

Pashai Language Development Project: Promoting Pashai language, literacy and community development¹

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Abstract

The Pashai language is spoken by about 500,000 people, about seventy-five percent of them living in Afghanistan. The spoken form of the language has been around for roughly 2000 years but has been in written form only since July of 2003. Most Pashi speakers are bilingual in Pashto, the language of wider communication (LWC) in that area but more than seventy-five percent of them are illiterate in the LWC.

The long war in Afghanistan destroyed most schooling opportunities and during the Taliban's rule, authorities did not allow any education except for religious schools. They also forbade the use of any minority languages in public places. In 2001 with the end of the Taliban regime, people could speak and use their own languages again. But the long period without schools left many adults illiterate and it is culturally unacceptable for them to study with children in the new schools.

This paper focuses on the Pashi language development and literacy program, a key part of a general community development project among the Pashi people. The paper describes the process by which the local community planned and implemented the program, especially on the development strategies that encouraged mother tongue speakers to take responsibility for the program which currently is conducting fifty-nine adult literacy classes in forty-three villages.

Background: Pashai language and education

Approximately 500,000 people, most of whom live in eastern Afghanistan, speak the Pashai language. Although many Pashai people are bilingual in Pashto, the dominant language in that part of the country, more than 80% of the population, including about 98% of the women, are illiterate in both languages.² During the years of war in Afghanistan, people had no educational opportunities. Following the war, Taliban³ authorities forbade any education except that which was provided in religious schools. The Taliban also forbade speakers of minority languages from using their languages in public. In 2001, when the Taliban regime ended, people could again speak and use their own languages and new schools were established. Most Pashai adults, however, were unable to take advantage of the new education opportunities, partly because it had been so long since they had any opportunity to study but also because the new schools focused on children and adults felt it was inappropriate for them to study in the same school with children.

The literacy project in the CDP

The Pashai literacy project is one component of the larger Pashai Community Development Project. The literacy project has three general purposes. One is to help the tribal people maintain their ethnic identity by recording their history and cultures, in writing, in their own language. Another is to help community members improve their living conditions and foster community development and a third is to help the Pashai people integrate socially with the majority population—an important focus in this war-torn country.

Upon the request of local community members, an adult literacy project was initiated in the Pashai area in 1999, during the Taliban period. Project leaders surveyed the area and then initiated the

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² According to UNICEF and European Parliament sources, it is estimated that fewer than 20 % of the women in Afghanistan can read and write; 40% of men are literate. Most Afghans are unable to read even simple instructions for using medicines.

³ A fundamentalist Islamic regime that controlled Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001

program to teach literacy in Pashto, working with a local NGO that had agreed to sponsor the project. This was the only way to get permission to do adult education activities in Afghanistan. As of late-2003, 58 adult classes had been established in 43 villages with 1450 participants. This includes seventeen classes in which 480 women are learning to read and write Pashto.

Although the oral form of Pashai⁴ has been in use for about 2000 years, the language was unwritten until 2003. In July of that year project leaders held a two-day seminar that focused on developing a Pashai alphabet. Most village elders in the area participated in the seminar, along with literacy teachers and delegates from local schools. An outside linguist led the seminar but local people made all the decisions relating to the alphabet. The project then published a Pashai alphabet test book based on the seminar participants' decisions. People who participated in the seminar have indicated their satisfaction with the process and are proud to have books in their own language at last. At this point, the project is ready to publish a diglot picture dictionary (Pashai and Pashto) and several locally produced diglot storybooks. Local elders and teachers organized a language committee to follow up on what has been started. In 2004 the committee will initiate Pashai language classes in the area. The committee also intends to produce a triglot dictionary (Pashai, Pashto and English), their own story and history books, primers and other reading materials in their language.

Approach and development strategies

The Pashai language project has used the following approaches and strategies, all of them based on well-known community-development principles:

