



## Support to Afghan Civil Society in the Decade of Transformation

### Introduction

The Afghan people are living through a critical time in their country's history, with the first democratic leadership transition from Hamid Karzai—the first president post 2001—to a National Unity Government under the leadership of President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Dr. Abdullah Abdullah.

Though the formation of a National Unity Government is to be applauded for resolving an electoral stalemate and integrating a broad coalition consisting of all major political players, it leaves an important democratic void in the form of a non-violent opposition that can hold the government accountable and ensure that the voices and concerns of the Afghan citizens—especially those less represented in the Afghan government—are not forgotten and go unheard.

This democratic void presents an opportunity for Afghan civil society to step up to engage effectively with the new country leadership—which has expressed commitment to an ambitious reform agenda, advance national development and strengthen democracy—as an independent monitoring body of government performance, a platform for citizens' voice, development and presentation of policy alternatives, but also and most crucially as a partner in Afghanistan's peace and state-building project.

In order to fill this important space and accomplish the important role of a viable democratic opposition, Afghan civil society must rejuvenate itself, get organized, improve its coordination, professionalism and transparency, and most importantly show dedication and commitment to the task ahead.

There is, however, also the urgent need for the Afghan Unity Government and international actors to provide a better enabling and supportive environment for civil society action. The Afghan government must accept civil society as a serious partner in the country's development. The international community must re-examine its past support to civil society and make necessary changes to funding modalities that can facilitate the development of an effective, efficient and united democratic citizens' dialogue and action platform.

### **Achievements**

Challenges and corruption allegations aside, the 2014 presidential elections in Afghanistan were evidence that the Afghan nation voted for peace, overcame political obstacles and mastered a peaceful democratic transition. The participation of around 8 million voters, with an impressive 38% women's participation, was the result of over a decade of tireless efforts by civil society and media organizations promoting and educating about the importance of democracy. Afghan civil society and media organizations have been instrumental in consolidating democracy through concerted civic



## Support to Afghan Civil Society in the Decade of Transformation

education and information campaigns, awareness raising, targeted policy research and tirelessly promoting a political culture of participation, volunteerism, accountability and transparency.

In addition to monitoring government performance, influencing policy as well as ensuring government accountability to pass policies and decisions, civil society actors have mobilized Afghan citizens in rural and urban areas and educated them about their rights as well as responsibilities so that they too can confidently demand good governance and basic service delivery.

Above and beyond their jobs with non-governmental organizations and official duties, civil society activists have volunteered their time in national and international advocacy campaigns, traveled the country to reach out to the Afghan people, persistently engaged the Afghan government and international actors on key issues of concern to the Afghan people and raised independent funding for supporting people in need. The lobbying efforts around key international conference (e.g., Bonn, London, Tokyo, Chicago) and national meetings surrounding the Tokyo Mutual Accountability Framework are just some examples of civil society's voluntary efforts for influencing public policies, government decision-making and raising the voices of the Afghan people.

### Challenges

Civil society's journey of promoting democracy, good governance and accountability, as well as advocating for human rights, justice, ending a culture of impunity and media censorship, over the past thirteen years has not been an easy one. They were confronted with a state constantly undermining their role and challenging legitimacy of active and genuine civil society institutions and media.

There have been difference of opinion between different groups of civil society and from time to time this has jeopardized the unity of civil society. Major civil society actors, however, have understood the need for improved cooperation, joint-advocacies and better mass mobilization across the country and are well on the route to bring a diversity of civil society and media players together on major issues, while still respecting the necessary plurality among organizations.

The Tokyo Mutual Accountability Framework (TMAF)—a main tool for measuring the Afghan government's progress in achieving all identified benchmarks and for the international community to provide more on-budget support to the government—does not yet officially acknowledge the unofficial and important role played by civil society in monitoring progress on TMAF indicators and presenting reports to both the Afghan government and international community. This undermines local civil society ownership of being part of the process to develop Afghanistan and fails to acknowledge and respect their crucial role in holding the government accountable.

