BOMBS AND BOOKS
INFORMATION – A FOUNDATION STONE FOR REBUILDING WAR-TORN NATIONS

How would you retrieve a nation's information after decades of fighting? This was Royce Wiles's task when he volunteered to go to Afghanistan to start rebuilding research information sources there. HEATHER WELLARD talks with Royce about parachuting into the capital, Kabul, (ostensibly) post-conflict and staying for nine years.

Women attending a book display and fair in Kandahar, 2008

It would be an understatement to say that a job in Afghanistan was a big change from Royce Wiles's previous roles in the Australian National University and the Australian National Library. In November 2003 he went as a volunteer librarian and information management specialist with Australian Volunteers International to work with a newly established research agency in Kabul – the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, or AREU (www.areu.org.af). His contract was for one year, but he ended up staying on for nine years as an AREU employee, helping national and international development agencies, government libraries, local academic institutions and others in Kabul to set up libraries and improve information management in Afghanistan.

'When I first arrived it was really a matter of getting used to a city which had been destroyed by war. Nonetheless it was a functioning central Asian capital city. There were collapsed buildings, lots of security, no electricity, it was winter and there was snow and ice. We all did anti-mine training because there was so much unexploded ordnance around the city,' Royce said.

His objective was to set up the document base to provide the quantitative and qualitative information needed for development and other decisions. Because no document repository based in Kabul was functioning, information about population figures, historical climate, agricultural information and even laws was missing. Information had to be sought out or salvaged.

'There is still no national library in Afghanistan, so we had to go in search of all manner of materials. We went to booksellers; we went to find surviving academics to buy their collections. At first, I would go out every week with a local interpreter to buy things at bookshops or at street stalls.

'When the city was being bombed and shelled, houses would be destroyed and then people would loot and sell the libraries. Second-hand booksellers would buy them by the kilo, so there were a small number of booksellers with piles of old books. We would go there and bargain, buy old government reports, individual serial issues, back issues of the census, anything we could.

'Then in one bookshop I found the only known surviving copy of the old Nizamnamahs (legal decrees) from the 1950s. Now it's been scanned and we have shared it online. Salvaging and collecting is a very important part of the first response.'

One of the most fundamental lessons from Royce's experience was understanding the general ignorance of the importance of information management in post-conflict zones. He says very few people working in development or policy-setting agencies are aware of the professional inputs needed to set up, develop and run an information management facility.

'It brought home to me the invisibility of our profession. Almost none of the people who are making the development decisions are prepared to fund information management because they don't think it's an integral part of the development agenda. We do our job invisibly here and overseas – the consensus seems to be that "You've got Google and you don't need anything else". That doesn't work for a country where all the information has been offline for 30 years and hasn't come back, and where people do not have internet access. We had to restore public access to the statistical information, the agricultural figures, the laws. If there's no national library how do you find out the average wheat yield or historical flows in certain rivers for irrigation? We need to convince people that the role information managers perform is so built into the decision-making structure now that we can't see it. I was repeatedly asked by international agencies for "up-to-date" statistical information which simply did not exist. We had to make do with printed historical data salvaged from the bazaars.'

Royce said there's a hierarchy of needs to be addressed before a development library operation is undertaken. These are the physical security of staff and collections; electricity supply; stable and reasonably speedy internet; Roman script competency (if the local languages are not in Roman script); and library software solutions need to be explored (with at least an interface in the local languages). Recruiting soundly educated local staff to train in library and information management is a continuing challenge. With non-functional state institutions the question of how to relate to these institutions needs to be negotiated. At times there is also the question of how to relate to state and non-state military personnel. Library software solutions are vital. 'Software is really important because I could never find software which had local

language capability. Then I wanted to use open source material but there was no one in the country who could set it up. Even free solutions like Koha or Greenstone needed such IT backup; no one in the country could put it together for me. We still need a basic plug-and-play library solution for these situations,' Royce said.

There are cultural struggles as well. 'People treated libraries as cafes or restaurants. They would stand at the door and say what they needed and whoever was there had to supply it. The education process of teaching people to meet their own information needs wasn't actually there.

'Attitudes towards information provision also come into play. Access to information is one of the foundations of a democratic society and also promotes government accountability. But in Afghanistan there was and still is a serious reluctance to share information, which is probably a legacy from the Soviet period or even the previous regimes, when little information was released to the public. So information sharing as a public good had little history in Afghan government agencies.'

He admits there was a period of adjustment and the need to update his skills on return from Kabul. Despite this, he says it was a life-changing nine years. For the LIS profession, there are valuable lessons to be learned for those considering working in a post-conflict zones and provocative considerations for development agencies and governments attempting to rebuild war-torn nations.

Book delivery by ute, beside the booksellers' huts near the Kabul River. Many useful and rare statistical publications were sourced from these book dealers.

Booksellers beside the footpath in central Kabul (2012)

Lessons: Information management in post-conflict zones
by Royce Wiles

1 Information management is needed in post-conflict zones so decision makers can base their development programs on evidence (ie evidence-based policy making rather than policy-based evidence making).

2 Before setting up information management functions, a number of conditions need to be addressed:

- physical security of staff and collections
- electricity supply
- stable and reasonably speedy internet access
- Roman script competency (if the local languages are not in Roman script)
- library software solutions need to be explored (with at least an interface in the local languages)
- in prolonged conflict situations, tertiary education is often disrupted or non-existent, so recruiting soundly educated local staff to train in LIS is difficult and a continuing challenge (higher salaries may be needed to retain trained staff)
- with dysfunctional or non-functional state institutions, the question of how to relate to failed state institutions needs to be negotiated.

3 Cultural negotiations are also often necessary to allow for local views on 'seniority', gender issues, the professional standing of local library staff and 'access to information' which is often a problematic concept in post-conflict situations.

4 Salvage collection of previous publications is essential early on to re-establish access to statistical compilations, census data, laws, provincial surveys, map data etc.

5 Web-based databases and digital repositories outside the country are also recommended in case security or other local conditions deteriorate as they offer uninterrupted sources of information for both local and international researchers.

If you are interested in reading more from Royce, see these articles:

bit.ly/1HCbNb2

bit.ly/1CGpxoC