

## Afghan civil society: Tradition facing the future



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Developing robust civil society organisations (CSOs) is a high priority in countries emerging from conflicts. However, civil society is very diverse, and different organisations might require different development strategies. The Afghan case illustrates this diversity, along with some of the challenges and opportunities for strengthening civil society's competence and capacity.

**AFGHAN TRADITIONAL ORGANISATIONS**

An **arbaki** is an unpaid local or tribal defence force established for a limited period of time to protect a community against external threats.

A **hashar** is a community organised effort to prepare and maintain shared infrastructure, buildings, and the environment. The government mobilises an **ashar** – similar to a hashar – for “voluntary work.”

The **jirga** is a consensus oriented council where all men (and sometimes women) have the right and duty to meet and discuss issues of common concern to their community, such as resolving conflicts or mobilising the community for collective action. The **Loya Jirga** (national council) was and is Afghanistan’s highest national authority. It appoints the head of state and deals with matters of national interest.

The term **shura** (meaning “council”) is taken from Islam and is more of an advisory council than a decision making one. Alliances of different mujahedeen groups, such as the Shure-e Nezar (the Northern Council), have applied the term to meetings held (frequently by NGOs) to plan interventions or resolve particular community issues.

**THE LONG TRADITION**

The traditional, narrow definition of “civil society” as “non-governmental and not-for-profit organizations that have a presence in public life, expressing the interests and values of their members or others, based on ethical, cultural, political, scientific, religious or philanthropic considerations” (World Bank 2013) does not adequately capture Afghan’s diverse civil society. Throughout history, Afghans have come together in consensus oriented *jirgas* to resolve conflicts and decide on important community issues. Traditionally, all men in a community were obliged to take part in their jirga, and each local jirga sent representatives to the *Loya Jirga*, which appointed leaders and dealt with national issues. Every village also had a system for community work, *hashar*, which took care of everything from water resources and road maintenance to repairing the mosque and protecting the village. When the need arose, the community would establish an *arbaki*, an unpaid local defence group.

*Shuras* came to Afghanistan with Islam. A shura is an advisory council, rather than a decision-making body like the jirga. The term became applied to political and military entities, and international non-governmental groups (NGOs) later used it to describe their local counterparts as well as meetings with local counterparts (e.g., “they met in a shura”).

**BUILT ON LOCAL VALUES**

Islam has a strong tradition of providing charity. Muslims have a duty to support the vulnerable and poor, and this duty is institutionalized through the annual *zakat tax*. People can also turn to the mosque, religious scholars, and community networks in times of need or to share their wealth. They may also donate to institutions such as orphanages. In fact, the Afghan Red Crescent Society was established in 1934, largely due to an initiative to help the poor.

Afghan professionals (such as doctors and teachers) established and ran the first Afghan NGOs in Pakistan in the early 1980s, following an influx of international NGOs and solidarity groups. These professionals used their skills primarily to support Afghan refugees, although groups such as the high-profile Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan also advocated for human rights. Mujahedeen parties also established committees to support their members in relation to health and education. By the late 1980s was a number of Afghan cross-border NGOs established, often led by younger Afghans with technical education.

In 1989, the United Nations announced that it would financially support the establishment of Afghan NGOs. Within a few months, the number of NGOs skyrocketed from less than 20 to 250. Some of these were undoubtedly genuine NGOs, but quite a few were only a rebranding of existing political committees or were the personal organisations of commanders or their families. This increase in the number of NGOs led to a demand for better coordination of NGO assistance and NGO coordinating bodies, where three different ones were established.

The majority of the NGOs moved from Pakistan to Afghanistan after the fall of the Soviet supported Afghan government. Some continued to run their activities from Pakistan during the civil war and Taliban period, surviving on limited external financial resources.

**INFLUX OF INTERNATIONAL NGOS**

During the 1990s, many emergency relief NGOs moved into rehabilitation and development work. This required a different set of skills, and many small, family-based NGOs had to expand beyond their close networks to recruit specialists such as engineers, social workers, or nurses. Furthermore, the NGOs became subject to a different kind of outside scrutiny. Mere solidarity was no longer enough; instead, they had to document impact and effect and adapt to buzzwords like “monitoring and evaluation,” “audit reports,” “strategies,” and “priorities.” The NGO coordinating bodies and international NGOs organised trainings on these topics, and international NGOs adopted a partner-based approach aimed at building a competent and professional Afghan NGO sector. Norwegian Church Aid (NCA) was among the first international NGOs to adapt a partner-strategy. Some international NGOs channelled funding through Afghan NGOs to avoid sending staff into high-risk areas and to reduce costs; this was more about subcontracting their operations than capacity building.