While the international community has been supportive of civil society, recognizing its efforts for promoting a culture of transparency and accountability, the funding modalities have not been as effective as they could have been for strengthening the position of Afghan civil society. Afghan civil



## Support to Afghan Civil Society in the Decade of Transformation

society has been at the forefront of advocating with the state for positive change, challenging unfair decisions, organizing demonstrations and public gatherings; yet it has not received the level of support it deserved. Of a majority of multi-year projects funded by donors with the aim of supporting civil society and managed by international contractors, Afghan organizations receive short-term support lasting on average 3–6-months and in rare occasions one-year funding. This undermines process orientation and sustainability of civil society projects. Furthermore, the lack of sufficient and long-term funding has increased civil society competition for scarce resources and undermined the coordination and unity necessary for civil society action.

Furthermore, there is a great power imbalance between the managing contractor and the Afghan civil society organizations, with the former micro-managing project implementation, at times even dictating project foci and advocacy priorities. This leads to civil society organizations spending valuable time and energies in the filling of forms and writing narrative reports rather than coordinating action, advocating for the rights of the people and holding government accountable. This over-proceduralization, however, confuses compliance with systems and transparency for achievement of results. The frequent (at times weekly and monthly) progress reports focus on whether boxes have been ticked rather than on whether the intended outcomes, results and most importantly impacts have been achieved. This does not only frustrate but seriously undermines the efficiency and effectiveness of civil society action.

The use of management contractors also leads to valuable project funding being directed to management overheads and expensive security and administrative costs of international staff. This wastes increasingly scarce resources for civil society development and diminishes value for money. Most importantly however, the role of management contractors undermines the very agency of civil society that donors aim to build by allowing them to set agendas and priorities as well as which capacities to build. This leads to meaningless workshops and further misdirects funds from more effective projects that could be devised when putting local civil society organizations in the driver seat. True civil society ownership and agency can only happen when Afghan organizations and communities are able to influence and control the design and priorities of programs meant to strengthen their capacity, outreach and action.

### **Recommendations**

The Transformation Decade provide a unique opportunity for the National Unity Government and Afghan Civil Society to come together and develop a more active, constructive, as well as mutual trusting and accountable relationship. This requires for the Afghan government to embrace civil society as a legitimate partner, Afghan civil society groups to consolidate their presence and capacity, and the international donor community to re-evaluate their engagement strategies, support and funding mechanisms.

## Support to Afghan Civil Society in the Decade of Transformation

In light of the above, we—a group of diverse Afghan civil society organizations with reach across the entire country—propose the following recommendations to both the Afghan government and international donor community:

### **1. *Clearly Define the Role of Civil Society in International [monitoring] Frameworks Such As TMAF:***

The Tokyo Mutual Accountability Framework (TMAF) is the main tool for measuring the Afghan government's progress in achieving all identified benchmarks, and for the international community to provide more on-budget support to the government. Though civil society has played a role of monitoring progress on TMAF indicators by presenting reports to both the Afghan government and international community, there is no official and explicit acknowledgement of such role in TMAF documents or by the Afghan government. This undermines the role of civil society as monitoring government performance and weakens accountability.

- **To the Afghan Government:** Recognize role of civil society as monitoring body of TMAF and similar frameworks and work on institutionalizing feed-back mechanisms.
- **To the International Community:** Ensure the role of civil society is explicitly and unambiguously spelled out in TMAF and similar agreements in order to make civil society cooperation a mandatory progress indicator.

### **2. *Improve the Enabling Environment for Civil Society to Function as Effective Democratic Opposition and Partner in Building Afghanistan's Future:***

- **To the Afghan Government:**
  - Safeguard freedom of speech, press freedom and open communication channels between civil society and Afghan government actors.
  - Improve dialogue with civil society through developing and institutionalizing a more formal role of civil society consultations on key government decisions and policies.
  - Hold frequent [e.g., quarterly, annual] public debates and consultations on government performance as well as key government programs and policies.
- **To the International Community:**
  - Improve dialogue with civil society organizations through developing a more systematic (and frequent) discussion forum on issues concerning civil society support.

## Support to Afghan Civil Society in the Decade of Transformation

- Develop feedback mechanisms on the effectiveness of civil society support mechanism. Ensure annual and transparent evaluations.
- Improve funding modalities to Afghan civil society actors [see further recommendations below].

