



Mobile Theatre in Badakhshan... Gets People Talking about Drug Addiction

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Reducing Afghanistan's production and sale of illegal narcotics is central to the country's pursuit of security, stability, and democracy. Within a multi-faceted strategy by the international community and the Afghan government to provide alternative livelihoods to poppy farmers, Equal Access is addressing drug demand reduction through our dynamic mobile theatre program. Equal Access has partnered with Ustad Asad Theatre Company to conduct mobile theatre performances in Badakhshan and Bamiyan provinces, alongside our radio drama series produced in-house for national broadcast.

In 2005, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime reported an estimated 920,000 drug users nationwide. While addiction rates are higher in other provinces, Badakhshan ranks among the highest for opium production, making the drug easily accessible to the local population. The consequences of addiction here are also exacerbated by a lack of access to health care. The lack of medical infrastructure in Badakhshan is evidenced by the highest maternal mortality rate ever recorded of 6,500 deaths per 100,000 live births according to UNFPA in 2006. In this province and around the country, women take illicit drugs in place of inaccessible or expensive medicine, and give opium to babies to keep them quiet while they labor. The widespread lack of knowledge about drug use, addiction and treatment is a formidable challenge. With this in mind, Ustad Asad performed a series of 34 theatre shows throughout Badakhshan in schools, bazaars, community centers and mosques.

In the remote and underserved provincial capital of Faizabad, there is only one girls' high school. When Ustad Asad visited the school, the grounds were bustling with young women

and teachers. On an adjacent rooftop, a small crowd of children and adolescents also gathered to catch a glimpse of the theatre. Throughout the audience, concerned faces joined the characters' struggles as they experienced the destructive impact that drug addiction has on one's health, family and community. The headmaster explained that the only other drug education the girls have received are posters, which lack the interactive and emotional appeal



of a theatre performance. As the girls dispersed, praise radiated from their faces. "We learned very much from this; now we should teach the lessons to our homes and families and villages" one girl exclaimed. Their enthusiasm is a powerful example of how targeted community theatre performances can bring educational messages far beyond the walls of a school, or even a marketplace. Even more so, a local reporter from Radio Azadi covered the show for local broadcast.

Further down the road, in the district capital of Baharak, the early morning crowd gathered at the bazaar where the District Governor recommended a morning performance to attract a large audience. Hundreds of men collected in the center of the bazaar, where police voluntarily blocked off vehicular traffic, in front of the stage, on rooftops and inside chai khona (tea houses) with views of the square. As the first actor stepped onto the stage, the entire crowd broke into applause. Activities and transactions in the bazaar came to a halt as people gathered around, drawn in by the characters' compelling story of addiction. Equal Access later learned that after this performance, four men admitted themselves to the local hospital for drug treatment. Before the performance, many people reported not knowing that addiction can be treated.

From shopkeepers, religious leaders and community members, to the highest district and provincial levels, the mobile theatre program has received unanimous support. The theatre group expressed its excitement at the program as they recalled some of its impact. According to the group leader, "In Zargon district, three men burst into tears during our performance; one was a security commander." "In Argo district, one man ripped up his pack of cigarettes and declared 'I will never smoke again.'" On the way back from a month of performances in Badakhshan province, the group staged a show in Kunduz province where the District Governor of Khandabad, after hearing about the educational theatre initiative, explained that drug addiction is affecting the citizens in his area as well.

This program is supported by the United States Department of State Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, and includes funding for a radio program for national audiences to compliment the theatre performances in Badakhshan and Bamiyan provinces.

Equal Access, an international not-for-profit organization, creates positive change for large numbers of people in the developing world by providing information and education through targeted content, cost-effective technology and community engagement. Headquartered in San Francisco, we have offices in Kabul, Afghanistan; Kathmandu, Nepal; Phnom Penh, Cambodia; and New Delhi, India.



In Baharak, thousands of men gathered to see the performance. They took their places in the audience, on surrounding rooftops, or second story tea houses in order to catch the view...

