



گروه کاری مشترک جامعه مدنی
د مدني ټولني گډه کاري ډله
Civil Society Joint Working Group

**CIVIL SOCIETY JOINT WORKING GROUP
POSITION PAPER
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For more information, please contact:
Abdullah Ahmadi, CSJWG Coordinator,
ahmadi.cca@gmail.com

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GRAFT, UNEMPLOYMENT & INSECURITY ARE CARDINAL ISSUES

Afghan civil society believes that insecurity, unemployment and corruption are the hot-button issues facing the war-devastated country over the past decade -- a conclusion endorsed by a national survey involving about 8,000 Afghans and conducted five times between 2010 and 2018.¹ Therefore, we call on all stakeholders to approach the Afghan conundrum from this angle and address each of the questions individually as part of a strategic engagement. Our collective experience of the past one decade and a half indicates that any reductionist approach to dealing with one factor at the expense of another will not lead to peace and prosperity in Afghanistan.

The understanding that corruption fuels both insecurity and unemployment is exaggeration. By the same token, the argument that insecurity is a major cause of both corruption and joblessness loses sight of the root causes of insecurity. Unemployment may look like an effect of both insecurity and corruption, but that does not reflect the damage the 40-year conflict has inflicted on society and economic infrastructure. These three factors have spillover effects on each other. However, they are independent of each other in terms of consequences for, and impact on, the lives of ordinary citizens.

The Civil Society Joint Working Group (CSJWG) is the largest civil society platform that brings together organisations and individuals from all walks of life – education, health, election transparency, anti-corruption, women’s participation, social protection for refugees and the disabled, as well as media, freedom of speech and rule of law. The 31 members of the group were elected through a transparent and open election in mid-2018 in Kabul.²

The group has existed in its form for the last five years. As a group, we welcome the momentum the peace process has gained over the last few months, but warn against any pre-mature negotiations that do not taken into account the constitution and achievements of the past 17 years. Since the US is driving the peace process on behalf of both Afghans and the international community, we seek guarantees from the global fraternity, particularly Washington, to ensure that a possible peace deal lasts at least a decade.

Similarly, the international community must stay committed to supporting the Afghans. Given the multiplicity of insurgent and terrorist outfits, a peace agreement will not necessarily mean an end to the conflict in Afghanistan. Therefore, we call on our international partners to remain committed to bring sustainable peace and help the Afghans to come out the current crisis—Afghanistan is currently one of the most dangerous³ and underdeveloped countries in the world⁴.

The Civil Society Joint Working Group calls on the Afghan government and the international community to take the following six recommendations into consideration:

- Any peace negotiations should respect the constitution and achievements of the last 17 years. The international community should guarantee that peace prevails at least for a decade and stay committed to support to keep sustainable peace in Afghanistan.

1 <https://iwaweb.org/ncs/>

2 http://www.afghan-bios.info/index.php?option=com_afghanbios&id=4063&task=view&total=3781&start=762&Itemid=2

3 <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/galleries/The-worlds-most-dangerous-places/>

4 http://hdr.undp.org/sites/all/themes/hdr_theme/country-notes/AFG.pdf

- The Afghan government and the international community should put people at the centre of designing and implementing their emergency and development programmes by observing a humanitarian-development-peace nexus that involves the masses in such initiatives. We call on International Community to commit to support Afghans to implement SDGs until 2030 rather than short term two-year assistance packages.
- The current women's empowerment programmes at urban centers require continued support and a fresh momentum. Women's rights achievements in rural areas are under threat. There is an urgent need for and substantial attention to hiring and training qualified female teachers and nurses and support women's economic empowerment through rural uplift schemes.
- Durable anti-corruption efforts need to be stepped up with the creation of new bodies and support of existing independent, apolitical and strong agencies across the government. This includes the establishment of an apolitical anti-corruption commission, making current mechanisms like the Attorney General Office independent and supporting the already autonomous entities like the Electoral Complaint Commission and Access to Information Commission.
- We request the government to depoliticise the electronic ID cards and forge national consensus on its content and distribute it before the next election. If the use of biometric devices becomes a precondition to hold any elections and validate any votes, the incentives for fair and transparent election shall increase and we request the Afghan government and international community to support an election with such features.
- We believe that civil society organizations are playing a critical role in the democratic setup of the country and have established themselves as a source of support to the needy and a channel of advocacy for the victims of corruption and violence. We would like to call upon the international community to enter into a compact with the civil society to ensure an enabling environment to promote peace, justice, democratic and accountable institutions.

Given below are six themes stemming from our understanding of Afghanistan's vicious triangle of insecurity, unemployment and corruption for further attention, intervention and assistance:

PEACE AND RECONCILIATION

Afghan civil society is convinced that the ultimate solution to the current crisis lies in transformative peace negotiations. The government should give priority to the constitution and achievements of the last fifteen years in the peace process. Women's participation is especially important in any such dialogue. We call on the Afghan government to agree to the role of a monitoring team consisting of the civil society and women groups to oversee the process and update and ensure some level of transparency and accountability into potential behind the scenes deals.

