

Meeting EFA: Afghanistan Community Schools

Introduction

From 1979 to 2002, Afghanistan was in a near constant state of war and exhibited some of the lowest levels of development in the world. The decade-long struggle from 1979 to 1989 between a Soviet-backed regime and the Mujahideen severely weakened state capacity.

The early 1990s saw a slight increase in security and social services and the return of many refugees. However, continued war between 1994 and 1996 and the consequent emergence of the Taliban negated progress made during those years. While local conflicts and Taliban remnants continue to challenge Afghanistan's reconstruction and stabilization, significant progress has been made since the 2001 U.S.-led invasion and subsequent fall of the Taliban.

Under the leadership of the transitional government, Afghan ministries began to standardize policies and implement changes. The Ministry of Education began re-establishing formal schools and allowing girls to participate in public education for the first time since the Taliban ban on secular education for girls. The work of the Ministry of Education and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) led to a dramatic increase in primary school enrollments. Data collected by the United Nations shows that less than one million students enrolled in primary school in 1999. In 2003, nearly 3.6 million had enrolled. This expansion has been particularly beneficial for girls, among whom enrollment has increased from a 3 percent gross enrollment ratio of 64,000 in 1999 to an enrollment of almost 1 million in 2003.

Despite these advances, the effectiveness and legitimacy of Afghanistan's governing institutions are still being tested on the federal, provincial, and community levels. This is especially evident in areas in the south where extensive poppy cultivation and weak security remain.

Since the mid-1990s, a small number of NGOs have promoted community and home-based schools as approaches to expanding access to primary education, despite Afghanistan's challenging and ever-changing political landscape. These schools are usually based in homes or mosques, hire local teachers, and receive supervision and financing from Village Education Committees (VECs) with the help of NGO partners.

CARE Afghanistan launched its first small pilot education access program in Khost province in 1994. The initiative has evolved into the Community Organized Primary Education (COPE) program and now operates in nine provinces. This EQUIP2 Case Study examines the model and outcomes of the COPE program as well as the institutional and cultural context of the areas in which COPE schools operate. The complementary model developed through the COPE program offers an example accurately, the home-based classrooms—are either single-sex or mixed and are located of a working, collaborative partnership between communities, local and national governments, and an international NGO.



Since 1998, the COPE program has operated successfully within the context of Afghanistan's changing legal, political, and security environment. The goal of the COPE program is to reach underserved regions and populations with quality, community-managed education opportunities. CARE initially designed the COPE program to operate independently, outside the Taliban government, although the national conditions often required agreements with local Taliban officials. However, since the Afghan Ministry of Education has re-emerged as the dominant force in the education sector, CARE has shifted program design to integrate COPE schools and students into the government-controlled public school system—a major component of the model's success. The Ministry of Education has encouraged CARE to continue establishing COPE schools in underserved areas and has sought out its advice and capacity-building expertise. The partnership suggests that the Ministry of Education recognizes the value of CARE's complementary model to increase access in rural areas and the technical capacity of CARE's staff.

COPE has grown and progressed significantly since its inception, including during the height of Taliban power in the late-1990s and early-2000s and during the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001-2002. By 1998, the post-pilot program included operations in 64 schools in Khost, Paktia, and Ghazni provinces. COPE expanded to seven provinces in 1999 and opened an additional 57 schools. By 2003, the COPE program was operating in 479 schools in nine provinces. This case study examines the growth and impact of COPE schools in Afghanistan from 1998 to 2003.

