

How Nutrition Programs Can Improve Literacy in Afghanistan

by [*Heather Cruickshank*](#)



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Giving soy milk to young students in Afghanistan. Image courtesy Nutrition & Education International.

Education is a top priority in postwar Afghanistan. Since the fall of the Taliban in 2001, the Afghan government and international partners have been working hard to open schools and raise student enrollment rates, especially among girls. [Millions of children and youth](#) have gained access to educational opportunities, but many still lack basic resources. Teachers, school buildings, and textbooks are all in short supply—and so is food, the fuel needed to power the human brain.

Malnutrition is a widespread problem in Afghanistan. Roughly [a third](#) of the country's population is falling short of its daily calorie needs. Nearly [20 percent](#) of its people aren't getting enough protein. And more than [40 percent](#) of its children are “stunted,” or small for their age.

That's one of the [highest rates](#) of childhood stunting in the world—and it spells trouble for brain health and learning. Studies have [linked](#) childhood stunting to poor cognitive development and educational achievement, as well as lower [earning power](#) later in life. Risk factors for stunting can set in before a child is even born.

“A malnourished mother has a higher risk of delivering a fetus that is malnourished, small for its gestational age, and sometimes even premature,” explains child-health expert Zulfiqar Bhutta, who recently coauthored [a paper](#) in *The Lancet* calling for greater nutritional investment in Afghanistan. “By virtue of this handicap, these babies often have issues with lifelong learning.” To help tackle hunger, Bhutta and his coauthors emphasize the importance of taking a “multisectoral” approach—one that addresses the underlying causes of food insecurity.

That's exactly what one nonprofit organization, [Nutrition & Education International](#), has been doing. Over the past decade, NEI has worked closely with local government agencies, universities, and the United Nations' World Food Programme to promote soybean cultivation and nourishment in Afghanistan. Soybeans are the most economical source of high-quality protein, explains Peter Williams, NEI's director of operations. They are also a [good source](#) of calories, iron, zinc, and other [brain-friendly nutrients](#).

Through its comprehensive approach, NEI is helping to cultivate education and employment opportunities, alongside soybeans. It has provided soybean seeds and training to more than 70,000 farmers, established seven soy-processing facilities, and distributed humanitarian aid in the tasty form of soymilk and locally baked soy-flour cookies.



Making soy flour. Image courtesy Nutrition & Education International.

By 2023, NEI hopes to eradicate protein malnutrition across the country by helping Afghan farmers produce [300,000 metric tons](#) of soybeans. That's no small order—especially since soy isn't a traditional part of the Afghan landscape or diet.

Other efforts to establish a soybean industry in Afghanistan have faced criticism. For example, last year the [Center for Public Integrity](#) (CPI) released a scathing report on the Soybeans for Agricultural Renewal in Afghanistan Initiative, a multimillion-dollar project overseen by the United States Department of Agriculture.

Plagued by security risks, staff turnover, crop failures, and soybean shortages, that USDA-backed project “has largely been a flop,” claims CPI. Its report suggests that Afghanistan's climate is ill suited to soybean cultivation—and Afghans don't like the taste of soy products.

But food biochemist Steven Kwon, NEI's founder, tells a different story. He says soybeans are growing well in 23 out of 34 Afghan provinces, and many families are incorporating soy into their diets.

“The first three years, we had a very hard time,” he admits. “It's a new experience, and many farmers didn't want to try to grow soybeans because the livelihood of 10 family members depended on what was coming out of a half-acre of land.”

But over time, demand for soy has grown. More farmers are planting it, and housewives and commercial bakers are adding soy products to traditional dishes—like wheat-based naan bread—for an added punch of protein.

Kwon credits this progress to three key strategies:

“Number one is, work with the government: We cannot have a successful nutritional intervention for the nation without government support. Number two is, train the trainers: When we train local agronomists and home economists, they can go to the villages and teach people about the benefits of soy. And number three is, show our respect to these communities.”

From taste tests and focus groups to hands-on training, NEI has engaged local community members every step of the way. It has partnered with local researchers to identify soybean strains that grow well in different parts of the country. And it has used a wide variety of marketing materials and methods to teach people how to grow, process, and cook with soy.

“We have to be creative,” says Kwon. “When we teach people who can read and write, we use written communication with explanation and demonstration. But for illiterate people, we are using a lot of pictures and more demonstration.” One of the organization’s newest initiatives targets high-school-age youth, while promoting agricultural, business, and civic skills.

“We’re teaching them how to plant wheat as a first crop and soybean as a second crop for nutritional nourishment,” explains Kwon. “Because soybean is also an economical source of protein for animal feed, we’re also teaching them how to

conduct home poultry businesses to help those in need come out of poverty and hunger in self-reliant ways.”

Eventually, NEI wants to put itself out of business: Its ultimate goal is to create a self-sustaining soy industry, run by Afghans for Afghans. It hopes its training efforts will help feed the country’s economic and social development, as well as its people. Soybeans may give Afghan children and other community members the nutrients they need to learn and thrive.

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Heather Cruickshank is a freelance writer, with a background in sociocultural anthropology. Her writing focuses on health and the environment—and she is particularly interested in issues related to food. She previously worked in the fields of health education and research.

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