



**Afghans  
For Progressive  
Thinking (APT)**

# Narrative Report

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## I. General Information

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## II. Executive Summary

The Covid-19 pandemic affected the whole working system, including the educational system in Afghanistan, leading to the closure of all universities, schools, and educational centers. Despite the closure of the universities, APT was able to maintain its contact with its students and organize its activities online.

During the past quarter, APT was able to sign MoUs with four universities in Nangarhar, Herat and Kandahar provinces, organize a series of leadership, management, monitoring, and evaluation training sessions for its debate club members in Kabul, Nangarhar, Kandahar, Mazar, Herat, Faizabad, and Samangan.

APT conducted digital networking events, exhibition debate rounds, and a two-month leadership development course for students and youth from different universities and across the country. APT staff had also followed up meetings with National Youth Jirga participants to learn about their activities in their provinces and to provide support to them. Additionally, we were able to organize a series of collegiate debate rounds between Afghan students and Monash University students. Furthermore, APT launched an online campaign to raise awareness about Coronavirus and preventative measures to fight the crisis among local people and successfully conduct the first phase of the Afghan Youth Representative to the UN program. In the past quarter, the construction of our school building was completed and we moved to the new building.

The following report contains a detailed description and elaboration of the implemented activities and their impact on 320 male and 260 females.

### **III. Main Activities**

#### *Memorandum of Understandings*

In April 2020, APT staff organized follow up meetings with partner universities regarding signing MoUs which was shared with them by APT staff in the previous quarter. APT was able to sign MoUs with the following universities:

- On 7<sup>th</sup> April 2020, APT signed an MoU with Kandahar University in Kandahar province.
- On 28<sup>th</sup> April 2020, APT signed an MoU with Kakhkashan-e Sharq Institute of Higher Education in Herat province
- On 10<sup>th</sup> May 2020, APT signed an MoU with Nangarhar and Khurasan universities in Nangarhar province.

On May 2020, APT team after the election of the debate clubs' representatives, signed a term of reference (ToR) with each member of the club. The ToR is a designed one-page document of key responsibilities of the member and how to carry out those responsibilities.

#### **Debate Program**

#### *Leadership and Management Training for Debate Clubs Members*

During April and May 2020, APT team held leadership and management training sessions for the debate club members in Kabul, Mazar, Nangarhar, Kandahar, Badakhshan, Herat and Samangan provinces via Zoom. The training focused on the basics of leadership and management, aiming to enable the debate club representatives to learn leadership skills to lead the debate club activities effectively.

#### *Online Monitoring and Evaluation Training for Debate Clubs*

In May 2020, APT team conducted online monitoring and evaluation training for regional staff, debate club leaders, and their deputies in the provinces. The series of training aims to enable regional staff and debate club representatives to understand their project's core indicators, design pre-posttests, and develop quality questioners and surveys to evaluate the progress, challenges, and impact of their project activities regularly.

#### *Debate Training and Demo Debate Rounds*

In April 2020, APT team conducted online debate training for Kardan University students in Kabul. As per the request of the university, the training familiarized 17 students with the concept of critical thinking and how debate as a powerful tool helps students to build their critical thinking skills. Additionally, the training taught students how to develop arguments and logical reasoning.

### Digital Networking Events

On May 15, 2020, APT's debate program team organized several online networking sessions among debate club representatives and members in Kabul, Herat, Kandahar, Nangarhar, Faizabad, Mazar, and Samangan. Throughout the session, the participants discussed ways to organize joint online debate sessions and how to have close cooperation with each other.

On June 4, 2020, APT conducted a virtual networking event among its debate club leaders and provincial colleagues from Kandahar, Kabul, Herat, Badakhshan, Balkh, and Nangarhar. In this event, the participants shared their concerns and suggestions regarding their ongoing virtual activities and developed an action plan for their activities for the next quarter.

### Exhibition Debate Rounds

Over the past quarter, APT team has organized several debate exhibitions rounds in Kabul and provinces between university students. The exhibition debate round provided youth with the opportunity to connect and exchange views on important topics below.

- The house believes that no peace agreement can be sustained without transitive justice in post-conflict communities.
- What are the roles of international financial aids in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Afghanistan?
- This house believes that there is a direct connection between migration and national security in Afghanistan.
- The house believes that women's participation in the security sector is efficient to maintain sustainable peace.
- To fight racism in Afghanistan, we have to combat is the root terrorism.
- The house believes that it is only women who can fight for their rights in the intra-Afghan peace talks.
- This house believes that both parties – the Afghan government, and the Taliban will compromise women's rights and achievements in the peace talks.
- The house believes that the UN has failed to maintain world peace and security.