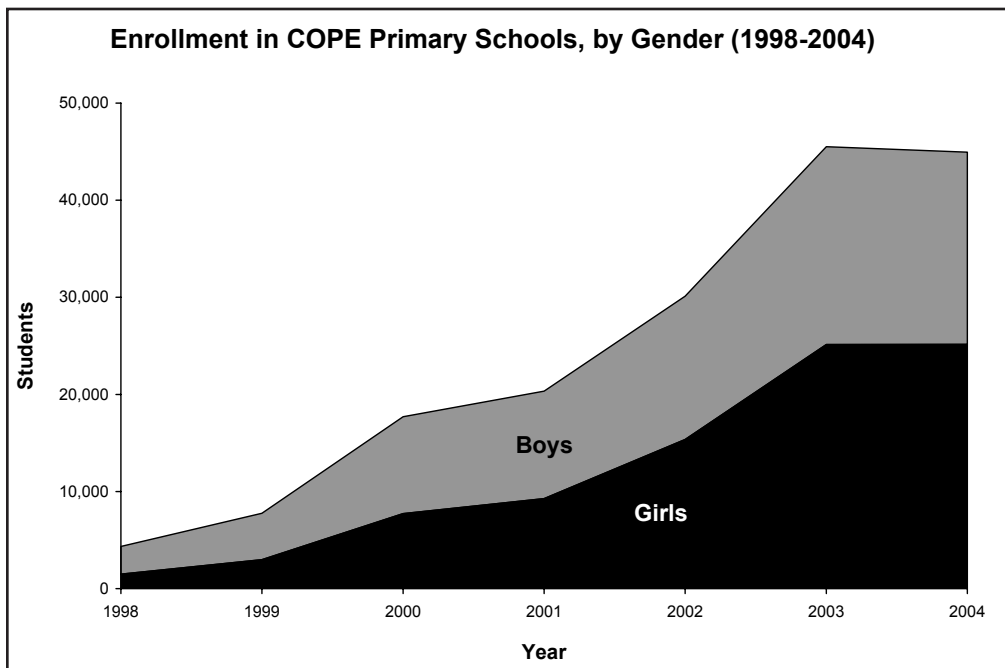
Program Outcomes

Access

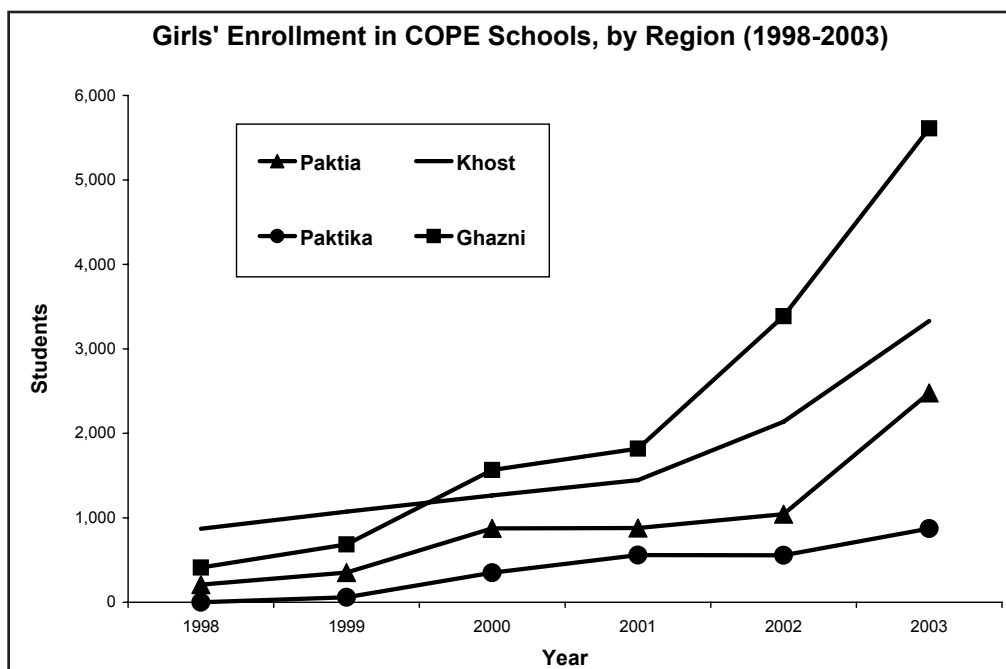
COPE school enrollments increased consistently each year from 1998 to 2003. In 1998, COPE schools enrolled 4,411 participants in three provinces. In 2003, COPE schools enrolled 45,514 participants in nine provinces.

Afghanistan's transition to the post-Taliban era saw the re-entry of the government as the major player in provision of primary education to boys and girls. The Ministry of Education, in conjunction with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), implemented the Back to School program in 2002, which resulted in a massive increase in public school enrollment and steady increases in COPE schools. Enrollment more than doubled in six of the nine provinces in which COPE worked: Wardak, Logar, Ghazni, Paktia, Paktika, and Khost. A comparison of COPE program data with enrollment data from the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey collected by UNICEF in 2003 suggests that COPE schools increased provincial-level enrollment by nearly 10 percent in these six provinces.

As a result of the Taliban's restriction of secular education for girls, NGO programs, including COPE, accounted for 100 percent of girls' primary enrollment in Paktia, Paktika, Khost, and Ghazni from 1998 to 2001. Girls' enrollment in COPE schools increased at a greater rate during this period than boys' enrollment, accounting for a greater percentage of the overall dramatic increase from 2001 to 2003. COPE annual reports show that girls' enrollment reached over 12,000 students in 2003 in Paktia, Paktika, Khost, and Ghazni provinces. From 1998 to 2003, female enrollment as a percentage of total enrollment in COPE schools increased from 34 to 55 percent.