### 3. To the International Community on Improving Its Engagement with and Funding to Afghan Civil Society

- Engage with Kabul-based Civil Society Organizations as Outreach Mechanism for Sub-national Civil Society Groups:** After years of support to urban-based civil society organizations, their potential to function as a bridge to sub-national civil society groups should be realized for the purpose of consultations, capacity building and mobilization.
- Embrace the Diversity of Civil Society and Reduce Funding-Competition:** There has been ongoing tension and unfortunate competition between more traditional structures (e.g., community ‘shuras’, elder groups, and religious leaders) and more modern and progressive groups (e.g., NGOs, CSOs) in terms of their visions for Afghanistan. This has been damaging for the unity and cohesion of civil society actors and we recommend encouraging and funding dialogue, exchange, linkage and cooperation over competitive and exclusive programming.
- Providing Funding for Organic Advocacy Networks, Coalitions and Consortiums:** Though many civil society organizations are involved in advocacy efforts, they can only influence public policies if they stand united as specific issues. It is therefore recommended that donors provide core-funding support to consortiums and/or coalitions of civil society organizations that share common goals and are already working together for their shared mission to influence public policy and advocacy on behalf of the rights of the Afghan people.
- Provide Long-term Direct Support to Afghan Civil Society:** Donors should explore options for multi-year funding to civil society that provides a mix of core-and process-oriented funding for Afghan civil society to enhance their political activism, monitor government performance, conduct informed and joint-advocacy campaigns, provide and seek out targeted capacity-building and improve civil society coordination. Long-term and direct support will facilitate civil society to work strategic, result-oriented, build strong coalitions and pursue long-term change agendas.
- Put Local Civil Society Organizations in the Driver Seat:** Though we understand the donor-need for management-contractors, their role should not function as gate-keeper or target-setter, nor siphon of much-needed funds, but rather function as a lean grant-giving organization and facilitation body with as little overhead and bureaucracy as necessary and



## Support to Afghan Civil Society in the Decade of Transformation

allow for the necessary space for civil society actors to set their own agendas and priorities. Civil society should furthermore be empowered to function as peer-review mechanisms for such agenda and priority setting, as well as impact evaluations.

- f. **Ensure Context-Specific Civil Society Support Around Local Priorities:** Though we understand and respect of donor accountability to their tax payers and overall strategic goals and objectives, there should be built-in flexibility for civil society initiatives to be developed context-specifics and around the needs and priorities of the Afghan people and civil society actors in line with overall donor strategies.
- g. **Streamline and Simplify Sub-granting Procedures of International Contractors:** If sub-contracting cannot be avoided, ensure monitoring and reporting procedures required by international contractors are simplified in order to not put proceduralism and bureaucratic red-tape before tangible outcomes and much-needed social change. Transparency is important but should not stand complicate and hinder civil society activism.



## Support to Afghan Civil Society in the Decade of Transformation

### Endorsed by:

1. Accountability Lab in Afghanistan
2. Afghanistan Civil Society Forum Organization (ACSFo)
3. Afghan Community Rehabilitation Unit (ACRU)
4. Afghan NGOs Coordination Bureau (ANCB)
5. Afghan Public Welfare Organization (APWO)
6. Afghanistan Reconstruction & Planning Department (ARPD)
7. Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU)
8. Afghan Women Resource Center (AWRC)
9. Afghan Women Education Center (AWEC)
10. Afghan Women Skills Development Center (AWSDC)
11. Asia Society 21-Afghanistan Young Leaders Initiative (AYLI)
12. Cooperation for Peace and Unity (CPAU)
13. Empowerment Center for Women (ECW)
14. EQUALITY for Peace and Democracy (EPD)
15. Human Rights and Eradication of Violence Organization (HREVO)
16. Free and Fair Election Foundation of Afghanistan (FEFA)
17. Organization of Afghan Alumni (OAA)
18. Peace Training and Research Organization
19. Research Institute for Women Peace and Security (RIWPS)
20. Sanayee Development Organization (SDO)
21. The Liaison Office (TLO)
22. Women for Afghan Women (WAW)