## Skype Debate Without Borders

Over the past quarter, APT began a partnership with the Gender, Peace, and Security Centre, as well as Monash International Affairs Society at Monash University in Melbourne, Australia, to hold a series of online debates on Afghan women's role in the Afghan peace process.

APT successfully held three rounds of debates through Zoom between debaters from Kabul, Mazar and Herat provinces and Monash University debaters.

Students debate the following topics in three rounds.

- *This house believes that the Afghan government and the Taliban should agree on an immediate and humanitarian ceasefire in line with the COVID-19 pandemic.*

Violence and war in Afghanistan take the lives of Afghan citizens every day. The COVID19 pandemic has disrupted the fragile economy, social lives, and individuals. Taliban on the other side carry out strong and complex attacks in almost all parts of the country. Even after the peace agreement between the Taliban and the United States in February 2020 which prepared the conditions for the intra-Afghan peace talks did not improve the security situation in the country. The Taliban have intensified their attacks, killing and wounding hundreds of Afghan civilians. The only hope that has remained to change the situation is the start of the Intra-Afghan Peace Negotiation. In this debate, our students who were on the government side and supporting the debate argued that until the ceasefire is not agreed by both sides, the peace negotiations will not bring any positive results to people. They argued that for lasting peace, people should support this process and back up the government's efforts. People will only support the government if they force the Taliban to announce a ceasefire. They further explained that until the Taliban does not accept the ceasefire, it indicates that they are not committed to the peace agreement. They have to show their good intentions for peace by announcing a ceasefire before the talks.

- *The House believes that women should influence the outcome of the Intra-Afghan Peace Talks.*

During this debate, the government side of the debate (APT Debaters) presented three main arguments in support of the topic. First, they stated that the UN Security Council Resolution (1325) has given women the right to be included in their country's important decision-making process and have influence in the peace process. In Afghanistan's peace negotiations, women's inclusion is imperative, guaranteeing the achievements they have gained and have made sacrifices for. These rights include freedom of speech, the right to pursue education, the right to work outside and participate in society. Second, women's meaningful participation leads to a sustainable peace because women during the negotiations do not only consider the issues related to them but represent the concerns and problems of all Afghans whereas men usually

think of power-sharing in the process. Third, women will not only protect everyone's rights during the negotiation but will also have a huge influence on the outcome of the process. They mentioned that research has shown that when women are included in a peace process, the outcome of the peace negotiation will be stable politically and economically. On the other hand, the opposition side (Monash Debater) argued that the Afghan government is not strong enough to pressurize the Taliban to accept women's meaningful participation and their inclusion might damage the process. The opposition side presented the following arguments in support of their case. First, the Afghan government is weak and politically disunited and including women might provoke the Taliban abandoning the negotiation which took place after years of work by the international community, the US, and the Afghan government. Second, women's rights are protected in the constitution and by women's rights organizations and their meaningful participation does not guarantee a long-lasting and enduring peace. Besides, the Taliban has recognized that women have certain rights and they will have those rights after the peace deal. At the moment our priority should be progress in the peace negotiation than the inclusion of women.

- *The house believes an international commission should be formed and assigned to protect Afghan women's past achievements during the Intra-Afghan Peace Talks.*

Considering the incredible achievements of Afghan women in past years, the government side of the debate (APT Debaters) argued that women's achievements are the indication of a democratic Afghanistan and these achievements should be protected and perceived at any cost. They mentioned that there is a high risk that these achievements might be lost because there are not enough female representatives in the Afghan negotiating team. Thus, the formation of an international commission is important. They argued that the commission would have no executive role but function as a consultant to the Afghan negotiating team. This commission will ensure the inclusiveness of the process which can have a huge influence on the outcome of the talks. Another argument they presented was that the experience and expertise of international commission members can be extremely helpful for lasting and inclusive peace in Afghanistan. On the other hand, the opposition bench (Monash Debaters) argued that Afghanistan is currently in a sensitive situation and there is no room for such an international commission formation at this stage. It will not be acceptable for the Taliban to have the international people interfere in the process and this action may damage the process. They alternatively proposed a national commission under Afghanistan's High Peace Council. The students claimed that the establishment of an international commission is not compatible with the US-Taliban Agreement because we are already done with the international phase of the negotiations. Now the talks are only between the Taliban and the Afghan government and there is no point in creating an international party when they cannot add anything useful to the process.