As a group, we welcome the momentum the peace process has gained over the last few months, but warn against any pre-mature negotiations that do not taken into account the constitution and achievements of the past 17 years. We call on the US not to replace Afghans in the negotiations with the Taliban. We also seek guarantees from the global fraternity, particularly Washington, to ensure that a possible peace deal lasts at least a decade. We warn regional powers that legitimizing the forces that fight the Afghan government, they can't be the partners for stability and call on their constructive role in bringing an end to the violence in Afghanistan.

Similarly, the international community must stay committed to supporting the Afghans. Given the multiplicity of insurgent and terrorist outfits, a peace agreement will not necessarily mean an end to the conflict in Afghanistan. The regional and international mafia and terror groups active in the country and the region may probably continue even after a peace deal with Taliban. Therefore, we call on our international partners to remain committed to bring sustainable peace and help the Afghans to come out the current crisis—Afghanistan is currently one of the most dangerous⁵ and underdeveloped countries in the world⁶.



5 <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/galleries/The-worlds-most-dangerous-places/>

6 http://hdr.undp.org/sites/all/themes/hdr_theme/country-notes/AFG.pdf

SECURITY AND CIVILIAN PROTECTION

Afghan civil society is of the view that stability and prosperity would continue to elude the country as long as the war continues. Millions of Afghans have been directly affected by the ongoing conflict and thousands have lost their near and dear ones. In September 2018, UNAMA reported 8,050 civilians killed and wounded (2,798 deaths and 5,252 wounded⁷). This does not include casualties among the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces as well as insurgents.

Afghan security institutions are in deep trouble. The political leadership and security chiefs are unable to ensure law and order. One of the principal reasons for leadership failure is corruption in police appointments and promotions at the top level, as well as the domination of institutions by the corrupt political elite. This is one of the major challenges that have resulted in increased insecurity, corruption and a dismally low morale among security forces.

Civil society's research shows rampant corruption in traffic police, including in Kabul, passport and **tazkara** offices and extortions on highways. One field research reveals two-thirds of 377 police check-posts on highways force truckers into paying bribes⁸.

Such violations of the social contract between citizens and the state have eroded public confidence in police services. Increased cases of abduction, theft, attacks on individuals, the presence of gunmen in Kabul and other major cities are deeply troubling. This situation necessitates comprehensive security improvement. CSOs working on police integrity and transparency call for comprehensive reforms within the force across the country.

Afghan civil society calls on the government to come up with a thorough plan and a clear timeline for consultations with the people on how the rulers and leadership of the Ministries of Interior, Defense and National Directorate of Security should restructure the security sector to boost citizens' protection. We also call on all warring parties to adhere to full implementation of international humanitarian laws be it the Afghan government, the NATO, US special forces and insurgent groups.

7 UNAMA "Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict 2018" quarterly report, 10 October 2018.

8 https://iwaweb.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/NCS__English__for-web.pdf

HUMANITARIAN & EMERGENCY AID

The humanitarian fraternity has worked with communities across the country for the last 40 years, delivering life-saving and emergency aid as well as health and education services to the people when and where the Afghan state could not reach them. While this has prevented development indicators from declining further, it has failed to address underlying causes through a humanitarian, development and peace paradigm.

Current Afghan development indicators are shocking: 54% of people living under the poverty line⁹, 3.5 million children out of school (out of a population of approximately 30 million)¹⁰, an estimated 10 million have limited or no access to health services¹¹, displacement of 282,000 people fleeing conflict and 223,100 due to drought so far in 2018.

After nearly 40 years of conflict and displacement, it has become crystal clear that Afghanistan needs a New Way of Working, also known as the Humanitarian-Development-Peace (Triple) Nexus. This approach involves a wide variety of actors, working based on comparative advantages and over multiple years, to reduce need, vulnerability and risk and increase peace and resilience for sustainable development.

This includes putting people at the centre and engaging residents and NGOs in programme designing and need assessment; long-term development arrangements as opposed to “doomsday scenarios”, promoting and ensuring mutual accountability and transparency between donors, NGOs and government.



9 World Bank “Afghanistan Living Conditions Survey (ALCS)”, 5 July 2018.

10 <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/04/world/asia/afghanistan-child-education.html>

11 <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/2018-afghanistan-humanitarian-needs-overview>

WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND EMPOWERMENT

The time when Afghan women were barred from exercising their social and political rights is coming to an end. They have come a long way to stand up for their rights and ensure their political and social participation in public affairs. Girls' enrollment in schools and universities and representation on elected councils, government, civil society and media have significantly increased over the years.

Although the role of women in society has been increasingly recognized by all parties, gender mainstreaming achievements in Afghanistan are reversible. Space for girls' education is shrinking and is being increasingly limited to urban centres and "secure territories". Likewise, the political participation of women in elected councils and government is arguably curtailed amid increasing criticism that women's empowerment programme beneficiaries have been the same sections of society over the years. Child marriage, higher illiteracy rates among women than men, more girl dropouts than boys, scarcity of female teachers in rural areas, violence against females and inheritance denial are women-specific issues.