The rapid expansion of female enrollment in COPE schools after the fall of the Taliban parallels gross enrollment patterns across the country. Girls' enrollment increased by over 100 percent in all but two provinces from 2001 to 2003. In 2003, COPE schools in Khost and Logar accounted for 37 and 33 percent, respectively, of all girls in primary schools. In Paktika, Paktia, and Ghazni, COPE's share of all enrolled girls was approximately 16 percent.





One of the greatest barriers to access to primary school in Afghanistan, especially for young children, is the distance to schools from home. COPE schools' locations are chosen specifically to reduce the impact of distance as a barrier to access. CARE requires that there be no other schools within three kilometers of a new school location. This policy dramatically increased access among children, especially very young children, who previously lived too far away from existing schools to begin first grade. Almost 50 percent of children attending COPE schools between 1998 and 2003 were enrolled in first or second grade.

Completion

A 2002 estimate from an assessment conducted by the European Union demonstrated that only 37 percent of students enrolling in first grade continued on to fifth grade in public primary schools. Reliable data is not available to calculate the survival rate through sixth grade, which is the final grade of primary school in Afghanistan. A case study by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) estimated that the completion rate through fifth grade for the public school system was approximately 31.5 percent in 2003. The average dropout rate for both girls and boys was 10-12 percent at each grade level.

In contrast, COPE schools have exhibited dramatically higher survival rates and lower dropout rates. Since COPE schools allow for year-round enrollment, different schools within the same province have cohorts starting at different times. Though this complicated a cohort analysis, two different methods of analysis, both using the annual year-end figures reported by COPE, show that COPE schools have survival rates to sixth grade of at least 50 percent. Additionally, dropout rates for COPE schools are much lower than for public schools. The average dropout rate from 1998 to 2003 was 8 percent, ranging from 6 to 14 percent in any given year. In most years, the dropout rate for girls was 1 or 2 percent higher than that for boys.

Graduation rates were more difficult to calculate. From 2001 to 2003, significant numbers of students transferred from COPE schools to public primary schools at higher grade levels. Unfortunately, sixth grade records do not specifically detail student transfers, leaving open the possibility that students who transferred to public schools have been counted as non-graduates or dropouts, causing the COPE graduation rate to appear lower than accounts suggest. This uncertainty made it difficult to confidently calculate a graduation rate for the 1998 enrollees. However, COPE records show that 531 of the 783 students graduating from COPE schools in 2003, accounting for 68 percent, continued on to secondary school.

Learning

COPE schools follow the same curriculum and formal examination schedule as public schools. Students are tested in math and literacy using teacher-designed exams. COPE staff provide teachers with training in test administration and design in order to help teachers adequately measure student competency and comprehension. In recent years, COPE staff has started to provide in-service teacher training on the basic competencies framework. Even so, standards for the assessment of student proficiency in basic competencies were not a feature of government- or NGO-led primary schools in 2003.

The following table shows graduation exam pass rates for the COPE program from 2000 to 2003. Data include aggregate grade graduation exams from first through sixth grade for

both boys and girls. Note that the range of pass rates between boys and girls and across grades over the period of 2000-2003 is consistently above 91 percent. Still, since exams vary from teacher to teacher, exam results alone do not provide sufficient data to assess student proficiency in numeracy and literacy.

COPE Graduation Exam Data (2000-2003)

	2000	2001	2002	2003
Pupils Examined	6,057	18,394	21,950	22,431
Number Passed	5,579	17,147	20,028	23,074
Percent Passed	92%	93%	91%	94%

COPE schools' significant investment in teaching and learning materials likely supported the classroom learning environment. From 2000 to 2003, COPE provided 173,000 textbooks and teacher guides to COPE schools and provided 1.4 million pieces of stationery. Additionally, continuous assessment, high levels of student-teacher contact time, and the positive learning environment of COPE schools might have contributed to consistently strong test results.

Integration

In 2002, CARE began working with the Ministry of Education to implement a Gradual Activity-Based Phase-Out Strategy. The strategy laid out a plan for the incremental integration of COPE schools into the public school system. The strategy suggested that, as provincial and district education departments develop institutional capacity, the COPE program would transfer specific management activities to the government. Over time, all COPE schools will be fully handed over to government management and integrated into the public system. However, this transfer will not take place until the Ministry of Education has adequate capacity to manage the COPE schools and provide an education that is comparable to or better than the education students are receiving through the COPE program.