Rights advocacy was a demanding task during the mujahedeen and Taliban periods, especially advocacy concerning girls’ and women’s rights to education and access to health facilities. Many NGOs implemented projects on these issues but did not actually “argue for rights” in Afghanistan. Around 1994, a few NGOs also entered the field of peacebuilding and conflict resolution. These NGOs, and the organisations they formed, developed magazines for schoolchildren, provided conflict resolution training for local communities, helped establish peace committees, and introduced the “Do No Harm” concept.

Despite operational challenges, a number of Afghan NGOs developed into professional organisations. They matched international NGOs in terms of their work quality, survey methods, quality assurance tools, and reporting procedures. Men staffed and ran most of the organisations, but they frequently employed women and established departments aimed at providing support to women. Many used participatory methods and worked through village and neighbourhood councils – some already in existence, others established to handle the support. The term “Afghan civil society” was hardly in use during the 1990s; it was either “NGOs” or “community/village organisations.”

**A VIBRANT CIVIL SOCIETY**

The fall of the Taliban in late 2001 changed everything, at least on the surface. Civil society was present at the Bonn Conference that established the Afghan Interim Government, and later international donor conferences have all had

Afghan civil society representation.

As international donors set up offices in Kabul, existing and new Afghan organisations lined up to present themselves for support. Some kept the NGO name, while others became private businesses because they saw a larger financial potential as “contractors.” A number of advocacy and rights-based organisations made their presence known, received extensive media coverage, and became very visible in public debates.

Due to the increasing number of organisations, the new government in Kabul demanded clarification of the NGOs’ role as well as guarantees that NGOs would act in line with national strategies and plans. The parliament passed an NGO law in 2005, followed by an elaborate registration process. Groups defined as “social organisations” – “the voluntary unions of natural persons for ensuring social, cultural, educational, legal, artistic and vocational objectives” – were to register with the Ministry of Justice (ADB 2009). NGOs were to register with the Ministry of Economy. By 2010, 1,468 NGOs and 1,716 social organisations were registered.

Development funding channelled through the Afghan government became available for NGOs through an extensive bidding process. The National Solidarity Programme (NSP) set up in 2003 had a strong governance component. Each village had to elect a Community Development Council (CDC) that constituted the lowest governance structure. Some of these CDCs were merely an extension of the traditional village council, with more of a civil society function than a government body function.

Norwegian NGOs have been active in capacity building amongst their Afghan partners. The Afghan Red Crescent Society underwent capacity building and training of its staff with support from the Norwegian Red Cross. NCA developed a strategy for capacity development of their partner agencies, that in addition to management capacity including training in peacebuilding and conflict resolution. The Norwegian Afghanistan Committee has built the capacity of Afghan health workers and teachers, engaged in community based disaster risk management, and strengthened the capacity of CDCs as well as community and district development bodies.

**INTERNATIONAL RECOGNITION**

The international community has recognised the importance of providing support to Afghan civil society (Insight on Conflict 2015). In 2005, the United States Agency for International Development established the Initiative Promote Afghan Civil Society, implemented through the US-based NGO Counterpart International. Its aim was to “assist communities in advocating their rights and interest towards the Afghan Government and Parliament” (Counterpart International 2015). Nordic donors and the British Department for International Development followed, and in 2011 they funded Tawanmandi, a civil society fund administered by the British Council in Kabul. The

fund’s aim was as follows:

*Through the provision of capacity development opportunities and project funding, we help to strengthen the operational and advocacy capabilities of civil society organisations, with a particular focus on the areas of human rights, access to justice, peace-building, conflict resolution, anti-corruption and the media.*  
(British Council 2015)

With a presence across Afghanistan, this support has led to a larger degree of organisational capacity, competence, and exposure for Afghan civil society. A whole range of networks, short- and long-term coalitions, and umbrella organisations have been established and are now part of what constitutes a vibrant civil society in Afghanistan.

A 2011 Afghan civil society assessment carried out by Counterpart International identified eight types of CSOs in the country: (1) community focused groups, (2) youth focused groups, (3) women focused groups, (4) CSO support organisations, (5) professional interest organisations, (6) community development councils, (7) shuras, and (8) local education committees.

