Telling Our Story

What's up, DOC!

Ringing Up Holiday Sales

Afghan businesswomen recently offered their quality products to fellow Afghans and members of the international community searching for holiday gifts for friends and family.

Weeda Sarfarazy sold saffron packaged in small disks and plastic bottles. Ms. Sarfarazy, who works for a Herat-based company called Negin Saffron, sold $250 worth of the spice at the two-day exhibition, held on Dec. 8-9 in Kabul. Saffron is one of Afghanistan's many high-value agricultural products and flourishes in Afghanistan's western province of Herat.

Other Items for sale included intricate wooden and marble sculptures, paintings, calligraphy, handmade dolls, jewelry, dried fruit and nuts, saffron, clothes and carpets.

The exhibition was part of USAID's efforts to give Afghanistan businesswomen opportunities to grow their businesses and contribute to their country's economy.

Weeda Safarazy sells saffron at a two-day exhibition organized by USAID.

Female Engineering Students Inspire Schoolgirls

Four Afghan women studying engineering recently inspired more than than 600 students at Sardar Kabuli Girls' High School in Kabul. The aspiring engineers from Kabul University shared their diverse experiences, focusing on how they are achieving their life goals through higher education.

"The first step is not to give up," urged engineering student Muzhda Mehrzad. "Everybody will face some level of problems in different ways, throughout their lives. If education and working are your ultimate goals, then you should try to overcome the problems, you should believe that there is always a solution to any problem."

Tip of the Week

A Picture's Worth a Thousand Words!

This phony Chinese proverb appeared in a 1911 newspaper article on journalism, but is remarkably similar to a thought expressed by Russian writer Ivan Turgenev in 1862 when he said, "a picture shows me at a glance what it takes dozens of pages of a book to expound."

One hundred and fifty years later, we look forward to seeing your most exciting project photos... with informative captions please!

Hossai Popolzai, another engineering student, told the students: "We are not here just to encourage you to be an engineer or architect… our goal is that you should find a path in your life and go through it."

Female engineering students speak at Sardar Kabuli Girls High School

The speakers' advice resonated with the high school students. As recently as 2009, the average Afghan woman could expect to receive only seven years of education. Higher-education opportunities for women have increased, thanks in part to USAID support, but to sustain this progress, it is important for Afghan women to encourage each other to pursue education opportunities.

"You will become independent, a productive person for the community, able to support your family and contribute to the economic and technological growth of the country," Muzhda saod. Following the presentation, at least one student said she had never considered going to university before but had changed her mind after she heard the speakers.

Young Afghans Speak Their Minds

In a first for southern Afghanistan, a month-long program of youth forums gave hundreds of young Afghans the chance to discuss citizenship, governance and ways to make their municipal authorities more representative and more responsive. USAID worked closely with the mayors of Kandahar, Lashkar Gah, Qalat, Tirin Kot, Nili and Zaranj to organize the fora, which drew about 600 persons.

Young men and women discuss citizenship at a youth forum in Zaranj

The young participants displayed cautious optimism about the future but added that much depended on authorities' ability to provide community services and to expand educational opportunity. They voiced concern about corruption and its impact on communities. Overwhelmingly, they expressed the desire to take part in community development work, but noted that op-portunities to do so were rare.

One young woman in Kandahar said, "today was the first time that the municipality has listened to our opinions and ideas, and the first time that they are explaining municipal services to us."

Added Sulaiman, a 20-year-old student from Tirin Kot, "If the municipality asks youth for their ideas, our role could be 100 percent positive. The current disorder is because the lack of youth involvement in government allows youth to engage in unlawful activities."

Two-thirds of Afghanistan's population is younger than 25 years old and can play a significant role in shaping the future of their communities. USAID work with the mayors is focused on developing activities and outreach events to encourage youth participation in local governance. The project puts special focus on girls' involvement in community decision-making because restrictive cultural practices have limited such chances for them.

Municipal Services Transform Town

The owner of a shoe shop in Shahjoy proudly displays his newly acquired business license

Shahjoy, an important business hub for Zabul province in southeastern Afghanistan, has long lacked the municipal services necessary to expand economic activity. That is changing now, thanks to a USAID pilot project that engaged Shahjoy's 56,000 residents in the business licensing process. As part of the project, local media informed Shahjoy's residents of the services provided by the municipality and helped them understand the correlation between taxes and the sustainable provision of municipal services. The effort is paying off, with District Governor Ghulam Sediq, who called the project an "achievement for the people," projecting a municipality revenue increase between 60 and 80 percent. Over 530 business licenses have been issued to date and additional revenue has already been used to clean up the Qalat bazaar, one of the largest in the region.

Photo of the Week

A recent training in Daikundi province provided women with the skills and materials needed to start their own small business so that they can provide an income for their family. In organizing the training, the municipality focused on ten participants from women-head of households, with a mix of women who are either widows or orphans.

At the beginning of the training, many of the women were nervous about the prospect of learning a trade and starting a small business. However, as the training has progressed, they are gaining not only the skills need to start a business but also self confidence in their abilities to support themselves.

Photo Credit: USAID's RAMP UP