2025, #1

Solidarity Committee for Afghanistan

Policy Brief

Supporting Civil Society in Afghanistan

– *Critical Reflections of the Past and Recommendations for the Future*

Kajsa Johansson[1]

Key recommendations

1. Ensure that engagement is based on an inclusive definition of civil society and on Afghan realities. Civil society should be supported in its own right, rather than merely being regarded as a mechanism to advance external agendas.
2. Advance women's and girls' rights through safe, locally anchored approaches, and support culturally resonant and safe spaces for women and girls.
3. Foster long-term, flexible and strategic partnerships, with informal and formal civil society actors that are legitimate and grounded in the urban and rural Afghan society.

Introduction

Following the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001, the international community made significant investments in civil society in Afghanistan. The dominant model of engagement was with urban-based NGOs with little downward accountability and representation within the Afghan society. While NGOs were and continue to be crucial in providing services to underserved communities across Afghanistan, the narrow definition of civil society—i.e. formalised and often lacking deep roots in the Afghan context, tradition, and history—has implied exclusion and weakening of other expressions of civil society (Borchgrevink 2007).

At present, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) takes a critical stance towards international NGOs (INGOs), with increased taxation, control, bureaucracy and limitations of women's possibilities for employment and being part of elected organs. Afghan civil society organisations, especially women's rights organisations, face shrinking space and severe repression (Tapesh 2023). At the same time, there are significant decreases in international development cooperation with Afghanistan, most notably from, but not limited to, the cuts in development aid by the US administration.

In this brief, we argue that critical reflection of past approaches, and ongoing contextual changes and financial flows, force us to re-think how to support Afghan civil society.[2] There is an opportunity to revisit our engagement to ensure it is more relevant to the current context and effectively supports a legitimate, locally rooted and sustainable Afghan civil society in its own right.

[1] Secretary General of the Solidarity Committee for Afghanistan, PhD in sociology. A special thanks to Annette Lyth and Anders Fänge for providing constructive comments on draft versions the policy brief. N.B. that the responsibility for the content is solely the responsibility of the Solidarity Committee for Afghanistan and the author.

[2] The focus is on civil society within Afghanistan and does not include diaspora civil society actors.

A Critical View on International Engagement with Afghan Civil Society

Historically, civil society in Afghanistan has taken numerous forms, ranging from traditional Shuras (community councils) and Jirgas (tribal assemblies), as well as mutual support mechanisms between members of the communities through Hashar (collective voluntary labour) to religious institutions including Madrasas, Ulema (national or regional assemblies of religious scholars) and mosques. Cultural expressions, including poetry and storytelling, have also played a significant role in civic engagement and social mobilisation. A diversity of religious and cultural actors and institutions are deeply rooted and present in society and the everyday life of most Afghans. They uphold and influence values, social and cultural practices, social cohesion, mediation and conflict resolution, resource distribution and social security (Borchgrevink 2007, Rubin 2002). However, when civil society support was designed in post-2001 interventions, this was rarely the civil society in focus. Rather, it was the creation of something new and modern, in contrast to the traditional that was already there. This was not unique to the Western approach to civil society but characterised the Western intervention in general, including state building and governance. NGOs and civil society forums emerged as a response to available donor funding (Winter 2010).

While important gains were made—including advancing women's and girls' rights, accountability, and transparency—this had little connection with existing forms of collective organisation present in the life of Afghans in the rural areas, i.e. the populations that the NGOs were advocating on behalf of. Although Afghanistan, as all other contexts, is unique and specific, the phenomenon of NGO-isation of civil society—the institutionalisation of social movements—is global (for example, see Kamat 2004). Western donor agencies turn civil society into a project rather than a process, something that needs to be created. Funding models create competition between civil society actors through competitive calls for proposals, instead of encouraging them to work together. This creates tensions between activists who used to collaborate. When funding decreases, competition increases. Research concludes that Afghan NGOs were more prone to interact with the traditional civil society than INGOs and Western donors, where the latter raised concerns that engagement would strengthen the power of a conservative religious leadership (Borchgrevink 2007; AICS 2018).

Development actors, both international and national, have continuously interacted with moderate religious actors. Meanwhile, the aim has seldom been to strengthen or address these as independent actors. Far too often it has rather been to gain access and ensuring acceptance in local communities for development programmes. Borchgrevink concludes that "religious actors are rarely given a voice; rather, their voices can be seen as being used" (2007:48). Furthermore, religious leaders were included and consulted in quick-impact projects with the aim to, as quickly as possible, win the hearts and minds of the Afghan population, to the benefit of the international military intervention. Research in Afghanistan as well as in other contexts shows that this kind of approach has created divisions among traditional leaders and weakened their legitimacy (Winter 2010).