## **Leadership Program**

APT team received around 230 applications from across the country for its spring leadership program. Out of 230 applications, 40 students were shortlisted for the interview process and 30 students from different provinces of Afghanistan were selected to attend a two-month-long virtual leadership program. The course covered important leadership related topics which included the definition of servant leadership, the characteristic of a servant leader, the importance of a vision and goal setting in leadership, and what differentiates a servant leader from other types of leaders. The course was facilitated by national and international instructors from Afghanistan, Canada, and the US.

## **Follow Up Meeting with National Youth Jirga Participants**

On June 28, 2020, APT conducted meetings for APT's National Youth Jirga participants. The meeting goal was to learn about our National Youth Jirga members' activities after they returned to their provinces and to provide support to their work. The National Youth Jirga, which was organized by APT in November 2019 served as a great opportunity for Afghan youth from 34 provinces of Afghanistan to exchange their ideas and share their perspectives on how they see the role of young people in the context of Afghanistan, once peace is established. It also provides a platform for youth from across the country to build supportive networks and lobby for themselves. The expected outcome of this Jirga was to create a policy paper/statement on the role of young people in shaping the future of the country and was shared with the government and the international community. APT is committed to conducting these meetings regularly and keeping the network connected.

## **Panel Discussion about the Covid-19 Pandemic**

On June 18, 2020, APT conducted a live panel discussion between three panelists, a doctor, a religious leader (psychologist), and a young man who recovered from a case of coronavirus. The panelists discussed the impact of Covid-19, the prevention measurements in large in-person religious and non-religious gatherings in any form. The program was live-streamed on APT's Facebook and Twitter pages.

## **Afghan Youth Representative to the United Nations Program**

### 2020 Youth Representative

APT received 145 applications from different provinces of Afghanistan for the 2020 Afghan Youth Representative to the United Nations Program. After three stages of the process, including background check, written test, and interview, four applications (2 males and 2 females) made to the final round of the program. The Afghan Youth Representative for 2020 will be selected through an open competition among the finalists. The competition will be organized in August.

### **Mehrabanon School**

We completed the construction of a permanent school for our children and installed safe rooms in the last quarter. Despite all the challenges and restrictions by the government, we were able to move to the new building and transfer all the items from the old building to the new building. The new building is ready to be used by our children. Our children will start their second year in the new grade once the restrictions are lifted by the government.

The Ministry of Education collaboratively with Afghanistan's National TV has started broadcasting educational programs for the high school students through. Our teachers are trying to engage with the students and persuade them to follow the programs on TV. We are following up on the progress with the students and we are glad that they are continuing to watch the learning programs on TV. We are also in contact with the children's families to make sure they are doing well. With the support of our donor, Love Does, we were able to support two rounds of food supplies and health care accessories for 40 families. We also provided textbooks and stationery to all the students so they can be busy and study during the lockdown.

### **I. Challenges and Lessons Learned**

The following are the challenges that we have had to deal with in the past quarter due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Working from home and conducting project activities online has increased the productivity of our work in terms of time. Because our colleagues do not need to visit universities and coordinate the events in-person which had always been time-consuming for us. However, working from home in Afghanistan is not without challenges. The poor internet connection and electricity issues were big challenges that we faced while conducting our activities online.

Following the Covid-19 crisis, all universities closed and APT staff were not able to sign MoUs with Kawoon and Rahnward universities in Mazar, Gharjistan, and American Universities in Kabul. However, project staff continued to provide training to our club students in the mentioned

universities. We look forward to signing MoUs with the above universities once the universities are opened.

During the past quarter, an electrical transmission line in the north of Afghanistan was attacked and destroyed twice by terrorist groups. As a result, the majority of Afghanistan did not have electricity for a while and we were not able to conduct all activities at the planned time. We had to schedule our activities and something all students were not able to join the training. They had either an internet connection problem or an electrical issue.

Despite all challenges, our colleagues carried out their responsibilities and tasks from home and organized project activities on time.

#### **IV. Qualitative Impact**

Afghanistan was already in a fragile situation before the COVID- 19 began. The level of violence from the warring parties has dramatically increased. Hundreds of civilians have been killed and injured in the past few months, and violence against women has escalated. The pandemic hit the Afghan's poor, fragile health system, adding to an ongoing humanitarian emergency in the country. The situation has left all people hopeless with no clear way forward. Despite all the uncertainties, the vision we promote at APT gave us the energy to continue our work and activities.

APT team worked effortlessly to implement planned activities and used the pandemic situation as an opportunity to enhance hope among people. Our activities challenge students' thinking about women's leadership in Afghanistan and enhance their knowledge and understanding of servant leadership. Students reported how our activities brought them hope after their universities closed down. They also mentioned that the pandemic situation provided them with plenty of time to do research and analyze the current situation.