The report points out that even though a number of these organisations have managed to raise funds locally, fundraising is still a major obstacle. Another concern is the rural-urban perspective. A majority of the organisations are located in Kabul, and this raises a range of questions regarding communal acceptance and ownership of Afghan CSOs. Several youth organisations are also concerned that many CSOs have been “NGO-ized” with posh offices, expensive cars, and well paid staff, lacking the voluntarism that should be associated with an Afghan civil society.

**STRENGTHENING AFGHAN ORGANISATIONS**

There is no doubt that Afghan civil society can play an important role in shaping the future and in protecting and furthering critical interests in Afghanistan. However, given that international funding and engagement capacity are limited, donors and policy makers need to make hard choices about which type(s) of organisations and what type(s) of capacity building to prioritise.

Here we might benefit from drawing on international experience. A Norad report studying the broad effects of Norwegian civil society support internationally identified a number of benefits foreign CSOs experienced from partnering with Norwegian CSOs (in addition to financial assistance) (see Box 2; Norad 2012). The report explained that much of the capacity building assistance had helped the organisations “respond better to the growing demands placed on them by Norwegian CSOs and by Norad in terms of specifying their plans more clearly and responding to new reporting requirements.” But questions “whether it has helped strengthen their overall capacity to make more effective development impact is more difficult to determine” (ibid., 12).

The report made two observations that seem relevant for Afghanistan. First, few Norwegian CSOs undertake their capacity building efforts within

**CSOS BENEFIT FROM NORWEGIAN CSO SUPPORT IN SEVERAL WAYS (NORAD 2012):**

- a. access to support for enhancing skills and building their own capacity;
- b. opportunities for international exposure, networking, and dialogue;
- c. access to specific competencies and information;
- d. bonds of solidarity;
- e. moral and political support; and
- f. the stability that long-term, durable partnerships bring.

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Editor: Åse Roti Dahl and Ingvild Hestad. Copy editor: KSA\_design, Kristin Skeie Antoine

the “context of contributing to the broader aim of ‘strengthening civil society,’” but rather they seek primarily to strengthen their local partners. This might be a challenge in Afghanistan if advocacy work is not prioritised. Second, civil society “comprises far more than the sum of formally constituted civil society organisations” (ibid., 13), and if this is not recognised other important groups might lose out in capacity building efforts. Applying this second point to Afghanistan, it can be suggested that four main types of groups comprise Afghanistan’s broad civil society:

1. service delivery organisations involved in providing assistance to communities and at times advocating their rights before the Afghan government and donors;
2. CSOs advocating for specific groups (such as women, girls, the disabled, or youth) in their communities and at the national and international levels;
3. interest organisations representing professional expertise (such as writers, journalists, or lawyers) that advocate the rights of Afghan groups or individuals before the Afghan government and the international community; and
4. community based structures that range from traditional councils (whatever they are called) to more specialised councils (such as for water, village maintenance, school, health, and conflict resolution) that work in a community to organise, protect, resolve, and improve the situation for community members.

Each type of CSO requires a different forms of capacity building, suggesting that international organisations ought to apply a differentiated approach.

For example, although **service delivery** organisations have developed over a number of years, they may still need to revisit their strategies to adapt to a rapidly changing context and to ensure sufficient monitoring and evaluation capacities and a well-functioning management system. Some might need further skills in community mobilisation, organising and skills transfer, or formulating and communicating advocacy messages.

**Civil society organisations** might need assistance improving their engagement with the groups they aim to represent, fundraising in Afghan communities, and formulating and communicating advocacy messages. Some might benefit from management and staff development, but it is important to be clear on whether the group aims to be a service delivery or representation/advocacy organisation before entering such a process.

**Interest organisations** have historically been at top of the class in terms of presenting and communicating their interests, but they could become even better. Different groups will have different audiences and thus different challenges in identifying and communicating with international partners and audiences.

The largest potential for capacity development is probably within **community based** structures, particularly assisting and enabling them to organise and develop their communities and community members. However, this must be done with care and tailored to each group’s needs and activities. One potential area of engagement is their ability to represent their interests before government officials and structures. Another is their contact with and potential support from the three other types of organisations. Enhancing links between the different types of CSOs in Afghanistan would strengthen a broad definition of “Afghan civil society” and allow that civil society to develop from within.

**FURTHER READING:**

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