Development programmes also contributed to dependency by disrupting long-standing traditions of mutual assistance, such as Hashar, a practice where members of communities voluntarily help one another with daily tasks and communal needs, e.g. agriculture. There is a growing shift towards expecting compensation for services, replacing traditional forms of mutual support rooted in trust and reciprocity. Furthermore, traditional conflict resolution practices were undermined. While not always inclusive, these practices were often more effective and better understood than externally imposed methods, which frequently led to confusion and a blending of frameworks that lacked local legitimacy.

As traditional civil society was often used as an instrument, a parallel form—shaped by Western norms and significantly backed by external funding—emerged and gained prominence.

Although these different forms were not mutually exclusive, this process nonetheless reshaped power dynamics. In terms of nurturing long-term ownership, the effectiveness of this superficial, fast track to advance rights can be questioned—in Afghanistan as well as in other contexts.

Symbolic activities by urban-based civil society actors—such as girls' bicycle races or kite-flying campaigns for peace—were often perceived as culturally alienating in rural areas. For instance, kite-flying is viewed negatively in parts of Afghanistan, and bicycle riding by girls is socially unacceptable in many communities. Such efforts, however well-intentioned, widened the gap between urban and rural populations, and often reinforced perceptions of foreignness and irrelevance.

Such efforts, however well-intentioned, widened the gap between urban and rural populations, and often reinforced perceptions of foreignness and irrelevance.

A popular Afghan saying captures the dilemma well: "When the crow was forced to learn how to walk like a quail, he not only failed to do so but also forgot how to walk like a crow". This metaphor speaks to the loss of identity and function that can occur when foreign models are imposed without regard to context. The alienation of rural communities deepened their sense of exclusion from modern institutions, including NGOs and the central government. The point is not to accept inequalities of injustice, but to support change in a contextually relevant way.

Scholars and practitioners have acknowledged the disconnect between traditional and modern forms of civil society, yet it has often been treated instrumentally, as a challenge for modern actors to build relationships with local constituencies. One can, however, question if legitimacy can be built afterwards, as an endorsement of a finished product, or something that needs to be the very first building block.

Some scholars have questioned the rationale in and priorities of civil society support, such as Winter (2010), pointing out that stereotyping traditional civil society has been unhelpful and questioning why civil society support was not directed towards the existing forms, such as the poets. van den Boogaard (2011) argues that the possible positive results of civil society's work were undermined by the international community's definition of civil society, which was not relevant to the Afghan context. AICS (2018) recommended that civil society should also include traditional civil society and that civil society should be seen more as a space for engagement and dialogue, rather than as actors to implement projects.

An approach that merged tradition with modernity was that of the Community Development Councils (CDCs). They were neither completely modern nor completely traditional, combining customary ways of organising with new principles, including the strengthening of women's participation. They were also neither formal nor informal, but rather a hybrid (Bjelica 2024). It is nevertheless important to note that the CDCs faced many challenges, including vulnerability to politicisation, the undermining of local government, a fragmented approach to development, and a lack of incentives for community contributions.

Finally, the mere division of 'traditional' and 'modern' civil society warrants questioning, as these labels are not neutral but normative. 'Traditional' typically connotes rural-based conservatism and a backward-looking stance and hence, it is seen as less relevant than urban-based, forward-leaning and progressive. These dichotomies place the traditional as inferior to the modern, which raises questions about how development should be promoted and by whom. It also implies that the strengths of the traditional are undervalued, such as processes of social cohesion, justice, redistribution, and preservation of traditions linked to different phases of life (Nemat and Werner 2016). According to most historical definitions, civil society is what holds society together. Thus, it cannot be exclusively categorised as either modern or traditional.

Rooted, principled and pragmatic – engagement with civil society moving forward

Civic space in Afghanistan, including the space for local civil society organisations as well as international organisations, media and journalists, is shrinking. The Taliban are critical of civil society, especially its urban, donor-funded forms which are viewed as remnants of Western-imposed democracy. The right to express a defying opinion is limited, as is the space for officials to openly criticise decisions made by the Taliban senior leadership. Many of the channels through which the rural population could collectively express their concerns to local leaders have been weakened. In May 2024, the Supreme Leader ordered the abolition of the CDCs (Bjelica 2024).

In moving forward, it is crucial that the approach is based on learnings from the past. International support for Afghan civil society must focus on strengthening it on its own terms.

This approach is based on the assumption that civil society holds value and serves roles in its own right—not merely as a tool for external actors to gain acceptance for their initiatives or to implement activities defined elsewhere, whether inside or outside Afghanistan. In her research, Winter offers a key insight for understanding the role of civil society in Afghanistan: "the importance of dignity was mentioned by so many participants that the inference could be drawn that they had experienced having their dignity compromised" (Winter 2010:21).