Since acquiring leadership and debate training, the debate clubs have continued organizing their independent weekly sessions among their members and with other clubs. We believe that these sessions are good opportunities for students to improve their leadership skills and build a network with each other. Additionally, students reported an improvement in their critical thinking, perception of servant leadership, and positive change within themselves. Sahar Mirza, a student of computer engineering from Kabul Polytechnic University said: "The leadership course introduced me to a real concept of leadership which I was not aware of before. Additionally, this course provided me with the opportunity to learn about leadership in a different context than my Afghan context. For example, from our facilitators from the US and Canada, I learned how leadership is defined in their country and who is a leader."

Below are some of the impact stories we received from our debaters:

Shahira Farhat, a junior student of the English Department at Balkh University shared her story with us:

“During November 2018, I became involved with APT family through an announcement in my university. I feel a change in my way of thinking after getting involved with APT and participating in debates. Before joining the debate, I was not able to express my opinion openly. The debate classes enabled me to explain my ideas and oppose what I do not agree with within a calm and non-violent manner.

Observing my new skills, my mother now encourages me to continue participating in debate events and learn debate skills. She believes that I will become a great leader in the future. I would like to confess that it has been just a few months that I have been working with debaters as a club leader and I feel that I am learning a lot. It is a new and very different experience for me and I am thankful to APT family for providing us with this wonderful experience of learning.

After taking leadership sessions. I dream of becoming a greater leader to sustain my debate club, lead my team to a bunch of success, and train them to be critical in everything they hear and see. I appreciate APT’s hard work in helping me achieve this goal.

M. Abid Askaryar a sophomore student of Urban Planning, and the debate club leader at Kabul Polytechnic, shared his story with us:

"During 2019, a classmate recommended me joining the debate club on our campus. I had doubts about whether to join the debate or not. Because things seemed complicated for me and I had no idea what debate is and how debate helps me to learn new things. I took the courage and joined the club. Because I am always open to learning new things. Participating in APT's debate gave me the unique learning experience that I was expecting. Through debate, I learned what critical thinking is, how to respectfully oppose others if you do not agree with someone, how to make logical argumentation and reasoning. Additionally, I learned what leadership is and who is a true leader. All the lessons I learned helped me to lead our university club

This new leadership position along with my learning debating skills enabled me to speak in a more organized way, be reasonable, and be able to convince my opponents very easily.

Through building my leadership skills, I have been able to influence my club members and teach them conflict resolution skills. I am proud and privileged to serve as a debate club leader and have the opportunity to participate in multiple debate competitions.

Furthermore, leading the debate club for almost a year taught me leadership values, such as how to be open to the club member’s opinions, how to behave with them in a friendly manner, and finally how to motivate and inspire them. These all skills contributed to securing the championship award for the 2019 National Debate Tournament.

Credit for the mentioned achievements and greater impact goes to APT staff and colleagues for providing the opportunities.”

*Nadia Hashimi, a junior student at Geographical Information Systems and deputy leader of Kabul Polytechnic University debate club:*

“I remember the first competition that I participated in as a debater. It was a stressful life experience because everyone was discouraging me. However, I kept moving forward because I knew that the skills I learned during the debate and leadership training sessions would help me to do great. I was confident because I learned how to think critically and speak reasonably. These are the skills that one needs to participate in a debate competition. I did not only do great in the debate but I also became the board member of our club. In this role, I practice how to serve others as a leader. I always thought that being a woman is a barrier to holding a leadership position. But my leadership experience proved me to be wrong

Serving the debate club for almost a year, I learned that gender is no barrier and it helped me to learn further leadership skills and enhance my professional skills to further serve my community. The greater impact APT and debate had on me was that I acquired new knowledge of working with different people with different characters.

*Miss Sarah Farjam a junior student at Kabul university debater: shared:*

“I started my debate journey with APT this year, 2020. In just a few training and practice sessions I learned about the great impact of the debate within myself. It enhanced my critical thinking and listening skills. As women, we always tend to compromise more than men in our life even when it comes to our rights. Debate helped me to learn how to fight for my rights by challenging the exciting stereotypes that hinder women's rights.”

*Rafi Mohammad, Student of Economic Faculty at Kabul University, shared his leadership experience:*

During the leadership program, we had great conversations and an interactive discussion with our wonderful facilitators from Canada, the US, and Afghanistan. Our facilitators had experience of leadership both in the Afghan context and in their context, this helped us to learn about cross-cultural leadership as well. This course did not only enhance our knowledge but also connected me with the great personality and open-minded people whom I consider to be great leaders and have the potential of becoming great and influential leaders in Afghan society. And Afghanistan needs these leaders.”