At the moment, education and health services, as well as economic and political empowerment of women at the urban centers, require continued support and a fresh momentum. Women rights in rural areas are under threat and there are signs of them being reversed as an upshot of violence and poverty.

There is a need for urgent and substantial attention and support from the international community and the government to reducing distance to schools and clinics and hiring and training qualified female teachers and nurses. There is also a dire need to enhance the economic empowerment of women through rural development programmes and ensure their access to formal justice through supporting the relevant organs.

COMBATING CORRUPTION

With the creation of the National Procurement Authority (NPA) in early 2015 and the Anti-Corruption Justice Centre (ACJC) in mid-2016, the National Unity Government (NUG) took a giant stride toward preventing leakages and curbing graft through strict law enforcement. Reform at the Attorney General Office (AGO), Independent Administrative Reform and Civil Services Commission (IARCS) and Supreme Court (SC) were set in motion in the middle of NUG's tenure.

Nonetheless, these initiatives resulted in the prosecution of a few dozen corruption cases and prevention of leakages in some contracts. All along the line, the government's political will to combat corruption has been weak. It has plainly refused to transfer the power to fight against corruption to independent and apolitical agencies. The political leadership not only failed to encourage NPA, ACJC, IARCS, AGO and SC to make independent decisions, it also persistently tried to influence their decisions.

In spite of promising to establish new independent counter-corruption agencies like an anti-graft commission, ombudsperson and strong regulatory and oversight bodies, the government has used all resources at its disposal to mislead the international community and buy time from civil society on the issue of setting up independent entities.

Consequences of such a flawed political approach to anti-corruption campaigns and the fragile political will have been devastating for the Afghan people and building of vital state institutions. Due to the non-existence of apolitical institutions, the NUG has been unable to prosecute a single case against current or former parliamentarian or ministers. Nor has it succeeded in recovering Kabul Bank's stolen assets.

Worse still, the NUG awarded two large mining contracts to its minister of urban development in 2018 in breach of the relevant law.¹² Subsequently, it was accused of paying back campaign-financing businesses like Alokozay¹³. In the most recent instance, a political team tampered with the text of the anti-corruption law that would have enabled the formation of an agency to oversee grand corruption cases.¹⁴

A lasting and result-oriented war on corruption in Afghanistan could be beefed up with the creation of new entities and support of existing independent, apolitical and strong regulatory and oversight agencies across the government. This includes the creation of commissions on battling corruption, police and judicial service reforms, ombudsperson, national mineral regulatory authority, civil services, human rights, supreme audit office and constitution oversight. The Attorney General Office, Supreme Court High Council and non-political entities like the electoral complaint and information commissions should be made autonomous and apolitical.

PARLIAMENTARY & PRESIDENTIAL POLLS

The Afghans have proved that they support and value democracy by actively participating in the October parliamentary election in spite of insecurity, lack of confidence in the poll panel and low governmental legitimacy. The courage and will of the people should be respected and valued by the government and the international community.

The Afghans should be lent technical and political support to exercise their rights and enhance their willingness to participate in the democratic process. We think Afghanistan does not have sufficient human, technical and infrastructure resources to hold an acceptable election. The October parliamentary polls showed the Afghan election commission is neither independent nor capable of conducting a fair and transparent election.

The lack of a responsive electoral system, non-availability of electronic identity cards and non-existence of a free poll panel created chances of fraud, manipulation and intervention in the election process. Although the last-minute introduction of the biometric voting system frustrated attempts by certain candidates and warlords to rig the election through paper ID cards, the decision on allowing and validating paper ballots flew in the face of the will and capacity of the commission and the government to hold or oversee fair elections.

We request the government to depoliticise the electronic ID cards and evolve national consensus on its content and distribute it before the next election. If the use of biometric devices becomes a precondition for voting, odds of a transparent election will increase. We request the Afghan government and the international community to support an election free of fraud and manipulation.

12 <https://iwaweb.org/csos-to-government-scrap-gold-and-copper-contracts/>

13 <https://www.pajhwok.com/en/2017/05/30/alokozay-group-sold-land-against-law-wolesi-jirga>

14 <https://iwaweb.org/civil-society-and-legal-organizations-anti-corruption-law-altered/>

ENABLING ENVIRONMENT

Afghan civil society has been working in an increasingly difficult situation. CSOs are delivering basic services such as education, health, environment and agriculture on behalf of the government in the remotest and most insecure areas. Women and human-rights organisations have arranged awareness and capacity-building programmes at national and local levels.

Watchdog organisations have conducted research on what people think of the government and if they have access to quality services. CSOs have advocated for curbing corruption, transparency in mining projects, security sector accountability and justice sector's integrity besides highlighting human and women's rights violations.

However, the support civil society receives from the government and the international community has not been enough. We would also like to raise the issue of hundreds of civil society organisations having halted their activities and many others threatened by declining support from the international community.

The Afghan government and the international community should put people at the centre of designing and implementing their emergency and development programmes by observing a humanitarian-development-peace nexus that involves the masses in such initiatives. We call on International Community to commit to support Afghans to implement SDGs until 2030 rather than short term two-year assistance packages.





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