



Results and Impact

Agah Walidain Early Childhood Development

Afghanistan

Rupani Foundation



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Chairman's message



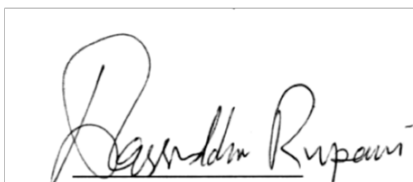
Development is ultimately about people. It is about enabling people to participate fully in processes affecting their lives and to make informed choices and decisions for their futures. With our projects in Afghanistan, I have been amazed at the capacities of illiterate people to express themselves and their priorities, and their willingness to work together. This enables them to achieve great results.

The Pamir plateau, where our projects are concentrated are characterized by high mountains, most extreme climatic variation and natural hazards – earthquakes, avalanches, rock-slides, and mudslides endangering human lives, herds of livestock, and roads and infrastructure. The lives of the impoverished are, by definition, precarious. The population experience extremes of poverty, isolation, and constraints on opportunities and choice.

At the same time, they sustain and show remarkable resilience in the face of extraordinarily harsh circumstances.

The Rupani Foundation aims to function as a catalyst for holistic human development and to establish vibrant mountain communities. Our objectives are to create economic opportunities and knowledgeable leadership. In order to accomplish this, the Rupani Foundation invests in sustainable rural development and early childhood care and education with special focus on empowering mothers. By education we mean a life-long experience in which qualities such as integrity, mental discipline, humility and honesty are formed, particularly during the early years.

Our work is predicated on the generous support of our donors, especially the World Food Programme and other UN entities, including the UNDP-GEF Small Grants Programme and UN Environment. The Foundation cooperates closely with communities and government counterparts. I would like to extend to them my sincere gratitude.



Nasrudin Rupani
Chairman, Rupani Foundation

1 Executive Summary

The Rupani Foundation was established in 2006 in order to create employment, promote equity participation, and reduce poverty in mountain communities of South Asia. The Rupani Foundation has been present in Afghanistan since 2008, working in border districts in eastern Badakhshan. Since 2014, the Rupani Foundation's engagement in Afghanistan has focused on two programs, namely the Green Badakhshan Initiative and Agah Walidain Early Childhood Development. This report presents and assessment of the outcomes and impacts (realized and anticipated) of Agah Walidain Early Childhood Development.

The first years of are crucial for a child's long-term development. However, there is a general absence of education opportunities prior to enrolment in primary school in Afghanistan. Agah Walidain Early Childhood Development is one of only a few programs in Afghanistan that addresses this gap and focuses on prenatal to six years old children. "Agah Walidain" translated to English is "Informed Parents". Established in 2012, Agah Walidain's overall purpose is to support all areas of child development – social/emotional, physical, cognitive, and language development. The program budget in 2012-mid 2018 was US\$ 137,000, fully funded by the Rupani Foundation.

Girls at the Ishkashim ECD Center



Photo: Christian Jepsen

The Agah Walidain program provides home-based support where the development of the individual child is monitored and the parents are educated on how to support its development, and preschool learning activities in early childhood development (ECD) centers. In Ishkashim town, the Rupani Foundation has established one ECD center; 84 children have graduated from this center as of mid 2018. Moreover, 13 villages are reached through an innovative mobile ECD Center introduced in June 2017; reaching 614 children and 518 mothers. The access to preschool education is in high demand, the attendance by children and mothers is very high.

Agah Walidain is providing tangible benefits for the participating children and mothers, such as:

- Enhanced education readiness and performance in primary school
- Improved parenting and literacy skills of mothers
- Better manners and cleanliness of children
- Job opportunities for community women employed as Family Support Motivators at the ECD centers
- Improved health as a result of improved knowledge of child hygiene and nutrition
- Empowerment of women and girls through learning

The ECD is thus making new generations better prepared for the future. The enhanced school readiness is a contribution to their further education and development, which in turn will contribute to giving them more opportunities in their adult life.

2 The Rupani Foundation

The Rupani Foundation was established in 2006 in order to create employment, promote equity participation, and reduce poverty in mountain communities of South Asia.

