



# ACKU Box Library Extension

(Afghanistan)

## Programme Overview

Programme Title:	ACKU Box Library Extension (ABLE)
Implementing organization:	Afghanistan Centre at Kabul University
Language of Instruction:	Farsi, Pashto
Date of Inception:	1996
Funding:	USAID implemented through the Asia Foundation, the Dupree Foundation, British Council, Foundation to Promote Open Society and City, University of London, Royal Norwegian Embassy and US Embassy in Kabul.
Annual Programme Cost:	Over USD 200,000

## Country Context

According to Article 43 of the Constitution of Afghanistan (2004), all citizens of Afghanistan are guaranteed the right to free education up to the Bachelor of Arts level. The transitional Afghan government has made tremendous efforts to realize this right and to rebuild the country. In 2001, the transitional Afghan government pledged to take the necessary steps towards the resurrection of the country's education system at the International Conference on Afghanistan in Bonn, Germany. Furthermore, at the World Education Forum in Dakar (2000), Afghanistan pledged the commitment to the six goals of the Education for All (EFA) movement, which are linked to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Subsequently, the EFA goals and the MDGs have informed the Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS) (2008-2013), a policy framework, and the National Education Strategic Plans from 2017 to 2021 (MoE, 2015, p. 2).

The implementation of the ANDS has resulted in the improvement of education indicators significantly. In particular, the female youth literacy rate increased from 29 percent in 2005 to 48 percent in 2012 and the male literacy rate increased from 43 percent in 2005 to 64 percent in 2012 (MoE, 2015, p. 10). Furthermore, the estimated years of schooling increased from 2.5

to 8.1 over the 2001 to 2011 period and the estimated number of children enrolled in school increased from one million (mainly boys) in 2001 to more than 9 million in 2013 (39 percent of which are girls) (MoE, 2015, p. 10). Despite these achievements, however, there is still a high demand for education in Afghanistan and a need to enhance the quality and relevance of education as well as the infrastructure of educational institutions (MoE, 2016, p. 13). In this context, the role and contribution of libraries become critical to further promote the culture of reading and learning throughout life.

However, the lack of access to libraries, especially in rural areas, is particularly troubling in Afghanistan. Although Afghanistan's 21 institutions of higher learning, 91 colleges and 6 regional universities have made considerable progress in developing their library infrastructures, these libraries are usually out of reach for rural populations (Kaur, 2009, p.169). Furthermore, reading materials in two official languages, Farsi and Pashto, are often limited or unavailable in these areas. This limits the ability of rural populations to access the literature and reading materials required to develop and improve their literacy skills. To address this issue, the ACKU Boxe Library Extension (ABLE) programme develops reading materials in Farsi and Pashto, and distributes these resources to rural populations through existing libraries or through the dissemination of metal box library extensions to locations without libraries.

## Programme Overview

The Afghanistan Centre at Kabul University (ACKU) founded the ABLE programme in 1996 with the primary aim of making reading materials accessible to newly low-literate Afghans. Newly low-literates are those individuals who have acquired basic but limited literacy skills that relapse with time due to the lack of resources and opportunities to develop these skills. The ABLE programme works with Afghan writers to develop and publish easily readable and relevant reading materials in the mother tongue languages, Farsi and Pashto. These materials, along with books acquired from local bazaars are distributed to already established libraries, and to locations without established libraries. To date, ABLE has commissioned and published over 385 books authored by Afghan writers in both Farsi and Pashto and supplied more than 4,11488 books to over 260 community and school libraries in all 34 provinces of Afghanistan. Furthermore, approximately 500,000 individuals access books from ABLE box libraries annually.

### The Implementing Organization (ACKU)

ACKU is a non-governmental organization founded in Peshawar, Pakistan in 1989. The organization was initially founded as a part of the Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief (ACBAR) with the purpose of making humanitarian aid available to Afghan refugees in Pakistan. In 2006, ACKU relocated its main headquarters to Kabul after securing office space at Kabul University. Today the organization promotes research and information sharing through the dissemination of knowledge and the enhancement of the capacity of Kabul University and other private institutions in Afghanistan.

