

## ***Regaining People's Confidence – Strategies to Enhance State Legitimacy and Civil Society***

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Community based peace building in Afghanistan during the last 10 years has largely gone unacknowledged.

After decades of war there was a compelling need to work with communities at the very grass root level on issues such as conflict resolution, good governance and advocacy to strengthen them both to resolve their local conflicts peacefully that sometimes polarize extended families, clans and ethnic groups, and also to actively participate in the local governance and keep their government accountable. Working with community councils, which is one of the traditional forms of civil society in Afghanistan, would have extensively limited the chances of the communities to laps back into the trap of insurgencies. It would have also played a crucial role in promoting good governance which is largely absent now. Or, in other words, bad governance is now being stated by many as one of the main factors widening the gap between the state and the general public and providing more space for the insurgents to retreat.

A bunch of civil society organisations are working on conflict resolution with community councils and are experiencing a magnificent change in attitudes and behaviour of their target communities to deal with their conflicts. Communities have been able to peacefully settle their conflicts that had remained untouched for decades. Many of these conflicts had resulted in death of individuals and consequent migration of families seeking or escaping from potential revenge. In many cases the parties involved would join armed groups looking for their support either to escape justice or to seek support for revenge. It is exactly what is happening now in communities where the state is not able to deliver justice and the communities are deeply divided and unable to resolve conflicts peacefully. The conflicts can be related to land, water, loans or simply a dispute on the street. But their consequences, if not carefully handled, are always worse. Communities without strong social structures and

trustworthy conflict resolution mechanisms provide a fertile ground for criminal gangs and armed opposition to grow.

Social peace building programmes initiated by a few civil society organisations have been mainly designed to strengthen traditional civil society structures in order to be more proactive in terms of settling disputes peacefully and not letting small conflicts slip into violence. The programme has fairly reduced conflicts in the target communities and has increased trust in their local structures that has been to a larger extent lost in the last almost three decades of war.

With all its breaking impact at the community level, it is contributing fairly to peace building at the provincial and national levels. A number of community council members have made their way to provincial councils and even to the parliament. Their exposure to the community based peace building programme and going through a series of training programmes in conflict resolution, human rights, good governance and advocacy has remarkably changed the way they are looking to the current peace building process in the country. They are significantly influenced by their peace building role in their communities and they are still linked to the community structures.

Beside working with community based traditional civil society actors, students at schools is another target group which needs to be worked with, aiming at an investment in the new generation to replace the culture of violence with a culture of peace. Only Cooperation for Peace and Unity (CPAU) covers more than 35,000 students in five districts in four provinces, delivering peace education and providing them with peace education textbooks that are entirely based on our 10 years of experience of peace education with the Afghan students in refugees' schools and schools inside Afghanistan.

These are certainly not quick fix initiatives to bring a durable peace, but without working at the grass roots level with enormous patience for its impact, political peace building will not last long in a country like Afghanistan. Along with all the efforts the international community and the Afghan government are making at national level, it should be equally mirrored by efforts at the community level in order to save peace in Afghanistan. Peace

building at community level is undeniably contributing to the efforts at the national level but has regretfully remained a low priority for the donors and has gone unacknowledged by the media too.

However, there are a number of factors that hamper local peace initiatives, and these are the same factors that also damage state legitimacy and wither away people's confidence. In order to regain their confidence, the Afghan government needs to take a bold step to curb corruption and bring security, while the civil society needs to come up with a workable definition of civil society and become more inclusive.

Lack of security is what in the first place deeply cripples access to the communities and state legitimacy in the eyes of ordinary Afghans. These were the Afghans who lined up behind the ballot boxes to vote for their government and warmly welcomed the international community, hoping they would have peace after decades-long strife and bloodshed.

In research and by travelling to various provinces it has been found that security is the first and sometimes the only demand of ordinary Afghans. They feel threatened by both insurgents and Afghan government forces accompanied by its international friends. In fact, many Afghans and civil society actors find themselves in between a rock and a hard place. What the government and international community needs to tackle immediately, in order to regain the trust of ordinary Afghans, is at least to reduce the security threats that are perceived emanating not from insurgents but from the government and coalition forces.

“Bring us security, we will look after ourselves and will find at least a loaf of bread and an onion to eat. We are used to being poor and would not mind if we do not have rice and meat for our lunch and dinner.”

This is what a poor old man in Uruzgan said, a province where an NGO employee could hardly go beyond a couple of villages in Trinkot, the capital of Uruzgan province in the south of the country. It was not only this old farmer who was decisively clear about this demand, but every other respondent's answer to the

question whether they would provide security themselves and let the international community and the Afghan government bring development, or would they ask the Afghan government and international community for security and take care of their development themselves. They were very clear and blunt in asking for security.

The government and international community need to review what has worked and what has not, even if it may not comply with the modern state model. They also need to consult and employ the right and influential people rather than relying on the ones who are deeply hated, not only for their previous human rights violation record, but also because peace and security for them is an end to their power and their lucrative businesses.

