

ASCE Explores Ways of Assisting Afghan Engineering Firms

INTERNATIONAL news

ASCE has been working with the Society of Afghan Engineers (SAE)—an organization of engineers in North America and Europe committed to the reconstruction of Afghanistan—to develop infrastructure projects that can promote economic growth in that nation. The initiative, which is in keeping with ASCE’s mission to advance professional knowledge and improve the practice of civil engineering, aims to foster technical training and create opportunities for U.S.-based industry members. Funded by the U.S. Trade and Development Agency, the effort involves collaboration with Kabul (Kābol) University to provide a pilot round of training, mentor Afghan engineering firms, and develop partnerships that can play a constructive role in Afghanistan’s redevelopment.

“There are some nice opportunities here, such as helping the private sector, the universities, and professional societies evolve,” says Michael Goode, P.E., M.ASCE, the Society’s former director of grants and contracts. “Of course, these are good focal points for any capacity-building project. We hope that an opportunity to create a good consulting practice or a thriving design/build company will begin to attract capable people to help.”

Henry J. “Hank” Hatch, P.E., Hon. M.ASCE, a retired U.S. Army lieutenant general and a former commander of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, spent much of his career working on engineering projects abroad. He defines capacity building as “the building of human, institutional, and infrastructure capacity to help societies develop secure, stable, and sustainable economies, governments, and other



During a trip to Afghanistan in April, Michael Goode, P.E., M.ASCE, right, the Society’s former director of grants and contracts, teamed up with Abdul Hadi Rakin, the chairman of the Society of Afghan Engineers, to assess the condition of the design and construction industry in that country. In visiting Kabul University, the two also looked at programs for providing business training to members of engineering firms.

institutions through mentoring, training, education, physical projects, the infusion of financial and other resources, and, most importantly, the motivation and inspiration of people to improve their lives.”

Goode, who traveled to Afghanistan in April, says the infrastructure in that country, having been poorly maintained for decades, is in deplorable condition. “There was little or no investment during the Russian occupation,” he explains. “So there was a natural deterioration. Roads went backwards; water systems went backwards; electricity supply went backwards. The country was an infrastructure basket case. Engineering consulting and academic capability were eliminated by many years of war, brain drain, and the Soviet system. Even now, I’d say it is about forty to fifty years behind most developed nations.”

During his trip Goode teamed up with Abdul Hadi Rakin, the SAE’s chair, to assess the state of Afghanistan’s design and construction industry and business training programs and establish a common vision of program objectives with Kabul University and other stakeholders. “One of the big problems right now is that the banking system in Afghanistan is only just getting legs under it,” Goode observes. “So you can’t just go to your friendly banker there and ask for a working capital loan for your new business. Working capital in Afghanistan is a major challenge right now. Folks are renting offices, buying computers and furniture, and hiring people, but they’re paying for all of this with their own money or with family money or, as some people have even speculated, with drug money.”

Security issues also present challenges,

according to Goode. “Clearly there are problems with the build-up of the Taliban presence and activity,” he points out. “There was certainly a heightened awareness while we were there. We took a low-profile approach and relied on good counsel to know where not to go. We didn’t go outside of Kabul, but we did visit [the U.S. Agency for International Development], which, like the U.S. embassy [building] and other government facilities, is in blast-protected bunkers. There was a little more anxiety when visiting there because the U.S. government folks really are targets. They have to wear camouflage and some body armor when they leave the protected areas. Those who are not civilians have to have an armed soldier with them if they go on a field trip. This obviously provides them with some extra protection, but it also makes them a target.”

Goode and Rakin attended meetings with Afghan contractors and engineers, ministry officials, and representatives of the Corps of Engineers, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and the Society of Afghan Architects and Engineers (SAAE)—a fledgling group that is concerned with professional development and with increasing the international support and financial and technical assistance for rebuilding Afghanistan and creating good governance and a regulatory structure. “I believe we can deliver on our relatively short-term infusion of training,” Goode adds. “But the willingness of U.S. firms to focus on the Afghan marketplace is, at the moment, constrained by the fact that the market is so healthy in other places in the world, including the U.S. So, from a practical standpoint, many firms really don’t need to be taking on an assignment this difficult unless, of course, they have some other reason for doing it. Fortunately, there are some folks out there who are simply committed to providing help to those in need.”

ASCE and the SAE are currently in the process of refining a curriculum to be implemented at Kabul University, and they have been discussing the strengths and needs of various trainee candidates with prospective mentors. “Right now there are about ten to twelve U.S. companies that have contracts in Afghanistan,” Goode explains. “Large contracts, mostly: doing work for USAID, for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and others. Many of these companies are saying, ‘Sure, we’ll help in whatever way we can.’ They are already mentoring and growing some firms as subcontractors, and I think that university-based, sustainable support will be paramount in this process. ASCE is also hoping that USAID will eventually embrace the project and carry it forward, and they have already indicated that they feel that this is a really good thing to do. So no commitments yet, but we’re exploring that with them.”

Numerous trainee candidates in Afghanistan have expressed interest in participating in this program, and several U.S. engineering firms already working in Afghanistan have indicated that they would benefit from mentoring start-up Afghan firms and would support the project. “ASCE will be hosting a delegation from Afghanistan,” Goode notes. “Kabul University’s president, some professors, including one from the Polytechnical University of Kabul, and two deans there—one from engineering and one from economics—will come and spend some time learning a bit about how professional societies are run here and hopefully [will] establish some networking contacts. We will take them to university-based business training and support centers, or incubators. We also plan—with the help of some supplemental funding from [the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization]—to give the SAAE a boost by offering internships to two of their leaders as UNESCO fellows.”

ASCE is also coordinating an effort to gather donated technical publications and ship them to Afghanistan. In 2005 the Society sent more than 10,000 copies of civil engineering texts and other publications from its archives to Iraq. The decision to donate and send civil engineering publications overseas arose from an initiative that ASCE launched in 2004 to help engineering communities abroad rebuild and upgrade their technical capabilities. Last year Metcalf & Eddy, Inc., an engineering firm headquartered in Wakefield, Massachusetts, donated an assortment of literature (numerous texts dealing with civil engineering, mechanical engineering, chemical engineering, pumps, water and wastewater treatment, pipeline technologies, disease treatment, water reuse, and desalination) to ASCE to be shipped abroad.

“There will be a big shipment going out soon,” Goode says. “We’ve already committed to sending recent back issues of several ASCE journals. Once we know that the universities have reliable Internet access and electric power, we’ll also be able to get them resources online. We want to be evenhanded but reasonable by starting in Kabul with Kabul University and the Polytechnical University of Kabul and then seeing that other technical universities around the country get support.”

ASCE invites U.S.-based engineering firms and members of their senior staffs to serve as mentors for principals of fledgling private engineering firms in Afghanistan involved in the reconstruction efforts. For additional information or to contribute technical materials to this initiative, contact Michael R. Sanio, M.ASCE, the Society’s director of international alliances, at (703) 295-6116 or msanio@asce.org.

—Mark Fitzgerald