## Aims and Objectives

The primary aim of the ABLE programme is to encourage newly low-literate Afghans of all ages, specifically marginalized women, children and internally displaced persons, to develop their basic literacy skills by improving their accessibility to appropriate reading materials, and in doing so, foster a culture of reading and learning in Afghanistan.

Specific objectives of the programme are:

1. To develop easily readable and relevant reading materials in the mother tongue languages: Farsi and Pashto.
2. To distribute the reading materials to communities through ABLE libraries and through the dissemination of metal box library extensions to locations without libraries.
3. To manage and maintain these libraries through the appointment of library officers.
4. To provide communities, schools and individuals with readable books of interest to them.
5. To strengthen reading skills and encourage a culture of reading while adding knowledge regarding a wide range of subjects.

## Programme Implementation

### Developing Relevant Reading Materials

An editorial board in cooperation with well-recognized young Afghan local authors carry out the development of reading materials. They are selected based on their educational background, literary knowledge, professional experience and their relevance to specific topics of reading materials that are under planning. The editorial board and the authors work together to develop relevant reading materials in Farsi and Pashto, which are appropriate for the two main target audiences, who are children and low-literate adults. The authors are responsible for developing an initial outline for the suggested topic, which is then reviewed by the ABLE editorial board. If the initial outline is approved, the authors enter into a contract with ABLE under specific terms and conditions. The editorial board and the authors work together to transform the initial outline into a relevant and appropriate publication for the target audience.

ABLE field staff play an integral role in ensuring the content of material is relevant and appropriate for the target audience. To do so, the ABLE field staff collects requests and suggestions through a readership survey process and through communication with local partners. Local partners include community leaders, local school or community officials, social organizations, civil society and local officers of the Ministry of Education. These requests and suggestions guide the content development process and assist the editorial board in selecting core themes for upcoming publications. By identifying core themes of interest to the target audience in this manner, ABLE provides a platform for the voiceless and highlights important issues and components of life in Afghanistan.

For example, ABLE collected 20 untold stories of women who suffered domestic violence and published them in three fictional books. Similarly, other publication topics have included vocational skills such as carpentry, gardening, sewing and farming; health and nutrition with an emphasis on the health of children, hygiene, balanced diet and lifestyle; shared humanitarian principles of peace, philanthropy and togetherness; current rehabilitation efforts in the country focusing on community development methods towards social change; history with an emphasis on historical and cultural places and arts, education, economy, mass media, psychology, women, literature, business, veterinary, civil society, professions, technology, employment, sports, travel, narcotics, peace, travel guides, religion, science and information technology (See Pictures 1)



Picture 1: ABLÉ children's books



Picture 2: ABLÉ books on various topics

Recently, ABLÉ has organized a nationwide story-writing contest, titled “Literature with Positive Message for Afghan youth „in Farsi and Pashto Languages:

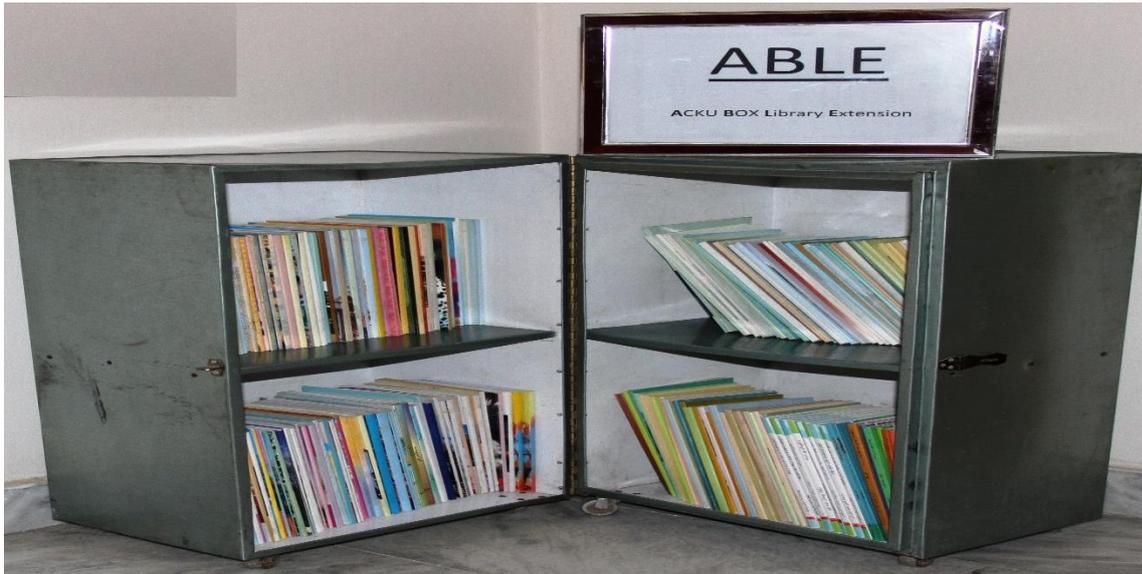
ABLE revived over 130 manuscripts (see picture 2 above) from the participants, after the evaluation of the manuscripts by the judges ‘committee, eight titles were selected as best works. All the selected titles were designed illustrated and printed (24000 copies in total, 4,000 copies each), and distributed all over Afghanistan through ABLÉ libraries, literary associations, writers etc.

This story-writing contest aimed to:

- 1) Provide the opportunity and encourage the local authors in Afghanistan to write for children/youth
- 2) Provide children from Afghanistan an opportunity to get access to the story books with positive contents and raise the public awareness about the impact of positive literature on them
- 3) Promote the culture of reading among children/youth

### Distributing Reading Materials through ABLÉ Libraries

The ABLÉ programme distributes newly developed reading materials along with those purchased from bazars (market) to rural populations through schools or community centers with or without established libraries. Schools and community centers with established libraries receive up to 500 books and a metal box library extension or a set of bookshelves, whereas schools and community centers without established libraries receive a metal box library extension or bookshelves (See Picture 3) which hold up to 361 books.



**Picture 3:** ABE metal box library extension

The schools and community centers are usually identified by ABE field staff through community requests and with the help of local partners. Various criteria are considered when selecting schools and community centers for ABE books. These criteria include the population density of the area, the remoteness of the location, accessibility to educational institutions and materials, demand for library services in the area, security risks associated with the district and the willingness of schools, communities and local education officials to cooperate with ABE.

Once a school or community center is selected, it enters into a contract with ABE. This contract specifies the terms and conditions to be followed by the premises, the responsibilities of the custodians and the amount of material to be distributed within the specified contract period. The reading materials are donated to the libraries and therefore become property of the library (See Picture 4 for a glimpse of ABE library). Typically, the locations are fixed and custodians cannot move the books to another location without prior agreement with ABE. An extension of the contract is carried out based on the performance of the library. Furthermore, if a library fails to meet the terms of agreement pertaining to the proper usage and access of the materials, the materials are moved to another location.



**Picture 4:** A glimpse of ABE library

The libraries are open to everyone and there are usually no specific requirements for obtaining access, though some libraries limit access to women only (See Picture 5). If an individual would like to use the library, they are required to register their names in the logbook provided by ACKU. Furthermore, word of mouth has been key to promoting the libraries and users usually invite other people from their district and villages to use the libraries



Picture 5: A high school girls reading ABE

## Managing and Maintaining ABE Libraries

Each library has a library officer (see Picture 6). Library officers are usually schoolteachers and principals, shopkeepers, mullahs, and other community leaders. They are responsible for establishing and running the libraries and their tasks include keeping a record of borrowed books, sorting books, introducing users to the library and reporting on the conditions of the libraries to ACKU. The library officers are recruited by school management or by community organizations and they usually have a basic knowledge of librarianship, as ABE is not in a position to provide training. For quality assurance, each year the ABE team conducts a field assessment and evaluation visit to each project site or library. During the field visit, the team will meet with the library officers, check the logbooks and investigate how the libraries are used as a learning center. A certificate of appreciation will be awarded to libraries with good performance in attracting and benefiting learners. This certificate also grants the relevant community with the permission for continuously running the ABE libraries.