The endemic corruption in aid delivery is another factor that has raised grievances and is prolonging the conflict. Corruption in state institutions has resulted in a growing gap between the public and the state. According to the Human Development Report of 2007, almost 80% of the local disputes go to the traditional jirgas. One of the main reasons has been stated to be corruption in the judiciary. The worst scenario is that a parallel system has been developed by the insurgents in most of the insecure areas, to which people are advised to take their disputes. It undermines the state legitimacy and shows its inability to deliver justice.

Many in the West may believe that the war in Afghanistan is fought on ideological lines, but beside the ideology, lavish reconstruction contracts and access to power is what nowadays fuel the conflict and help increase the insurgencies. Access to the beefy contracts with the greatest chances of corruption is fuelling the competition among individuals, including some government officials. Anecdotal stories exist about contractors who are supporting insurgents either to maintain good relations and let their business flourish or threatening their competitors in order to monopolise the contracts in their areas.

Inevitably the people see the government officials, and nowadays the PRTs, involved in one or another way and that questions the credibility of the international community and Afghan government.

The Afghans desperately need the reconstruction process to be speeded up to create more jobs, which will largely hamper the ability of the insurgents to recruit the jobless youth. This also needs precise planning and close monitoring of the international assistance. Otherwise international aid, pulled into few hands, is going to prove counterproductive.

The international community, in order to boost the trust in the Afghan government, needs to renew its promises and commit itself to long-term support. The reluctance within the international community and lack of coordination are gradually withering away the confidence of Afghans and are making them unwilling to decisively stand beside their government. Not only the choice of an ordinary Afghan, but also of a government employee at local level, is magnificently influenced by the degree of international commitment to support the Afghan government. Many Afghans and even government employees think they will be betrayed and exposed to the ruthless punishment of the insurgents if the international community either leaves or shares power with the most radical groups within the insurgents. Therefore even very crucial government employees try to find a balance in maintaining relations with both sides.

As one of the district administrators in a friendly conversation said: “If you want to be successful, your one hand needs to be with the government and the other with the Taliban” He certainly meant the district administrators in areas where the Taliban groups are clandestinely operating and are brutal in punishing the dissidents. It is primarily because they do not trust the commitment of the international community and the ability of the government to defend them.

The Afghan government needs to demonstrate and come with clear strategies for its commitment to defend those who are associated with the government whether they are government employees or tribal leaders. At the same time it must be decisive on those who are playing a double role.

To tackle all these problems (bringing security, controlling corruption, improving aid effectiveness) the government first needs to come up with a strong political team which unfortunately has not existed in the last seven years, a political

team in the cabinet which can work together and have coherent strategies and close coordination at central, provincial and district levels. This team must have a clear picture of how the future Afghanistan should look like.

Personal ambitions among the cabinet members and loyalty to political groups that override government priorities and their official responsibilities within the central and provincial governments are what tears apart any agreed coherent strategy and makes national programmes stagnate. Afghans and the international community are deeply concerned how the various national programmes are not supported by one or another ministry. It not only hampers the trust in the state but also largely hampers the effectiveness of aid and the state building process.

Civil society's role is crucial to save peace in Afghanistan but regretfully very little knowledge and awareness exists about civil society among ordinary Afghans and government officials. Even many civil society actors still have not been able to fully understand what civil society rationally exists for. NGOs, the latest phenomenon and sometimes believed to be a concept injected by the West with their emergency and development funds, are still considered to be mere service provider. Though they have proved to be remarkably effective in providing services in very harsh security conditions, still its leading role as civil society organisations is largely questioned due to its funding sources and financial vulnerability. Some will also argue, referring to the NGO and human rights groups established in post 9/11 with the lavish reconstruction aid, that they are very much centred in big cities and only reflect the opinion of those with an urban life and who remarkably lack deep knowledge and experience of the rural Afghanistan where the majority of the population is settled.

To come up with a civil society that can keep the government accountable and ensure wider participation, the Afghan government and the international community need to find ways to work with traditional civil society and religious groups that have remained influential in Afghan social and political life. One should be cautious not to make them state related local governance bodies that sometimes blur its identity as a civil society actor. Community councils, religious groups and leaders,

and tribal structures constitute the civil society that ordinary Afghans believe has a relation to them, and is not something that is parachuted from the west or promoted in the Afghan cities with an unimaginably alien culture. NGOs with its development experience can only have a facilitating role in building its capacity.

The government still has not recognized civil society as a critical partner but is looking at it as a competitor which cuts a large portion of the cake that is supposed to go to the government. On the other side, civil society is keeping a considerable human resource that the government desperately needs.

To forge working and mutually reinforcing relations, the government of Afghanistan needs to demonstrate enough openness to address critical areas where the role of civil society has historically been and currently important. And more importantly, in order to restore people's confidence it needs to work out mutual accountability mechanisms.