Vision: *Sustainable society for future generations*

Mission: *To promote the holistic development of children (0-8 years) by providing essential early childhood development services at household and community level and to create lasting solutions to poverty by creating skills development and value addition in local production with the partnership of local, national and international agencies*

The Foundation's objective is to create economic opportunities, knowledgeable leadership, and 'aristocracies of merit' for marginalized communities, particularly women and youth. In order to accomplish this, the Rupani Foundation mobilizes the required technology and financial and human resources to facilitate market access and support the transition to a market-based economy. The foundation's primary approach revolves around the development of local human resources in terms of entrepreneurial, managerial, technical, marketing and financial skills. It provides seed capital to carry out research, conduct pilots and initiate projects in value-adding sectors. The Rupani Foundation also functions as a catalyst for the holistic development of an economic and social infrastructure to establish vibrant mountain communities. The Foundation cooperates closely with communities, governmental and non-governmental organizations to achieve sustainability, accountability and effectiveness in its work.

The Rupani Foundation has been present in Badakhshan, Afghanistan since 2008. Initially, the engagement comprised the establishment of gem cutting and polishing training centers, and ECD centers. Since 2014, the Rupani Foundation's engagement in Afghanistan has focused on two programs, namely the Green Badakhshan Initiative and Agah Walidain Early Childhood Development.

3 About this report

This report presents and assessment of the outcomes and impacts (realized and anticipated) of Agah Walidain Early Childhood Development. The methodology applied is briefly described in the following. Quantitative monitoring data and documents provided by the Rupani Foundation were reviewed and analysed. A field visit to Ishkashim and Wakhan Districts was carried out in June 2018 to gather more in-depth qualitative information. Early childhood development (ECD) centers were visited. Focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews were carried out with mothers, Rupani foundation staff and volunteers. Quantitative data and documents provided by the Rupani Foundation were also used in the study. Please refer to the annex for a of data sources, mission programme and sites visited.

4 Overview of Agah Walidain Early Childhood Development

The first years of a childhood are formative and crucial for the long-term development of a child, both physically and mentally. It is internationally recognized that early childhood care and education is highly effective for unleashing the child's natural potential and enhancing its mental faculties, physical development, and social/behavioral competencies. Yet, early childhood development is a novel concept in Afghanistan, and there is a general absence of education opportunities prior to enrolment in primary school at the age of six; only one per cent of Afghan children have access to preschool education¹. The Aga Walidain Early Childhood Development program addresses this gap. It is one of only a few programs in Afghanistan that focuses on prenatal to six years old children. "Agah Walidain" translated to English is "Informed Parents".

Ms Najaf and her sons Naweed and Parwez doing homework



Photo: Christian Jepsen

Established in 2012, Agah Walidain's overall purpose is to support all areas of child development – social/emotional, physical, cognitive, and language development. The program is

¹ The Impact of Investing in Early Childhood Development in Afghanistan 2010, AKF Afghanistan

fully funded and implemented by the Rupani Foundation; the total costs of in 2012-mid 2018 was US\$ 137,000.

Agah Walidain: Objectives

Social-Emotional Development: To learn about self and others – trusts known, caring adults, regulates own behavior, plays with other children, learns to be a member of a group, and uses personal care skills.

Physical Development: To learn about moving – demonstrates basic gross motor skills, demonstrates basic fine motor skills.

Cognitive Development: To learn about the world – sustains attention, understands how objects can be used, shows a beginning understanding of cause and effect, shows a beginning understanding that things can be grouped, uses problem solving strategies, engages in pretend play.

Language Development: To learn about communicating – develops receptive language, develops expressive language, participates in conversations, understands and uses words, enjoys books and being read to, shows an awareness of pictures and print, experiments with drawing and writing.

The Agah Walidain program comprises two main elements. The first element is home-based support, which focuses on monitoring the development of the individual child and educating the parents (especially the mother) on how to engage with the child and support its early development. The second element is early childhood development (ECD) centers, where the children aged zero to six years and their mothers are engaged in preschool learning activities. In Ishkashim town, the Rupani Foundation has established one early childhood development (ECD) center, whereas villages are reached through a new innovation of the Rupani Foundation, a mobile ECD Center introduced in June 2017.

Children and their mothers are taught through rhymes, songs and games, supported with colorful teaching aids. The curriculum includes education in Dari (Afghan Farsi), English, and in Wakhi (the local language in Wakhan), in order to prepare the children as much as possible for later education and functioning in an increasingly globalized world.

Moreover, the program seeks to break down shyness and cultural barriers especially for girls, such as the restrictions imposed on girls regarding dancing and laughing. The curriculum is based on modern pedagogical principles (e.g. using the body for learning) but adapted to the local environment and culture; the caregivers (Family Support Motivators and volunteers) have been trained in Afghanistan and in Pakistan and are directly engaged in the curriculum development. The mobile ECD center is in the process of expanding its curriculum, to cover basic health and hygiene (e.g. handwashing and nutrition), environmental education, and adult literacy.