Picture 6: library officer showing a story book at ABE libraries

## Monitoring and Evaluation of the Programme

### Self-assessment by ABE Field Officers

The ABE team performs an annual self-assessment in which field officers visit library sites in the 34 provinces and collect feedback, suggestions, requests and testimonials from library users. The self-assessment is based on established criteria including a checklist, survey forms,

logbooks, and direct communication with users and beneficiaries. This information is sent to the ACKU headquarters in Kabul and is used to improve and supplement the library centers in the following year.

## External Impact Assessment

In 2013, the Asia Foundation (TAF) (an ABLE partner) also commissioned an external impact assessment of the ABLE programme to Sage Solutions Consulting Services. The impact assessment was limited to ABLE libraries placed in schools. During the impact assessment, 475 students and 234 teachers in 13 provinces across Afghanistan were surveyed using questionnaires. The impact assessment also included group discussions and key informant interviews with librarians, headmasters and parents. Various well-designed assessment instruments, such as questionnaires for students and teachers and guidelines for key informant interviews and focus groups were used during the impact assessment. The objective of the impact assessment included, among others, an assessment of the extent to which ABLE has contributed to increasing basic literacy skills of children and adults in remote and rural areas of Afghanistan. The study revealed that the ABLE programme has contributed to promoting literacy and a culture of reading among youth in Afghanistan.

## Programme Impact and Challenges

### Findings from the External Impact Assessment

The external impact assessment commission by TAF found that ABLE libraries had a positive impact on students, teachers and society as a whole.

**Impact on students:** the libraries were found to contribute to improved reading skills, academic performance and the promotion of a reading culture amongst Afghan youth. Focus group discussions and key informant interviews with parents revealed that children were fonder of books, had more knowledge about poems and stories, and had improved spelling and reading skills. Parents also noticed their children spent more time reading, were able to complete their homework on their own and increasingly applied the knowledge obtained from books to family situations. Teachers also observed students becoming more active in class.

**Impact on teachers:** the libraries were also found to have a positive impact on the professional success of teachers. Teachers indicated that the main three perceived benefits of ABLE libraries were an improvement in teaching methodology, an improvement in their own reading ability and being able to stay up-to-date with information. Teachers also indicated that the three main reasons they used ABLE libraries were to plan lessons, conduct research and to obtain information from libraries.

**Social impact:** ABLE libraries were also found to have indirect benefits on society through their contact with students and teachers. 64 percent of students and 63 percent of teachers said that they would share the knowledge gained from reading ABLE books. Students and teachers also indicated that ABLE books influenced their values and taught them how to deal with people.

### Success Stories

- The production, distribution, and consumption of the illegal drug, opium, is a widespread issue in Afghanistan. A man from Jalalabad, who previously farmed opium, took the opportunity to borrow books from an ABLE library about farming vegetables. Given that,

the reading materials were in his local language and at an appropriate level, he was able to develop his skills and increase his profit and pride. He has replaced the cultivation of opium with saffron.

- In 2015, an ABLE library was created at the Female Juvenile Detention Centre in Kabul and approximately 500 books, including ABLE produced materials, were provided to the center with the purpose of giving girls the opportunity to continue their literacy learning. A visit to the site by an ABLE field officer revealed that many girls were reading books and older girls were reading to smaller children who were unable to read.

