



Afghan Youth Voices Festival photography trainees in Bamyan share photos with one another during a hands-on exercise. Nearly one third of the nearly 550 multimedia trainees were girls.

Third Afghan Festival Celebrates Youth Voices | June 2014

In a country in which roughly 70 percent of the population is under age 25, it is crucial that young people develop both the communication skills and self-confidence necessary to make themselves heard. Last month, Internews and local partners supported the third Afghan Youth Voices Festival (AYVF), a nationwide series of events that celebrate and strengthen the multimedia skills of Afghan youth so that they can engage with tools that range from photography to social media to express themselves on the issues that matter to them most.

Altogether, the month-long event, which included a regional festival in each of the six host cities, drew over 1000 Afghan students, journalists, artists, activists, government officials, and members of the public for a variety of trainings, discussions, film showings, photo exhibits, and performances. The Afghanistan Youth Cultural and Art Organization (AYCAO) took the lead in organizing the event, with assistance from other civil society organizations that include the Afghan Women's Network, the Qaqnoos Arts and Cultural Organization, and local universities. This year's festival was supported by the USAID-funded ACEP.

The majority of the events took place in the capital city of Kabul, where the festival kicked off (after elections- and security-related delays) with an April 30 "The Victims of Terrorism" art exhibition at the AYCAO Art Gallery. On May 9, a joint AYCAO and local civil society organization Equality jointly held an open forum on the topic of the challenges female journalists face in Afghanistan, which drew a crowd of over 150 journalists, civil society activists, university students, and academics.

Throughout the entire month, AYCAO held numerous photography, videography, and social media trainings across the country for over 500 young Afghans, nearly a third of which were girls. Negah TV, a local station, selected two short films produced by videography trainees for a broadcast screening.

"I joined the Afghan Youth Voices Festival with more than 20 of my photos this year," said Ali Mohammad Mohaqiq, a photography trainee. "It was an unforgettable experience. I will take this opportunity to congratulate all my friends who exhibited their work in the festival, and together we will figure out how to overcome our challenges."

Outside of Kabul, five other host provinces – Bamyan, Nangarhar, Kandahar, Herat, and Balkh – celebrated with regional festivals of their own. "I was impressed with the AYCAO training

"I am really happy that my photos were selected for the Kabul exhibition, and I can see improvement in my work after participating in the photography course. I encourage youth to participate in such courses, and through them improve their skills, express creativity, and find future employment."

– Farzana Bayan,
photography trainee



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and festival. After participating in the programs, I learned how to edit videos, became familiar with the camera, and improved my talent,” said Mohammad Nazir Hayat, whose work from photojournalism and videography trainings was exhibited at the Kandahar regional festival. “These events are unforgettable... The festival provided a great opportunity for me.”

Each host province ran a variety of youth-oriented activities for local residents. In Bamyán, for example, and outdoor photo exhibited highlighted the people and culture of the province, while in Kandahar, young people painted murals depicting the issues they believe are most important to Afghanistan. In Balkh’s capital city, Mazar-e Sharif, AYCAO hosted an open discussion for 60 journalists on the role of youth in the country’s presidential elections.

On May 29, over 500 guests poured into the sunny Babur Gardens at Kabul’s Queen Palace for the festival’s closing ceremonies, where they heard speeches from festival hosts and trainees. Guests were treated to a range of events, including a theater performance on the impact of social media, break dancing, a concert, caricature sketches, rap performances about the elections and peacebuilding, and screenings of videos produced throughout the month by trainees.

“In my opinion, holding such social events and festivals in Kabul is useful for young people,” said Maryam Khamosh, a freelance photographer who attended the Babur Gardens festival. “The more young people participate in multimedia training courses, the more they will learn new skills and that they can do great work even with less modern equipment. They will develop their existing art and build their personalities.”

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Top left: Women register to participate in the Herat regional festival: **Top right:** Balkh videography trainees spotlight the challenges of Afghanistan’s disabled population face. **Bottom left:** Young artist Freshta Ahmadi reads her article about the role of art in the lives of Afghan women at the closing ceremonies in Kabul. **Bottom right:** Closing ceremony guests were treated to break dancing, a concert, performances about elections and peacebuilding, a concert, video screenings, and caricature sketching.