- The project takes a *holistic approach* to development. The purpose of the literacy classes is not just to help people become literate, but also to help them understand the problems they face and learn how to manage and solve the problems. This is the focus throughout the course, from the beginning primer to vocational training. In Afghanistan, adult literacy and education should teach life-skills as well as literacy skills and should help people gain access to and use new information in order to raise their income-earning potential and hence their standard of living. The project is now preparing to initiate functional and vocational literacy classes along with developing the Pashai language. In addition to language development and literacy, the project has established income generating programs such as cow and goat projects, a locally modified micro-finance loan program and other related programs such as veterinary services and an animal-breeding program. In cooperation with other NGOs and projects, training is provided in communication skills for deaf and blind people.⁵ Finally, the project has tried to invite medical mobile service teams annually to visit areas where there are no clinics or doctors available. The literacy program thus is part of and supports the larger program of community development.
- The program is *community-based*. Project leaders work together with the Shura—local elders and local authorities—who provide the classrooms, select the adult students from the communities and encourage them to attend classes. Supervisors and teachers are from villages in which classes are situated. Local people's leadership in the program helps to ensure that the program is *culturally appropriate*. The result is that local people do not feel threatened by outsiders or the outside world
- The project has *good relationships with local political and religious leaders*. Project leaders are aware that failure of many programs in the past has been the result of poor relationships with those in authority. The project has two classes for local government officers and two of the teachers in the project are religious leaders or Mullahs. When the Taliban tried to dismiss and destroy the project, the local people protested and tried to protect the project and staff.

⁴ Pashai is classified as an Indo-Iranian, Indo-Aryan and Dardic language.

⁵ About 5 % of the country's population—approximately one million people—is disabled. Because some disabled people are the main income-earners in their families, more than 10 % of the actual population in Afghanistan is affected economically by disabilities.

- The project has built a *strong management system and qualified staff*. There is a manager, who is also an expert in animal husbandry, a field officer who is a former school teacher, an administrator, field worker, driver and seven supervisors, four of whom are women. Most of the project's fifty-eight teachers are also teachers in the local schools. At this point, an outside linguist-facilitator provides overall coordination for the project. A priority is on capacity-building and encouraging staff members to take initiative in their particular area of responsibility.
- Project staff members, including the outside facilitator, have *good relationships* with the intended beneficiaries of the project. For local project staff, this meant learning how to work together with one another and with the community. For the outside facilitator, it meant spending time in the community and in-depth learning of the language, culture and social patterns. The guiding principle for both insiders and outsiders was to focus on "being" rather than on "doing". As a result of these relationship-building efforts, local people are aware of the project staff's willingness to listen to them and help them. For example, because community members were aware of the outside facilitator's willingness to help them develop a writing system for their language, most of the village elders and teachers participated in the alphabet seminar and have supported the decisions that were made.
- Project leaders recognized the importance of making a *good beginning* (because the end often depends on the beginning) and so, before initiating the project itself, a careful and accurate survey of the area was conducted to learn about people's self-identified goals, needs, capacities and resources. Once the team had identified what people wanted to *achieve*, it was important to begin with what they already *had* and help them build on that. Because people in the project area place particular value on their cows and goats, an animal husbandry program was built into the project and has been particularly valued in the community.
- Project staff focus on *building the community's ability to take responsibility for the project and sustain it*. The goal is that the project, initiated with help from the outside, will move to being partially self-supporting and eventually, fully self-supporting and self-managing. Another goal is that the community will have the capacity for self-employment.

One way the project is trying to do this is through the animal husbandry project. As of late 2003, the project had distributed around 350 cows and 130 goats to vulnerable people such as war widows, orphans, disabled people and extremely poor people in two districts of Nangarhar province. This is a kind of modified micro-finance loan program: rather than loaning money, the project provides heifers and goats to the beneficiaries who later return animals of the same age to the project. While the animals are pregnant, the project provides beneficiaries with supplementary milk, cheese etc. When the beneficiaries return the heifers and goats to the project, project leaders give them a certificate of ownership for the animals they keep and then redistribute the returned animals to people in the same area who are selected by the community and approved by project leadership. The plan is that, when the cow and goat distribution and redistribution has grown enough to provide for all of the vulnerable population, the returned cows and goats will go to the communities directly rather than to individuals. At that point, each community will select a person to take care of animals. Half of the profits will go to the animal keeper and the other half will be used to pay the salary of community's teacher

Conclusion

The Pashai live in one of the most political, social and environmentally difficult situations in Asia. Even so, community leaders have taken positive steps to develop their community and promote the immediate and longer-term well-being of its individual members. As noted above, two goals of the

literacy component of the project are that the Pashai will have a written record of their language and culture and that adults as well as children in the community will have access to and make productive use of written literature in their own language and in the national language. Recognizing the urgent need to provide educational opportunities to women, the program has established classes specially geared to their interests and needs and is equipping women to take leadership in these classes. Program leaders hope that as this program grows and is sustained, it will become a model for community-based education and development programs for other minority groups in Afghanistan.