## Testimonials

- “In the beginning, I always borrowed books in our ABLE library and brought them home so that I could deepen my knowledge about Afghanistan history which is my favorite subject. Then my husband asked me to bring books on Islamic laws, and poems, as he had been teaching literature for high school students for 10 years. Later on, I also borrowed ABLE books to and read bedtime stories to my children.” – Frozan Razaei

در اوایل من از کتابخانه توانا کتاب به امانت می‌گرفتم و آنرا در خانه می‌آوردم تا معلومات ام را درباره موضوع مورد علاقه ام (تاریخ افغانستان) افزایش دهم. وقتی شوهرم میدید که من کتاب می‌خوانم، او هم از من خواست که برایش کتاب قوانین اسلامی و ادبیات را بیاورم. شوهرم معلم مکتب است و ده سال است که ادبیات تدریس می‌کند. بعدها من کتاب‌های داستان و قصه از کتابخانه توانا به امانت می‌گرفتم. این قصه‌ها را شب‌ها برای کودکان می‌خواندم و آنها با شنیدن این قصه‌ها بخواب می‌رفتند. – فروزان رضایی

- “My father is always busy with his work and my mother is illiterate. ABLE books helped me with my homework. I can work on my own assignments and my teacher is happy too.” – An ABLE reader’s feedback from Saefi High School in Herat City, Herat Province.

کتاب‌های توانا حل کار خانگی را برای من آسان میکند. من این کتاب‌ها را به امانت می‌گیرم. پدرم مصروف کار و بار خودش است و فرصت ندارد که در کارخانگی و حل تمرین درس‌هایم کمک کند. مادرم بی‌سواد است. من با خوانش این کتاب‌ها کار خانگی خود را حل می‌کنم و معلم من نیز از این مساله خوشحال است.

- یکی از خوانندگان توانا/ABLE- لیسه سیفی- شهر هرات

- “ABLE publication is a vital for school students and new literate people from community. I have come to know that since 10 years, ABLE has successfully provided thousands of easy- read books in Balkh province, I really appreciate ACKU implementing this Unique program- ABLE libraries profoundly enriched public and school libraries in Balkh Province”. - Engineer Ahmad Shah- Ansari – Library officer in Rawza-e Sakhi- Mazar-e – Sharif

کتابهای توانا برای تقویت سطح سواد شاگردان مکاتب و نوآموزان بزرگ سال بسیار موثر و حیاتی است. در جریان یک دهه اخیر که با برنامه توانا آشنایی پیدا کردم به این نتیجه رسیدم که اهدای هزاران جلد کتاب به کتابخانه‌های شهر مزار شریف تأثیرات خوبی در بهبود وضعیت مطالعه داشته و سبب شده کتابخانه‌ها از نظر مواد مطالعاتی و تنوع موضوعات مورد نیاز غنی شود. من به شخصه از برنامه توانا و گردانندگان این برنامه سپاس گزار هستم- انجینر احمدشاه- کتابدار- کتابخانه عامه روضه سخی- مزار شریف-

اسما متعلم صنف ششم لیسه عالی عایشه افغان - بلخ

- "One day, our history teacher gave us an assignment- the topic was about Darul Aman palace. I was confused from where to collect the relevant data about it. Then I went to our school library and started searching for a book to find some information on Darul Aman History. I

found a book titled “Artistic and cultural values of Architecture in Afghanistan,” that book published and donated by the ACKUU’s ABLÉ program in the ABLÉ section of the library. It was the best historical book I had ever read about Afghanistan.- I got many interesting and updated information about Afghanistan’s cultural heritages.- I have shared what I have learned from that book with my classmate. History of Darul Aman Palace was one of my favorite topics, which I learned so much about through the ABLÉ’s book and I am so thankful to them for donating this book in our school library.”- Asma- a six grade school student- Ayesha-e Afghan High School – Balkh

