



ARZU Overview **September 2017**

In 2002, ARZU Founder Connie K. Duckworth was invited as a founding member of the U.S.-Afghan Women's Council and travelled with its first delegation to Kabul in January 2003, where she witnessed first-hand the daily hardships experienced by Afghans, especially women. Compelled to act, Connie drew on over 25 years of private sector business experience to create ARZU, a social business enterprise to create fair labor jobs for destitute rural women, to invest in a better future through education and healthcare, and to transform society through civil engagement based on sustainable economic and community development.

After careful market research, ARZU's pilot project, initiated with seed-funding from USAID, focused on the employment of women using a cottage-industry model to create high-end Afghan rugs that are sold in Afghanistan, the United States, and internationally. Today, ARZU's award-winning, internationally acclaimed rugs, marketed under the brand name ARZU Studio Hope, can be found across America and Europe in homes and high-profile commercial enterprises, including the World Bank, Apple and Discovery Communications, to name a few.

ARZU, which means 'hope' in Dari, transforms lives in a place often considered the world's worst for women by creating skilled artisan-based employment in villages where little or no other economic opportunity exists. For truly sustainable development, particularly in conflict zones like Afghanistan, an ecosystem of economic opportunity, skills training, literacy and basic health services is essential to make the individual, the family and, ultimately, the community successful over time. We link these jobs to specific social benefits producing outsized impact relative to the cost of the investment. This is the ARZU approach.

For the past thirteen years, ARZU has consistently and effectively overcome the many challenges and unexpected obstacles encountered while working in a conflict zone by identifying, piloting and implementing a series of innovative solutions that address the root issues of extreme poverty, social injustice and the civil discord that weakens a community. ARZU has systematically shifted the paradigm of a patriarchal society to one where women in our villages are economically empowered, literate and have the resources to care for themselves, their families and their communities. ARZU implements its programs at the rural household level and provides direct benefits to over 2,000 Afghans, while impacting tens of thousands of other villagers from the ripple effect of broad-based community development programs and infrastructure.

ARZU is effectively a learning laboratory testing "behavioural economics" under challenging field conditions. Our objectives are to continue the delivery of appropriate applied innovations to our existing communities. Our dream is to scale our model of sustainable community development as appropriate more broadly in-country in partnership with a well-respected and highly-effective partner. If successful in Afghanistan, we believe that our protocols can be further replicated and scaled by others operating in different countries, cultures, and industries.

Establishing our deep local footprint in Bamyan and playing the long game from the outset is the key differentiator. ARZU's success is rooted in strong and trusted partnerships with the communities in which we work and the Afghan Government, particularly at the local and provincial levels. An early decision to hire and train only local Afghans for all positions based in Afghanistan has paid some of our biggest dividends. Our local field team is a trusted partner in the villages. They understand community culture, and set appropriate expectations that are met through competent implementation. ARZU is perceived as local because our team is local. Beginning with a single employee in 2004, our local team has grown to 48 Afghans, who execute all in-country programs. They represent four ethnic groups: Hazara, Pashtun, Turkmen, and Uzbek; and both Shia and Sunni religious sects. Their positions include Country Director, Social Programs Director, office and facility managers, teachers, education monitors, health monitors, carpet experts, grapplers, drivers, cooks, and guards. Most of our staff have been with the company for at least five years and are so committed to ARZU's mission and purpose that they have turned down other, more lucrative opportunities.

In turn, this local talent works hand-in-glove with a small, seasoned U.S. team, who provides necessary training, financial oversight and compliance along with best practices and innovation. The U.S. team also develops partnership opportunities



PROJECT PROFILES

While ARZU's long-standing weaving program directly links jobs to benefits, we believe our integrated social programs model can also provide great community assistance simply as a package of stand-alone benefits or as an overlay for existing company employees or others already employed elsewhere, like with the Afghan police or military.

Investment in the Future: Education, Healthcare and Community Building

Albert Einstein notably observed, "An empty stomach is not a good political advisor." While the top-line goal of ARZU is sustainable economic empowerment through enterprise development to "put food on the table," there has always been a holistic underlying focus on the emotional, physical and mental well-being of program participants. When people lack basic literacy, they cannot achieve their maximum economic potential in higher value-added work or keep pace in an ever-changing marketplace. When people are chronically sick, they cannot work to sustain an income. Worse, when women die in childbirth, there are worse outcomes for all children in the family. When people lack access to the basic necessities of life—clean water, housing, food—they cannot create and participate in civil society.

Central to ARZU's approach is our Social Contract with weaver families. To be a registered ARZU weaver and receive fair labor wages and bonus payments, families must agree to send all children under age 15—both girls and boys—to government school full-time; to permit all adult women in the household attend ARZU literacy classes; and to release all pregnant women for ARZU to transport to local clinics for pre-natal care, delivery and immunizations for the baby. Even in villages with schools or clinics, families often fail to understand the value of an education for children, particularly girls' literacy for women, when 90% in rural Afghanistan are illiterate; or the benefit of women delivering with some trained, limited, medical care rather than on the dirt floor of their homes. By linking the right to well-paying jobs to the family's responsibility to complying with this three-part Social Contract, ARZU has quietly caused a transformation to occur within these families and driven outcomes thought to be impossible in this war-torn country.

"I had many problems in my life. ARZU helped me educate myself and understand the role of education in my life.

Education is power. With education, I am an active participant in the world around me.

I don't need to ask men to read to me from the newspaper or the price of an item in the bazaar.

Before, I was blind."

Khadija, ARZU weaver since 2010

Now that the families recognize the merits of education, ARZU has rolled out English classes, three preschools, and computer classes—all at the request of our weavers and other villagers. We also opened our Women's Community Center: and gardens to village women not working for ARZU, expanding the ripple effect of our impact to the greater community and demonstrating that Afghans do understand the benefits of education and are eager to improve their own lives.

Bamyan Women's Community Center

In January 2010, ARZU opened the doors of this multi-functional complex to the Dragon Valley community. From the initiation of a small, two-room building where women could wash their clothes and drink a cup of tea, the Women's Community Center has evolved into a beautiful, multi-purpose complex where women and girls attend English and Computer classes; share cups of tea and small treats baked in the on-site bakery; wash clothes in warm water; send their children to preschool; weave rugs in the well-lit two-story loom room while sharing companionship with other weavers; and, perhaps most importantly, establish the solid foundation of friendships to support each other through the trying hardships of Afghan life.

As a key hub of community engagement, both centers provide opportune locations for workshops and trainings. In the past we have hosted birthing workshops, health and sanitation classes and advanced education trainings for local teachers.

The WCC is considered a symbol of success in the region and is frequently toured by VIPs visiting Bamyan. It has been profiled in television stories in the U.S., the EU, and Afghanistan. Due to the success of the first Center, we have since opened



letter prepared and more successful in Government school than children who did not attend preschool. This preschool model is highly effective, yet simple in design and economical, making it a turn-key program that can be easily replicated across Afghanistan.

Women's Community Garden

In 2009, former Governor of Bamyan, Habiba Sarabi, granted ARZU use of 1-½ acres of land to create a community garden. The Women's Community Garden is now the site of a thriving co-op style garden; a playground for local children; a free-standing preschool and a small chicken farm. Even here, the programming considers a holistic approach. Women are taught about health and nutrition while learning how to create their own cottage gardens. The eggs produced are part of the preschoolers' daily meals. The community is eager to continue the development of this Center, expanding on their basic knowledge of horticulture and food production.

With ample room both indoors and outdoors, we have also used this space for some of our most innovative pilots including triquetra production, bio-sand water filter production and training in superadobe construction.