According to Singh in the 2004 "COPE Evaluation Study for CARE Afghanistan," COPE had fully handed over 112 and partially handed over 125 schools to the government by March 2004. In addition to school transfers, CARE had also partnered with the Ministry of Education in Afghanistan to develop the capacity of Provincial Education Departments by training public school teachers and administrators on education management, teacher training, and monitoring and evaluation.

In 2004-2005, COPE school enrollment fell by 50 percent as COPE schools were integrated into the public education system. No documentation definitively states whether the integrated schools include the features previously considered critical to COPE schools' success. Under government management, it is not clear whether VECs will continue to have a significant voice in school management or generate resources for schools. It is also unclear whether the government will have adequate resources for teacher salaries and amenities.

Cost and Cost-Effectiveness

The recurrent cost for the COPE school program averaged approximately \$1.13 million



and transportation, materials and supplies, home office support, and salaries for COPE staff. Teacher salaries have been included in the total recurrent costs but are not technically a part of the COPE program budget because VECs are responsible for paying teachers. In addition to recurrent costs, COPE spent an estimated \$62,918 piloting the program from 1995 to 1997. Startup costs included technical assistance, materials, and project design.

COPE Program Costs (2001-2003)

	Cost (U.S. dollars)	Percentage of Total
Salaries and Wages of COPE Staff	\$1,320,742	38%
Materials and Supplies	\$1,042,331	31%
Salaries of Teachers	\$365,670	11%
General Operations	\$238,213	8%
Travel and Transportation	\$255,895	7%
Supervision and Training	\$178,941	5%
Other Costs	\$5,058	less than 1%
TOTAL	\$3,406,850	100%

The Ministry of Education annual budget for 2004-2005 was approximately \$154 million. Recurrent costs included curriculum and materials, teacher salaries and development, and capacity-building equipment. Total costs for the Ministry of Education budget included an additional \$10.52 million for education policy and reform and \$194.62 million for education infrastructure. Including these items raises the overall budget to \$359 million.

Recurrent cost for students enrolled in COPE schools in 2003 was \$38. Data from previous years indicate that the cost per student for the COPE program remained fairly consistent over the COPE project's last five years. Comparable data in government schools show recurrent costs at \$37. Cost-effectiveness of COPE schools can be evaluated in terms of the average cost to produce a primary school completer (i.e., a student that finishes the program) and cost per learning outcome. Based on average cost per student and average completion rate, the cost per completer in COPE schools is \$453. Unit cost per completer in Afghan public primary schools is much higher at \$704 in 2003 and \$594 in 2004.

Cost Per Student and Cost Per Completer in COPE and Afghanistan Public Schools (2003)

	Cost Per Student	Completion Rate	Cost Per Completer
COPE Schools	\$38	50%	\$453
Public Schools	\$37	32%	\$704

In December 2003, 94 percent of COPE students passed their year-end exams, making the cost per learning outcome just over \$40. Data on the cost per learning outcome for public school students are not available.

Critical Features of COPE

The COPE model was established during a period when secular girls' schooling was outlawed and in an environment where national institutions did little or nothing to address basic

operated were religiously conservative and exhibited low levels of formal education. As a result, the COPE program demonstrated a number of critical features that helped schools gain traction and trust in the early years of the program and maintained community confidence during the establishment of the transitional government.

School Organization and Management

The COPE model's success was a result of clearly articulated management guidelines:

- Use criteria-driven procedures for selecting school sites and developing VECs.
- Clearly articulate the roles and responsibilities of NGO staff and community stakeholders.
- Offer sustained commitment to training and operational support to COPE schools.

The COPE program decides where to open new schools based on the results of a baseline survey that assesses community need and interest. The five selection criteria are:

- Target communities must demonstrate a strong interest in primary education.
- No other functional primary school should exist within a three kilometer radius.
- The community must produce a list of potential enrollees, 30 percent of whom must be girls.
- The community must provide a space for the school (e.g., a local mosque).
- The community must be willing to form a VEC and pay a teacher's salary.

Communities that meet all these criteria are invited to form VECs and enter into formal agreements with CARE. VECs must agree to provide school space, manage teacher selection and payment, resolve school problems with the community and local authorities, and implement a monitoring and evaluation system. CARE then agrees to provide training to VECs and local teachers, supply classroom materials to students and teachers, and offer additional management support. VEC training consists of courses in community participation, school management, resource mobilization, and conflict resolution.