5 Working with parents

Parents and families, and in the Afghan context in particular mothers, play a pivotal role in children's development, especially in the early years. Therefore, the Agah Walidain is putting parents at the center stage, as indicated by its name; Agah Walidain means informed parents. Hence, the Rupani Foundation's Family Support Motivators and volunteers work with parents to enhance their knowledge about how children develop and learn, and how parenting can bolster the child's development. Parents are also trained on how to observe how their child socializes during early learning playgroups at the ECD Centers.

Ms Nodira and her daughter Ruya at the Ishkashim ECD Center



Photo: Christian Jepsen

Moreover, the parents are encouraged to participate in the classes and to engage proactively in their child's learning (this is also an opportunity for illiterate mothers to learn the basics of reading). The families are provided with parenting information materials, such as guidance on how to establish learning corners at their homes, and learning materials for their children, such as age-relevant books and toys. Hence, Agah Walidain enhances the knowledge of the parents of their child's development needs and encourages parents to invest in their child and send them to school, including the girls.

Class in the Ishkashim ECD Center



Photos: Christian Jepsen

6 Home-based support

In the home-based program, staff promote learning by using the setting in which children spend most of their time in the home. The Family Support Motivators visit all interested pregnant women and parents of small children in the villages and neighborhoods covered by Agah Walidain and help parents to better understand how simple household items and everyday experiences enhance learning.

Ongoing assessment is required for all children enrolled in Agah Walidain. The Family Support Motivators and volunteers work with parents to gather information about their child, in order to obtain an understanding of the child's abilities and needs. Based on the assessment, the parents and Agah Walidain staff identify goals for the child, what the child can already do and what the child is ready to learn next. Pregnant mothers are educated on nursing. If the Family Support Motivators see any indication of a child having health problems or not showing a normal development trajectory, the parents are advised to seek medical help for the child.

7 Ishkashim ECD Center

In the center-based program, caregivers promote learning within the daily routine of care and by changing the environment as children learn new skills. Children and their mothers participate in the lessons. The children are divided into two classes based on age, the first class is for children of zero to three years of age and the second class is for four to six years old children. The children are eager to participate in the classes.

The ECD Center in Ishkashim town was established in 2012 and covers three neighborhoods: Sayyad, Zargaran, and Konkoth Ishkashim. Each class is held four days a week and lasts two hours. The children participate daily, and mothers participate, when they are able to, having to balance their participation with other responsibilities. As of mid 2018, 84 children have graduated from the Agah Walidain program and joined the normal schools.

Class in the Ishkashim ECD Center



Photo: Christian Jepsen

8 Mobile ECD Center

The mobile ECD Center is an innovation introduced by the Rupani Foundation in June 2017. It is unique, as it provides easy access to early childhood development services for remote villages which would otherwise not have access to such services, and villages too small to have their own ECD Center where children and mothers would otherwise have to walk a considerable distance to access services in other villages. Moreover, girls face many cultural and social constraints, so access to education within their village facilitates their attendance. Moreover, the Rupani Foundation is in the process of adding a health component with a nurse travelling with the Mobile ECD Center. Access to health care is a major constraint; the Wakhan District is covered by only one health clinic along its entire 245 km length.

Mobile ECD Center



Photo: Christian Jepsen

The mobile ECD Center is a box truck, where the cargo compartment has been fitted and functions as a classroom with learning materials (audio and video equipment, books, and toys) and space for 20 children and their mothers. The truck is also fitted with rugs and heating to allow for classes during winter. The Mobile EDC Center visits each village twice a week for 2.5 hours, but the volunteers in the villages also conduct additional classes.

Class in the Mobile ECD Center



Photo: Christian Jepsen

Initially, 13 points in eight villages in the Wakhan districts were covered, reaching 304 children and 165 mothers. In June 2018, the Rupani Foundation purchased a second truck, and the Mobile ECD Center is now also covering nine points in five villages in Ishkashim and Zebak districts, reaching an additional 352 children and 279 mothers. The Mobile ECD Center is conducting classes for children from birth to three years of age. The access to preschool education is in high demand, the attendance by children and mothers is very high, and several other villages have requested to be included in the program.

