Afghan civil society: Tradition facing the future

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.
The long tradition of civil society in Afghanistan is defined as “non-governmental and not-for-profit organisations 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 Afghanistan’s diverse civil society. Throughout history, Afghans have come together in continuous organised jirgas to resolve conflicts and develop important community issues. Traditionally, all men in a community were obliged to take part in their jirga, and each local jirga sent a representative to the Loya Jirga, which appointed leaders and dealt with national issues. Every village also had a council for community work, 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 arba’i, 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 meetings with local counterparts and is more of an advisory council, rather than a decision-making body. The term was also applied to meetings with local counterparts and is more of an advisory council, rather than a decision-making body. The term was also applied to meetings with local counterparts and is more of an advisory council, rather than a decision-making body. The term was also applied to meetings with local counterparts and is more of an advisory council, rather than a decision-making body.

The government mobilises an organised effort to prepare and deal with external threats. This required a different set of skills, and many small, family-related jirgas expanded beyond their close networks to recruit specialists like engineers, social workers, and farmers, who operated under a different subject to a different kind of outside scrutiny. These men no longer worked in isolation; instead, they had to deal with impact and effectively adapt to budgets like “monitoring and evaluation,” “audit reports,” “strategies,” and “priorities.” The NGs coordinating bodies and international NGOs organised trainings on these topics, and international NGOs adopted a partner-based approach that aimed to reach a broad range of Afghan NGOs 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, whereas they were more about subcontracting their operations than capacity building. Rights advocacy was a demanding task during the mujahideen and Taliban periods, especially advocating concerning girls’ and women’s rights to education, access to fair health care, and to an education. Many NGOs implemented projects on these issues but did not work directly with Afghan women. However, there was a steady growth of NGOs in Afghanistan.

Some NGOs developed field offices for local peacebuilding and conflict resolution. These NGOs, and the organisations they formed, developed the field hospital for schoolchildren, provided conflict resolution training for local councils, and established 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 control tools, and reporting procedures. Men staffed and ran most of the organisations, but they frequently employed women and established deals with male aid workers at a profit to women. Many used participatory methods and worked through village and neighbourhood councils – some already existed, others established to handle the relief. The term “traditional NGOs” and “community” NGs emerged in the 1990s; it was either “NGOs” or “community/NGO organisations.”

Afghan tradition of civil society

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 parties or were the personal organisations of political 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 and some formed an Afghan-Mujahedeen body like the Jirga. The term became applied to meetings with local counterparts and is more of an advisory council, rather than a decision-making body. The term was also applied to meetings with local counterparts and is more of an advisory council, rather than a decision-making body. The term was also applied to meetings with local counterparts and is more of an advisory council, rather than a decision-making body. The term was also applied to meetings with local counterparts and is more of an advisory council, rather than a decision-making body. The term was also applied to meetings with local counterparts and is more of an advisory council, rather than a decision-making body. However, they were no longer in danger, and they had to deal with impact and effectively adapt to budgets like “monitoring and evaluation,” “audit reports,” “strategies,” and “priorities.”

A vibrant civil society

Community development councils – some already in existence, others established for a limited period of time – became of an advisory council, rather than a decision-making body. The term was also applied to meetings with local counterparts and is more of an advisory council, rather than a decision-making body. The term was also applied to meetings with local counterparts and is more of an advisory council, rather than a decision-making body. The term was also applied to meetings with local counterparts and is more of an advisory council, rather than a decision-making body. The term was also applied to meetings with local counterparts and is more of an advisory council, rather than a decision-making body. The term was also applied to meetings with local counterparts and is more of an advisory council, rather than a decision-making body. The term was also applied to meetings with local counterparts and is more of an advisory council, rather than a decision-making body. However, they were no longer in danger, and they had to deal with impact and effectively adapt to budgets like “monitoring and evaluation,” “audit reports,” “strategies,” and “priorities.”

International NGOs

Development funding channelled through the Afghan government became available for NGOs for the first time. To support their members in relation to health and education, Mujahedeen parties also established committees and organisations. They matched international NGOs in terms of their work quality, survey methods, quality control tools, and reporting procedures.

Norwegian NGOs have been active in capacity building and have supported their Afghan partners in the Afghan Red Crescent Society. The Afghan Red Crescent Society has undertaken capacity building and training of its staff with support from Norwegian Red Cross. However, there are other NGOs that provide conflict resolution, the Afghan National Community has built the capacity of health workers and teachers, engaged in community-based disaster risk management, and created the capacity of CDGs as well as community and district development bodies.

International recognition

The international community has recognised the importance of providing support to Afghan civil society. The Afghan National CGOs have undertaken capacity building and training of its staff with support from Norwegian Red Cross. However, there are other NGOs that provide conflict resolution, the Afghan National Community has built the capacity of health workers and teachers, engaged in community-based disaster risk management, and created the capacity of CDGs as well as community and district development bodies.

International NGOs

Norwegian NGOs have been active in capacity building and have supported their Afghan partners in the Afghan Red Crescent Society. The Afghan Red Crescent Society has undertaken capacity building and training of its staff with support from Norwegian Red Cross. However, there are other NGOs that provide conflict resolution, the Afghan National Community has built the capacity of health workers and teachers, engaged in community-based disaster risk management, and created the capacity of CDGs as well as community and district development bodies.

International recognition

The international community has recognised the importance of providing support to Afghan civil society. The Afghan National Community has built the capacity of health workers and teachers, engaged in community-based disaster risk management, and created the capacity of CDGs as well as community and district development bodies.
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:
ADB Civil Society Briefs (June).
Insight on Conflict. 2015. “Afghanistan Civil Society Forum organisation (ACSFo).”