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SNAPSHOT

Stone-cutting: Gem Of A Profession

A disabled job-seeker in northern Afghanistan acquires skills that will mean assured work



USAID/ AWDP

A construction site in Mazar-e-Sharif, where Gul Alam and other trainees receive on-the-job instruction in stone-cutting

Stone-cutting suits Gul Alam because it does not require him to be on his feet for hours, nor carry heavy loads

Gul Alam and other job-seekers in the northern Afghan province of Balkh are learning how to cut stone and for Gul, more than anyone else, this professional skill promises to be a lifeline. The 24-year-old has a paralyzed leg and uses a crutch. “I cannot stand for long and I cannot carry loads,” he says, explaining why stone-cutting will mean the difference between abject poverty and moderate financial security.

There’s a reason Gul saw the chance of a life in the cold, hard stone of his native province. He was four when his life was said to be over. The oldest of 10 children, he was supposed to become a farmer, like his father. But a paralyzed leg following an accident made that an unattainable dream.

Instead, Gul became a burden to his family, needing constant physical, emotional and monetary support just to stay alive. Till the stone-cutting training came along, he was unable to find – and keep – a job. He reasoned that his physical disability was the cause and there’s little doubt that was a factor. However, it’s estimated that all unskilled workers are at a disadvantage in Afghanistan, which has a 35% unemployment rate.

Gul’s first break came with a job at a construction company, where he realized the possibilities of a life as a stone-cutter.

In Balkh, a stone-cutter’s skills are invaluable. Local stone is plentiful, the construction sector is booming and there is great demand for stone-cutters and decorative stone carvers.

Gul signed up for training offered by USAID’s Afghanistan Workforce Development Program (AWDP). Classes were held at construction sites and Gul and the other trainees worked on live projects, learning the trade as they helped the master stone-cutters. Once the training period was over, Gul and the other students received a complete set of tools as a starter kit to launch them in their new profession.