Table 6.4.1: Mobile ECD Center coverage, 2018

District	Village	Child	Mother	Total
Wakhan	Qala-e-Panja	57	55	112
	Sarkand	21	14	35
	Pak	21	15	36
	Pakoi	61	52	113
	Ashmurg	22	19	41
	Sust	82	75	157
	Wizad	24	21	45
	Silk	16	14	30
		304	265	569
Ishkashim	Nachum	49	42	91
	Bozgir	108	85	193
	Surkdara	42	26	68
		199	153	352
Zebak	Zarkhan	98	78	176
	Dand	20	20	40
	Dastikhon	35	28	63
		153	126	279
Total		656	544	1200

Source: Rupani Foundation

Case: Ms. Wahida, Ishkashim town

Ms. Wahida is 22 years old. She is married and has one son, Nakisa, who is 3.5 years old. Wahida went to school up till third grade, but the classes were not regular. She knows the basic alphabet. Wahida says, *“education is very important – I could not get an education and it hurts me and I feel the need for education; with an education my life would have been different. I want my son and future children to get that opportunity”*.

Nakisa loves going to the ECD Center; he insists in the early morning to leave quickly for the center, even if their house is a bit far from the center. He likes watching photos, writing and painting, so his mother also engages him in similar activities at home. Nakisa attends every class; he has participated since he was 1.5 years old.

Wahida finds it important that the children learn how to sit, how to talk to each other, how to stay clean, and she also find sit very important that the children learn languages and she is thus highly appreciates that the children are taught in both Dari and English. She also highlights that her participation in Agah Walidain has taught her about how to raise a child and teach the child.



Wahida can only participate in the classes once weekly, do to her work as a gem cutter and household chores. Nonetheless, she has from her participation learned the numbers and names of body parts in English.

Photo: Christian Jepsen

9 Benefits

The Aga Walidain program is providing a number of tangible positive benefits for the participating children and their mothers. While the Mobile ECD Center is a recent initiative, changes similar to those achieved at the Ishkashim ECD Center are already emerging.

Enhanced education readiness and performance in primary school. Parents report that the children that have graduated from the Ishkashim ECD Center perform well when enrolled in primary school. One mother noticed a marked difference in the performance of her oldest son, who had not participated in Agah Walidain, and her other children who had participated – the latter were the best performers in their class and they in general found studying easier. Other mothers interviewed also highlighted that their children perform well in primary school, and that their teachers are very pleased with the performance and general behavior of their children. One of the advantages for the Agah Walidain participants is that they are already able to read before they are enrolled in primary school.

Improved parenting and literacy skills of mothers. The targeting of parents/mothers has contributed to improved parenting and support for the children's learning and education, including for the girls. Mothers and the Agah Walidain team report that parents (especially mothers but also fathers) participating in Agah Walidain engage more with their children compared to previously and compared to other parents, both in terms of engaging with their children in learning activities and helping them with their homework, but also in terms of more interaction and attention in general, including playing with the children and teaching them how to interact with other people. Moreover, mothers that have been educated by Agah Walidain are gentler with their children and refraining from physical punishment, and more responsive to the requests of the children. The mothers have also become better at ensuring the cleanliness and more aware of the food and nutritional needs of their children.

Moreover, many of the mothers participating in Agah Walidain are illiterate, and some mothers indicate that they through the participation have been able to pick up some basic

learning, examples given include becoming more familiar with the alphabet (Persian script) and some English words.

Better manners and cleanliness of children. As a result of the learning experiences in the classroom and the improved parenting, there is a noticeable difference in the behavior of the children participating in Agah Walidain and other children in the program area. Parents and Rupani Foundation caregivers notice a marked improvement in the cleanliness of Agah Walidain children compared to those not participating in the program. Secondly, the children participating in Agah Walidain are less shy, and they have a better understanding of etiquette and good manners; they have learned how to greet people and how to interact with together with people, and they speak more politely. The different behavior is reported to also manifest in the way Agah Walidain children interact with other children; they are less aggressive and not tease other children. They also play differently, singing songs and playing the games they have learned in the ECD Center.

Job opportunities. Four women are employed as Family Support Motivators and they are assisted by five female volunteers from the villages covered. The women engaged are all local and have high school degrees or at least a 12th grade exam. Agah Walidain is thus providing job opportunities for young educated women and also giving them an opportunity to obtain further skills.