The examples mentioned, including Hashar, provide an illustration; it was an informal institution and practice of mutual support, of value to the members of the community based on their self-defined needs and interest. Development programmes not only failed to strengthen them, but also caused harm and weakened them. Thus, engaging with civil society on its own terms requires careful analysis of the existing legitimate structures and practices for participation, decision-making, mutual support and dignity, as well as how to engage without the intent to implement specific services or activities.

> **Development programmes not only failed to strengthen them, but also caused harm and weakened them.**

One important aspect of this includes strengthening the Islamic perspective and applying a principled yet pragmatic approach to our relationship with civil society. Community-based and traditional structures such as Shuras, Jirgas, Maliks (village representatives), elders, and religious scholars still hold influence. One of the main challenges with these structures is the barrier to meaningful participation of women and girls. However, efforts to address this must come from within the local communities themselves, both women and men, to ensure sustainable change. If our engagement with local civil society is based on Islamic concepts and practices—including Adl (justice), Shura (consultation), and Maslaha (community well-being), Zakat (obligatory almsgiving) and Waqf (endowments)—then progress towards greater respect for the rights and dignity of all community members is more likely to be lasting. Or, as it is put by Anders Fänge, Afghanistan expert with a long history in different functions at the Solidarity Committee: "You don't change tradition by provoking it. You change it by walking with it."

This implies that change, even if slow, can not only be accepted but also owned and driven by communities and their leaders. We need to support change that is less likely to result in repercussion. Engagement with local civil society structures must be led by actors that are legitimate and grounded in the society—formal or informal—i.e. truly localised. Careful consideration is needed to determine which issues can be raised more prominently, and which should be promoted more discreetly, in a culturally sensitive manner that avoids triggering suspicion or backlash. Climate change resilience is of the former category, while women's and girls' rights of the latter. Local civil society actors have the capacity and

knowledge to decide on appropriate activities, and to make the necessary risk assessments. Apart from demanding carefully calibrated, context-specific and long-term programming, strategic patience is also required from the international community, as well as trust in local partners.

It is important to underline that the above by no means imply accepting women and girls being denied their dignity and basic human rights. Rather, it is about identifying the best way to capture the potential of the children and women educated over the past two decades, but doing so in a way that promotes long-term change while to the furthest extent possible mitigating backlashes. We need to aim for supporting informal networks and spaces where women and girls meet. Women are not allowed to head NGOs, and hence many choose to put a man as their formal head in the so-called Kafeel system. However, donors push for female official leadership and the organisations are thus squeezed between donor and IEA demands. In rural areas, ways to support women and girls include groups of women supporting each other in the agriculture production, in urban areas it could be women coming together to discuss strategies to keep their economic activity alive with the support of other women. Support to professional organisations that are still allowed for women, like Afghanistan Midwifery Association (AMA), constitute unique opportunities to strengthen women's ability to support other women and children, promote women's economic empowerment as well as enable them to play a role outside their households and in public life.

By recognising these opportunities and anchoring engagement in locally resonant values, civil society support can begin to repair past disconnections and promote a more legitimate, grounded, and sustainable development pathway for Afghanistan.

References

AICS (2018) The State of the Enabling Environment of Civil Society in Afghanistan. AICS.
Nemat, Orzala A. and Werner, Karin (2016) The Role of Civil Society in Promoting Good Governance in Afghanistan. Kabul and GmbH: AREU and GIZ.

Rubin, R. Barnett (2002) The Fragmentation of Afghanistan. Yale: Yale University Press.

Bjelica, Jelena (2024) The Fate of the Village Councils: The Emirate's effort to institute hegemony over rural Afghanistan. Afghanistan Analyst Network.

Borchgrevink, Kaja (2007) Religious Actors and Civil Society in Post-2001 Afghanistan. PRIO Papers. Oslo: International Peace Research Institute.

Kamat, Sangeeta (2004) The privatization of public interest: Theorizing NGO discourse in a neoliberal era. Review of International Political Economy, 11(1), 155-76.

Tapesh, Storai (2023) The Collapse of the Civic Space in Afghanistan and Supporting the Fight to Reclaim it. Princeton: Afghanistan Policy Lab.

van den Boogaard, Vanessa (2011) Building Afghan Civil Society "From the Outside": The Role of Global Civil Society Actors and the Impacts on Perceived Local Legitimacy. International Affairs Review, XX (2).

Winter, Elisabeth (2010) Civil Society Development in Afghanistan. London: LSE.