

There is so much that lies in our inner self, but it takes many years to realize the person we will become in the future. Everything we endure, more especially when we are young, defines the person we will become. I opened my eyes in a poor and in a conflicted county where schools, colleges and the whole educational system has been badly destroyed by decades of war. A country where people live in poverty and hunger and sometimes face extreme malnutrition, where the majority of the people are unemployed due to the destruction of the economic systems. Living in this country, Afghanistan, I have always desired to contribute to its restoration, to help bring it back on the path it was on before the conflicts destroyed education system, the economy, and led to a country where poverty and hunger prevails. I grew up in a refugee camp where I saw my father teaching kids in camps. Education for an Afghan refugee in such circumstances was extremely challenging, however, I remember my father always saying, **“I know it is hard to learn in this situation, but without education we will remain in the dark forever.”** These words never let my spirits down and I not only continued my own education against all odds, but also started teaching chemistry, computer science, and English classes to kids in the same camp as a volunteer to ease the odds for them, and in order to satisfy my desire to help rebuild my country.

Living in the era of conflicts, I always thought of my country’s sustainable future which includes its economic growth, food security, employment generation and poverty alleviation. I did the same when it came to selecting my field of studies for my Bachelor’s degree. Many countries have started off poor and only a handful have achieved high-income status. However, the ones that achieved it started with agriculture and went through an economic transformation that accelerated growth and reduced hunger and undernutrition. Thus, to contribute to the sustainable future of my country, I pursued a Bachelor’s degree in plant science and an MSc in Agronomy, which opened up many possibilities and interesting challenges as agricultural science and technology are evolving and advancing to face a variety of challenges and problems. While learning agriculture, I realized that there is a story to be told. It is not only about just producing food for over seven billion people around the world, but if we want sustainable futures through agriculture, there is a need to provide an opportunity for people through teaching to understand that agriculture is not limited to farming alone: it’s a sustainable way of life. Therefore, while I initially desired to be an agriculture teacher to help make people aware of the benefits they can gain as a society, I eventually came to realize that the best teachers are those with real world experience in their fields before teaching. This led me to set myself on the path to obtain not just an advanced degree in agriculture but also a career within the agricultural industry. As a young person involved in the industry, I have had a wide array of beneficial experiences.

I have served in national and international development organizations including the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), ACDI VOCA – USAID, CIMMYT (International Maize & Wheat Improvement & Research Center), lecturer and head of the Agriculture Department for Nokhbaghan University, Regional Agronomist for on farm-water project, management of a World Bank project. I also provided consulting services for the ASA (American Soybean Association) as well AAEP (Afghanistan Agriculture Extension Program) to design and deliver training on wheat cultivation and production. In addition, I have attended and designed various trainings and workshops on agriculture and handling pesticides. I always believed that **courage is not trying to be what you are not but instead it is about realizing your full potential being what you are.** The exposure to both the agriculture industrial world has made me a technically more proficient person. Moreover, to bring advancement to the field and to explore more about healthy methods of production, I have conducted various research-based experiments on improving production and have developed and published various research papers that provides a high-throughput method of achieving maximum yield and that infused in me a deeper understanding of the scientific process.

However, all these academic and professional experiences have not been enough to satisfy me as I have a broader objective and a deep-rooted desire to contribute to my country's sustainability through agricultural education. Therefore, after having enough field and research experience now was the time to promote agricultural education for development. For this, we need to teach and train tomorrow's scientist, nutritionists, teachers and so much more, a combination of classroom instruction and applied agriculture experiences outside of the classroom to build a foundation for educated consumers and agriculturists. However, considering the situation of education in my country where people are devoid of the basic education, the agricultural education system also lacks proper curricula and practical training, and thus does not address the modern needs of society. Therefore, firstly, there is a need to establish agricultural education system with proper curriculum, enhance technical education and efficient training and secondly, there is a need to implement the enhanced agricultural education to not only students, but also to non-students (stakeholders of agriculture). To accomplish the objectives, I joined the USAID Catalyzing Afghan Agricultural Innovation (CAAI) project managed by Virginia Tech to bring advancement in agricultural education. The CAAI project supported Afghan-led innovation in agriculture by training a highly skilled, modern agricultural workforce, strengthening the capacity of research and extension actors to deploy innovative solutions to the practical challenges of Afghan farmers and agribusinesses, and institutionalizing coordination among agricultural value chain stakeholders. Through this program, we worked with agricultural institutions such as high schools, technical institutes, and universities trained teachers and agricultural leaders on pedagogy, working with agricultural value chains, and youth engagement in agriculture activities. For the capacity building of teachers, we conducted a survey to find out their

competencies, their ICT skills, communication skills and hired local trainers to improve the expertise. Those experiences were not only enhanced my interest in agricultural- education, but also illuminated important skills such as communication, listening, collaboration, adaptability, empathy, and patience that set me on the path to pursue teaching, as I always desired.

With the same intention, and inspiration from the teachers and professors of Virginia Tech University during my exposure to CAAI training, I applied to and was admitted to a PhD in the Career and Technical Education (CTE) Program in the Virginia Tech School of Education. All was going according to my plan of contributing to the post-conflict rebuilding of my country until the conflict escalated with the eventual takeover by the Taliban and the closing of the CAAI project. Afghanistan is now facing one of the world's worst humanitarian crises. The Afghan economy has no cash to pay salaries or buy food. Western aid has been suspended and millions of Afghans face acute malnutrition and starvation. It not only ended the CAAI project, but also stopped funding for my PhD program. As someone who has worked for the U.S. Government in Afghanistan, I face a perilous situation. I not only intend to seek refuge in another country, but to get back to my education again, this time with a more resolute objective of post-conflict rebuilding. To this end, I am interested in exploring as a research focus on **“Restoring and Strengthening Higher Agricultural Education systems in Afghanistan so they can contribute to sector rebuilding and peacebuilding”**. This leads me to the doorsteps of The Department of Agricultural, Leadership and Community at Virginia Tech University, that is committed to provide the best possible opportunity for students to learn and develop as professionals in their areas of interest and also recognizes the significant contributions made by graduate students to departmental research, teaching, and extension programs. Therefore, I would like to pursue my Ph.D. in ALCE from Virginia Tech University as it will allow me to explore, teach and research about agricultural education particularly on sector rebuilding through education to help ensure that it can contribute to building human capital to restore the agricultural sector and implement the skills learned on my country to improve its situation. Dr. Van Crowder, whom I know through the CAAI project, has agreed to work with me on this research focus.

Summing up, agriculture plays a very central role. It's not the solution to every challenge that countries face in fragile and conflict-affected situations, but it is much more than just a sector that only produces food. So, we need this sector to play an effective part in post conflict conditions and that requires effective agricultural education in these settings. Therefore, as a person who has been exposed to various theoretical and practical applications in research regarding food security, fully trained in the development of most suitable extension models, vast experience in different agricultural designations, I believe that I have all the necessary perquisites to undertake the above-mentioned research in the school of Agricultural Leadership and Community Education. Through this study, I will continue to have a thirst for knowledge needed to

give back to my community, to help others, and most importantly to prove that what really matters is not where one comes from, but where one is heading to. Sadly, I have faced severe hurdles in my country, but my passion to make a difference in my country and live up to the potential my family sees in me, never has stopped me from moving forward. So, if accepted for an ALCE PhD, I will work hard to make the most out of this chosen carrier path with the goal of contributing to rebuilding the agricultural sector.