Case: Ms. Doulat Bigum, Ishkashim town

Ms. Doulat Bigum is 25 years old. She is married and has three children. Sona, her oldest daughter, is seven years old; Sunya, her second daughter is four years old; and Sameer, her son, is two years of age. Doulat Bigum graduated from 14th grade, where she learned English and computer use, but she is unable to work since Sameer is sick and needs special care and attention. All her children have participated in Agah Walidain since birth on a daily basis. Sunya and Sameer are still enrolled.

Sona spent five years in the class and is now enrolled in primary school. She enjoys school as she is performing particularly well in school and her teachers are very pleased with her. Doulat Bigum is very pleased with the discipline and tidiness of Sona, who does her



homework well, writes neatly, and ensures that she packs the right books every day. Some of Sona's classmates also graduated from the ECD Center and they are all performing very well in school. Sona has from the ECD classes gained a basic knowledge of English, such as simple talking and greeting.

Doulat Bigum has from Agah Walidain home visits earned about how to raise children, including food, nutrition and hygiene. The Rupani Foundation caregivers informed Doulat Bigum that Sameer needed medical attention; Sameer was subsequently hospitalized.

Photo: Christian Jepsen

10 Conclusion

The Rupani Foundation has through the Agah Walidain Early Childhood Development program made a tangible contribution to improving the lives of the women and children residing in the districts covered. Moreover, since the Mobile ECD Center is a quite young initiative, the expected impacts have not yet fully emerged, but will become increasingly evident as the children graduate from the ECD Centers and enroll in primary school. The impacts achieved and emerging include the following:

- Improved access to education as a result of the sensitization of parents on the importance of education including for girls and the enhanced school readiness of the children graduating from the ECD Centers
- Improved health as a result of improved knowledge about child hygiene and nutrition for both parents and children
- Empowerment of women and girls through learning

Agah Walidain is thus making new generations better prepared for the future. The enhanced school readiness and access is a contribution to their further education and development, which in turn will contribute to giving them more opportunities in their adult life.

Annex: Mission program and documents

Mission program for impact studies: Agah Walidain + Green Badakhshan			
Date	Day	Location	Activity
11 Jun	Mon	Dushanbe	Arrival
12 Jun	Tue	Khorog	Travel Dushanbe-Khorog
13 Jun	Wed	Ishkashim	Travel Khorog-Ishkashim, crossing border
14 Jun	Thu	Ishkashim	- Visit Ishkashim ECD center, interview mothers and staff - Visit Mobile ECD center - Interview Rupani Foundation staff - Visit Fruit and vegetable garden, interview owner (man)
15 Jun	Fri	Futur	Visit Fruit and vegetable garden, interview owners (man and woman)
		Gos Khun	- Visit watershed plantation - Interview Rupani Foundation local staff and CDC Head
16 Jun	Sat	Kret	Visit watershed plantation, interview association members (men)
		Kizget	Visit irrigation canal, interview Head of CDC
17 Jun	Sun	Sarhad-e-Broghel	Visit watershed plantation
18 Jun	Mon	Abgarch	Visit road, interview Head of CDC, interview woman
		Pak	- Visit Fruit and vegetable garden, interview owners (man and female) - Visit Mobile ECD class, interview staff - Visit women's watershed plantation, interview association members (women)
			Travel to Ishkashim
19 Jun	Tue	Ishkashim	- Visit WFP food distribution - Interview Ishkashim District Government Head of Agriculture - Visit watershed plantation, interview caretaker - Interview Rupani Foundation staff - Collecting documentation and monitoring data
20 Jun	Wed	Ishkashim	Skype meeting with WFP
		Garm Chasma	Travel Ishkashim-Garm Chasma, crossing border
21 Jun	Thu	Dushanbe	Travel Garm Chasma-Dushanbe
22 Jun	Fri	Dushanbe	Report writing
23 Jun	Sat	Dushanbe	Departure

Documents:

1. Rupani Foundation. Website: <https://www.rupanifoundationusa.org/>
2. Rupani Foundation. Agah Walidain ECD (project brief)
3. Rupani Foundation. Agah Walidain ECD Curriculum
4. Rupani Foundation. Presentation of Green Badakhshan and Agah Walidain ECD
5. Rupani Foundation. Rupani Foundation introduces "Mobile ECD CENTER" in Afghanistan (newsletter)
6. Rupani Foundation. Success Story: Innovation: The first mobile ECD center designed and introduced in Afghanistan
7. Rupani Foundation. Updated age-wise list of children in Wakhan (Excel sheet)