity in northern Afghanistan in 2002, as the effects of 9/11 ricocheted around the world.

He is currently working as its director with a team of on-site staff.



dan browne is the director  
of ASET which has runs a  
number of relief  
projects which are  
bringing hope and  
dignity to some  
of the poorest  
people in the world

Having a team of non-government westerners working in the middle of Afghanistan certainly turns a few heads.

"The foreigner is still something of an oddity", agrees Dan. "The locals around us are acutely aware of everything we do; the clothing we put on, the way we walk, the places we go, everything. We're almost as interesting as the TV serials that are beamed in from India. But in the places where we stop, knock on the gate or speak to the shopkeeper, we become their foreigner, their guest."

The local women are far from suspicious. Gayle, a member of the ASET team, comments:

"As a foreign woman in this country, I find myself not only welcomed into women's homes, but shepherded into them from the streets. Surprisingly, many Afghan women

trust us more than they trust their Afghan neighbours. We are foreigners. We will not gossip about them. With us, their stories are safe."

"They tell us stories about when the Taliban were in power", adds Dan. "They say things like 'my husband was taken; they beat him so badly that he died', or 'they stole the girls right off the street; we had to hide in our houses'. Although they consider the north of Afghanistan to be a completely separate to the conflict-ridden south, there is still an underlying fear that the Taliban will come back."

The family unit has suffered heavily in Afghanistan. Women who married young to older men now find themselves supporting their elderly husbands and numerous children. Those who are widowed take their children and move in with their brothers, uncles or fathers. Some marry again to become second, third or fourth wives. So often, women depend on male relatives to have any kind of living.

The statistics demonstrate just how few resources are available: only six percent of the population has adequate fresh water supplies; just fifty percent of children attend school; there is no NHS or benefits system. Recent reports suggest that around half the country's children are malnourished and around 50 women die every day in childbirth. Life expectancy is just 46 years.

"Afghan women are very honest about their needs", explains Gayle. "They are the first to tell you that their country was at war for 23 years, that their lives have been very hard. They assume that because we are foreigners, we are here to help them and they're not shy about asking for that help."

More than anything else, women want medicine. Tuberculosis is widespread. Without the freedom to go wherever they want, women live indoors. Without fresh air, disease spreads quickly. Post-traumatic stress is rife: so many have seen loved ones killed, or have been so badly treated themselves. The knock-on effect on their children is immeasurable.

Little wonder then that each woman who benefits from ASET's work is incredibly grateful. The fact that there is much, much more to do, however, isn't hidden from the ASET team.

"If I satisfy one need", says Gayle, "they will tell me of 10 others. They are not ashamed to ask and I'm not ashamed to say 'no' when

## AIDS project

ASET is setting up new projects targeted at the ever increasing number of people affected by tuberculosis (TB) and AIDS. The first among them is a program for trainers who will teach others how to prevent AIDS. Education is a key prevention tool.

"Even doctors are unaware of the dangers of AIDS", Dan comments. "We recently heard of one doctor in a village who injected 11 people with the same needle."

Basic TB training will also be included. It is hoped that this program, currently targeting about 30,000 people in one district, will expand and cover hundreds of thousands throughout the north."

## Kindergarten Project

The Kindergarten Project has wonderfully progressed over the last year. The first group of teachers have been trained, with a second group about to start. The big challenge has been showing women how to discipline children. Kindergarten teachers often disciplined their pupils by bribing them with sweets or money, ridiculing them with names such as 'dog', 'donkey' or 'satan' or threatening bodily harm. Since participating in the project, the teachers now disciplining the children appropriately, create their own lesson plans and take great pride in their own and the children's work. These teachers are now taking responsibility for training the next group of teachers.

The kindergarten has a huge waiting list. Mothers knock on the gate most days asking if there's room. Parents, the majority of whom are illiterate or poor, see the value of education and are keen to give their children a head start in the overcrowded school system.

The children at the kindergarten are doing really well: they are learning to read simple words, do simple arithmetic and be creative in their art and play. Some of the 'graduates' have begun school and 64 new children enrolled in November.



**Vulnerable Women's Projects:**

ASET has three projects underway that specifically target vulnerable women:

**1.Literacy**

ASET has also launched a neighbourhood literacy program. They are currently launching the second round of classes and hope to provide literacy training for up to 200 women over the course of the next seven months.

**2.Income generation program**

This project trains Afghan women in traditional Afghan skills, including weaving, embroidery and tailoring. The ASET team has developed a product line of Western products incorporating Afghan design motifs, which are sold primarily to international visitors. Hundreds of Afghan women benefit. Most of those trained return to their communities and use their skills to create piecework in their homes or offer bespoke tailoring to their neighbours. A handful of women continue to make products for sale to foreigners. All of this work generates an income.

**3.Men's suits**

Another 25 Afghan women have been trained to sew men's suits. Three of those went a step further to learn how to start and manage a small business. At the end of the training program, two of the women partnered together to launch their own small business. They are now employing 10 of the original 25 students. It's proving to be a real success. Although we're still incubating their business in the ASET facilities, they will move into their own facilities by Christmas. At the beginning of next year, we will train another 25 vulnerable Afghan women to do the same, with a view to training two more women to start their own business.



aset, through it's many projects, provides a measure of hope that is almost completely missing in this war-torn country

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confident, had learnt new skills and been accepted again by her family. Now, she contributes to the family income by sewing. Her mother is amazed by her progress and is clearly proud as she watches her two daughters working together at home.

One young woman came to ASET after she returned from Iran where she had lived for much of her life as a refugee. The ASET team trained her in machine embroidery and tailoring and then selected her to participate in the men's suit-making program.

Now, she's using these skills to work two days a week in her neighbourhood. She's just had her first baby and this arrangement enables her to earn a small income whilst being near her child.

Another young woman was taken out of school at grade seven. As her father had already died, her brother was her patriarch and decided that she was too old to go to school. She lived in her mother's house and helped with the cleaning and the cooking. ASET accepted her into the vulnerable women's men's suit-making program in place of her mother.

Now, she's graduated and is working for the Afghan women-owned and operated men's suit making business. She is providing a significant income to help her family.

### Hope for more

The ASET team always hopes for more than is already happening through their projects and the regeneration of Afghanistan as a whole. It is not without its challenges, the greatest of which is meeting the staffing needs of expanding programs. There is so much to be done! Finding enough expatriate workers who are willing to come and live and work in Afghanistan is another major hurdle.

As the organisation grows, there is a particular need for administration and accountancy support, both in the field and in the UK. In addition, ASET need funds to cover standing costs of essentials like renting office space and having transport to visit the projects. Local staff salaries are particularly difficult to raise.

If you would like to get involved, ASET would be delighted to hear from you. You can join the mailing list or send a personal message to Dan and the ASET team by visiting [www.aset-uk.org](http://www.aset-uk.org). For further information, please contact XXXXXXXXXXXX, The Firs, Paynes Pitch, Churchdown Village, Gloucestershire, GL3 2NS.

### Afghanistan fact file

- Population: 31 million
- Official languages: Persian dialects and Pashto
- 65% of the population live on \$2 a day
- 40% are unemployed
- 67% of GDP is generated by poppy and illicit drug growing, employing 3.3 million Afghans
- Has an estimated 36 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, 3.6 billion barrels of petroleum and 1,325 million barrels of natural gas liquids