When COPE schools integrate into the public education system, VECs maintain some degree of school oversight by becoming parent-teacher associations (PTAs). PTA responsibilities include promoting education in the community and helping teachers manage student education problems. However, once integrated into the public education system, PTAs have little say in school finance, teacher hiring, and school management decisions.

CARE offers constant technical and operational support to COPE schools. The COPE program is one of several programs organized by CARE Afghanistan and is directed by a project manager, a deputy project manager, and a technical advisor. Project supervisors work under these three managers and supervise a staff of community organizers, teacher trainers, and data management staff. Community organizers help communities mobilize resources and develop VEC capacity. Teacher trainers monitor teacher technical development to ensure that quality education is provided in all COPE schools.

CARE community organizers visit new schools every week. Once a school has been established for six months and is considered stable, it is visited once a month. All COPE



field staff members receive training in leadership, education management, coordination and partnership, and monitoring and evaluation. Within the Ministry of Education, the Department of Inspection oversees the supervisory functions of government primary schools. Government supervisors inspect an average of 10 schools two to three times per year.

Teachers

VECs use criteria developed by COPE staff to hire local teachers. Although teachers are not required to have any official qualifications, most have a twelfth grade education. Teacher candidates are expected to be Muslims of good behavior, acceptable to all parents, and able to read and write. Potential teachers are given a simple basic written exam or oral test by the VEC or teacher trainers. While the project emphasizes hiring female teachers, given the dearth of female candidates, a local mullah is often chosen.

Once hired, teachers receive pre-service training in teaching methodology, subject content, materials development, and textbook use as well as in-service training on the basic literacy and math competencies. COPE teachers are paid less than government school teachers on average and many parents in poor communities pay teachers with in-kind offerings rather than with currency. Teachers are evaluated regularly by VEC members, teacher trainers, and COPE community organizers. For their first six weeks of teaching, new teachers receive monitoring visits from COPE teacher trainers every week. Once schools stabilize, teacher trainers visit schools once per month.

Curriculum and Learning Environment

When the COPE project began, COPE schools filled a service gap in communities where schooling opportunities for boys and girls did not exist. COPE schools adopted the same curriculum as government schools so that COPE schools could eventually integrate into the government system. In order to create a better learning environment and respond to local realities, teachers and VECs often change the school day or calendar and use local language instruction. In the classroom, children are divided into first through sixth grade and are tested in accordance with the Ministry of Education exam schedule.

Former COPE Project Manager, Hassan Mohamed, noted that “a typical day for a COPE school begins with the teacher and one VEC member arriving 10 to 15 minutes before the school opens. On their arrival, the students greet the teacher who then holds a general assembly reciting prayers and songs. After bringing order to the class, the teacher takes the attendance and checks the homework. Each class is held for 45 minutes. A break of five to 10 minutes is given before resuming the next class. The average daily number of hours for grades one through three is five hours and 25 minutes, while the daily average for grades four through six is six hours and 25 minutes.”

In response to community interests, COPE schools pay particular attention to religious subjects such as Islamyat, Tajweed, Fiqa, and Aqaid. COPE project reports document that community members and local authorities are pleased with COPE students’ demonstrated knowledge of religious subjects.

CARE in Afghanistan

A critical feature contributing to the success of the COPE program is the reputation of CARE as a long standing and committed partner to development issues in Afghanistan. CARE has been operating in Afghanistan since 1960, with a hiatus from 1978 to 1989, and continues to run various successful projects. CARE chose to pilot the COPE school project in Khost province where it had previously seen the successful implementation of a food security project. CARE's sustained presence in many Afghan communities and its commitment to nurturing local relationships has helped COPE community organizers initiate new schools in various regions of Afghanistan and sustain relationships with VECs and government officials. CARE continues to play a critical financial, technical, and program development role in the COPE program in Afghanistan.

Policy and Institutional Context

Over the past 30 years, Afghanistan has been characterized by an unstable political environment, low access to formal education, and high incidence of poverty. Traditional religious and cultural observances among particular groups have made it especially difficult for girls to receive primary education. This unpredictable environment has both attracted and discouraged international agencies and local efforts, making for inconsistent program implementation and funding.