- یک از روز استاد تاریخ کارخانگی به ما داد. موضوع آن قصر درالامان و بالاحصار کابل بود. من تا آن زمان چیزی درباره این قصر نمیدانستم و کدام کتابی نیز نداشتم که معلومات بدست بیاورم. به کتابخانه مکتب مراجعه کردم. در آن در بخش انتشارات توانا، کتابی را یافتم که عنوانش بود « ارزشهای هنری و فرهنگی عمارت های افغانستان» این کتاب از طرف برنامه توانا نشر شده بود. این کتاب یکی از کتابهای مهم تاریخی بود که درباره آبدۀ های تاریخی و میراث فرهنگی افغانستان نوشته شده بود. من از این کتاب معلومات تازه و دقیق درباره تاریخچه قصر دارالامان یاد گرفتم. آنچه را که آموختم با دیگر دوستان و همصنفی هایم شریک ساختم. من از برنامه توانا و تیم مرکز معلومات افغانستان تقدیر می کنم بخاطر اهدای کتاب به کتابخانه ی ما.

## Programme Recognition

In 2017, the ABLÉ programme was awarded the national Bibi Gul Prize for its efforts in enhancing literacy. ABLÉ has also been recognized by the Afghan Ministry of Education, TAF, and the United States Embassy in Afghanistan, USAID, and the Dupree Foundation. Furthermore, UNESCO and the Deputy Ministry of Education for Literacy identified ABLÉ publications as good supplementary materials for basic literacy programmes and schools. The organizations that have included ABLÉ publications in their literacy programmes and curricula include: Koshan Private School, Charmaghz mobile library, “A Night with Buddha” cultural festival, the Hero Foundation, GIZ, various Juvenile Correctional Facilities in Kabul, Education in Emergency Group, the Hindu minority community in Shuur Bazaar and various orphanages in Kabul.

## Challenges

**The main challenges faced by the ABLÉ programme are:**

- A lack of financial resources: ACKU has been unsuccessful in its attempts to receive funding from ministry of information and culture and other governmental cultural organizations due to a lack of available funding.
- Traditional beliefs regarding education: in certain areas, conservative individuals have a large influence on people and are usually opposed to spreading non-religious material to locals. For example, in Khogiani district of Nangarhar, one of the ABLÉ field officers was threatened and labeled a Christian missionary.
- Security threats: schools are often the target of attacks by insurgents. In addition, in Taliban controlled areas any individual working for the current government or the overall establishment is considered an enemy. For example, two ABLÉ libraries were burned in Logar province and three other libraries were affected in Kunduz during the takeover of the capital of the province. Insecurity on the highways also poses a risk to field officers who are sometimes caught in between fighting between the Taliban and the Afghanistan National Security Forces (ANSF).

## Lessons Learned

In the past, ABLE was limited in terms of coordination with authors and the number of libraries. Outdated methodologies and publication styles were also used and many of the established libraries had no original books for children. Furthermore, many books were in poor conditions with no International Standard Book Number (ISBN). With time, however, ABLE managed to overcome these challenges by learning from experience and reflecting on survey results and suggestions. This has ultimately led to an expansion of the program's content, concept and scope of application, as well as an improvement in the quality of publications.

## Sustainability

ABLE has worked to serve the people of Afghanistan and increase access to reading materials for nearly 20 years. The programme aims to establish 10 new libraries per year and plans to expand to the most remote and rural areas of Afghanistan in the future. As the programme continues to increase in scope, its long-term sustainability needs to be taken into consideration. The continued functioning, growth and dissemination of ABLE libraries and publications requires further support of various stakeholders such as authors, translators, editors, field officers and library custodians. Furthermore, the expansion of cooperation with local partners, as well as the continued strengthening of existing partnerships is key to ensuring the distribution of books and the monitoring of library centers. In this light, ABLE continues to improve its relationships with local authorities and community leaders, and field officers visit these stakeholders during the monitoring phase of the libraries. Furthermore, the diversification of the programmes' funding portfolio is key to ensuring financial sustainability. ABLE is in the process of establishing an e-portal to sell its books locally and globally. The e-portal will support the program financially and all income earned will be reinvested into ABLE programmes. In addition, ABLE plans to collaborate with local bookstores to sell its publications in their stores.

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