In the mid-1990s, the return of many refugees who had been exposed to primary education in Pakistan and Iran and the Mujahideen-backed regime's efforts to increase primary enrollment led to increased demand for and access to education in most provinces. According to Chabbot in 1999's "Community Organized Primary Education Project—CARE Afghanistan: Mid-Term Evaluation" and Van Klamthout in the executive summary of 1995's "Mid-decade Review of Progress toward Education for All in Afghanistan," boys accounted for nearly all the enrollment increases between 1991 and 1995. Girls' enrollment reached 10 percent in only two provinces. Even with these small improvements, Van Klamthout described the education system in Afghanistan as "minimally functioning" and the provision of primary education as being implemented "in a heterogeneous and fragmented manner...[where] most children drop out of school before attaining literacy and numeracy skills."

In 1996, after the fall of the Mujahideen and during the rise of the Taliban, community and home school primary education programs were primarily supported by the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan (SCA), IRC, and CARE. During that period, most international NGO activities were located in the primarily Pashtun regions of Kabul and Southeastern Afghanistan. The combination of weak Taliban rule and a strong Pashtun culture encouraged NGOs to follow a strategy of creating buy-in for primary education at the community level as a first step in starting individual schools.

Pashtuns have traditionally restricted girls' access to secular education, in part based on the *Pashtunwali*, a code that Chabbot suggests binds the status of the community to the prudent behavior of women. However, while the Taliban emerged from conservative elements of Pashtun culture, many Pashtun areas, particularly rural areas near the Pakistani border, barely tolerated Taliban rule and remained largely independent of Taliban control.



According to COPE's second quarter report in 1998, the Afghan Ministry of Planning delivered an edict in June 1998 stating "for proper implementation of schools [NGO] direct contact to schools [must] be stopped." The CARE report noted that since the enforcement of the edict was limited to the Kabul area, COPE staff would carry on operations as usual. In 1998 -1999, COPE schools in Paktia, Maidan/Wardak, Paktika, and Ghazni were operating based on separate agreements with provincial Taliban officials and community support.

During the Taliban rule, COPE schools steadily grew in number and reach, and policy efforts to expand primary education gradually moved from the local and district levels to the national level. Though COPE signed a protocol with the Taliban Ministry of Education to endorse its efforts to provide education to children, it was not certain in 1999 whether this policy increased the scope of CARE's local and provincial work.

Following the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001-2002, the environment for education did not immediately improve. Interethnic skirmishes in Khost led to the closing of two schools. In Gardez, a COPE school teacher was killed. In Paktika, several girl students were killed by land mines and a school was destroyed by a bomb.

The post-invasion environment brought education sector changes that were challenging for many NGOs that played a large role in the provision of primary education during Taliban rule. The period saw a proliferation of NGO activity, a dramatic increase in donor funding, an increase in local demand for education, and the emergence of a Ministry of Education keen to drive education policy and often struggling to coordinate donor activities.

In 2002-2003, the COPE program began to build relationships with the various departments within the Ministry of Education and prioritize coordination with other local and international NGOs. The influx of resources, new NGOs, and education methods challenged many practices fundamental to the COPE program. Incoming NGOs offered to pay teacher salaries, build schools, or distribute large amounts of learning materials. According to Singh, these new NGOs often did not understand the local realities in Afghanistan implementing programs with varying levels of competence or in ways that conflicted with other NGO or government efforts in the region.

During the transition period, the Ministry of Education re-emerged as the dominant force in the provision and expansion of primary education. However, the Ministry was often forced to make difficult policy and programmatic tradeoffs given its dearth of financial, managerial, and technical resources. In many communities, complementary programs had been the sole providers of primary education for over five years and had established their legitimacy locally. Under these circumstances, the Ministry of Education likely felt challenged by complementary education programs.

In October 2004, after a lengthy constitutional process, a *loya jirga*, and an election, the Transitional Islamic State of Afghanistan became the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. While the transitional Ministry of Education was initially unwilling to support complementary models of education, the strong and accepted presence of NGO-run community-based schools led the Ministry to reconsider its policy. As the partnership between the Ministry of Education and CARE has developed in Afghanistan over the years, the government has urged

CARE to open new schools in remote rural areas and remain involved in the training and support of public school teachers, local and regional administrators, and community leaders.

Over the next decade, Afghanistan will prove fertile ground for further research on quality and cost-effectiveness issues surrounding expansion of primary education. Further research on the success of the COPE schools that were handed off to the government could yield interesting results. Additional assessment of the absorption of the COPE program into the Afghan public school system and the institutionalization of COPE's critical features could also reveal the possibilities and limits of complementary education models as a bridge for underserved populations to access traditional education systems.

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