



POLICY BRIEF

CSOs' Image and Credibility in Public

Introduction

Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) have made significant contributions to the inclusive and equitable development of Afghanistan. CSOs are providing critical services and support to Afghans in hard-to-access parts of the country that the government and other actors cannot reach. CSOs also play a key role in advocating on behalf of the Afghan people to their government for promotion and protection of human rights, access to basic services, and good governance, among other issues. However, despite being bolstered by major progress in their activities, capacity, and reach, CSOs in Afghanistan continue to face risks in terms of security, political stability, and their own sustainability.¹

Positive image and credibility are critical for CSOs to fulfill their social responsibilities and enhance their own sustainability. Therefore, CSOs' missions and programming should reflect the needs and priorities of at least a segment of the public they are meant to serve. They must also strive to effectively manage their programs to have a real impact on the communities in which they work. In addition, for Afghan civil society to be sustainable, the government, private sector, and public should also have a positive image of CSOs, including a broad understanding and appreciation of the roles that CSOs play in society. Therefore, public awareness and credibility directly affect CSOs' ability to implement public projects, undertake advocacy initiatives, recruit members and volunteers, and encourage indigenous donors.² In addition, CSOs' public image is also affected by the extent of the media's coverage of CSOs activities, the awareness and willingness of government officials to engage CSOs, and the public's knowledge and perception of the sector as a whole. CSOs' public relations, as well as their self-regulation, transparency and accountability, are among other key factors relate to their image and credibility in public.³

This policy brief discusses CSOs' image and credibility⁴, including achievements, key challenges, and opportunities. It provides relevant recommendations to the CSOs, Afghan government, and donors. AICS, an Afghan CSO, focused on promoting a positive enabling environment for Afghan civil society, developed this brief based on qualitative field research conducted in Kabul and key provinces. They also provided a desk review, specifically the State of Enabling Environment for CSOs in Afghanistan (SEECA) report published by AICS in the last couple of years.

Context Analysis

The SEECA report published by AICS underscored that the Afghan public appears to be supportive of the work of CSOs, but not all CSOs have community support. In addition, CSOs involved in service delivery activities, providing tangible benefits to communities, get more support than CSOs involved in advocacy and rights-based campaigns or activities. The report also revealed that there is a misuse of civil society positions for personal or group interests and gains. This could be due to "government-owned" CSOs, donor-oriented objectives, dependency on external funding and the associated competition. These are several factors that affect their representation of communities and their public image and thus contribute to a lack of legitimacy⁵ of civil society organizations. In fact most rural residents often confuse the purpose of CSOs with government and private sector and some do not understand the concept of "non-governmental" or "nonprofit," which is an indication of insufficient awareness about CSOs.⁶

The Afghanistan Civil Society Assessment Report published by Counterpart International in 2014 highlights that reputation was one of the biggest challenges facing CSOs as well as international NGOs. Afghan CSOs themselves are not broadly seen as effective. This report states that earning people's trust is crucial to establishing CSOs credibility to act as a government watchdog. The 2017 The Asia Foundation (TAF) - Public Opinion Survey findings corresponded to the 2014 study. In 2017, public confidence in international and local NGOs alike (42 and 48 percent, respectively) had gradually dropped for both since 2014 (from 53 and 57 percent, respectively). This was the lowest level reported in the survey's nine-year history.

This policy brief lays out three major factors that influence CSOs' reputation with the public including CSOs' self-regulation and internal reforms, role of donor community and INGOs, and role of government and media.

CSOs' Self-Regulation and Internal Reforms towards Raising Credibility

One factor that affects the level of trust among CSOs and within the public is the perception that CSOs are corrupt. Some CSOs still need to improve their capacities and transparency in order to advance their public image. The SEECA 2017 report indicates that 50 percent of respondents stated that CSOs are corrupt. In addition, most of the public interviewees expressed less trust in CSOs and have unclear understanding about CSOs and their activities. The public perception of CSOs tends to be more negative in the western and eastern provinces, particularly in rural areas. This is due to the unease that CSOs' work clashes with traditional Afghan culture, fear that NGOs are foreign agents imposing Western values, and concern over a lack of CSO transparency.⁷ Government representatives recognized CSOs' important role in democratic societies but expressed that CSOs should crackdown on corruption inside their organizations and ensure transparency in the implementation of projects and reporting back to the public. The feeling was that this would draw public attention and trust.

Another potential approach is the certification offered by AICS. AICS is uniquely mandated to support the credible and competent civil society sector in Afghanistan through its model of CSOs certification based on national and international quality standards in key management functions. However, certification is a new concept in Afghanistan and buy-in from the sector is still nascent.

Donor Community and INGOs' relation to CSOs' Credibility

Afghan CSOs are primarily dependent on funding from international donors. This has two major implications. First, donor funding for CSOs in Afghanistan is shrinking⁸. According to the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), US funding to support democracy, governance and civil society dropped by more than 50%, from USD 231 million to USD 93 million between 2010 and 2011 in Afghanistan. This has already affected CSOs' interaction and credibility with their constituencies as the decline in funds has led to a decline in the services they can offer. Moreover, donors often do not set their funding priorities in consultation with CSOs. As a result, there are discrepancies between the real needs of the communities and funding priorities set by donor organizations which weakens the credibility of CSOs in the target constituencies.⁹

Another implication is the close ties of project-funded Afghan CSOs with international NGOs. INGOs are focus of international donor funds that have dominated the landscape of Afghan civil society.¹⁰ According to the Ministry of Economy's (MoEc) 2015 Annual Activities Report of NGOs, 71% of total NGO expenditures within Afghanistan was spent by International NGOs while 29% of this expenditure was made by National NGOs. People still trust traditional community institutions such as *shuras* and *jirgas*¹¹ more than project-oriented CSOs, as demonstrated by the fact that *shuras/jirgas* got 67.9% confidence of the people in 2017 compared to 42% local NGOs¹². INGOs also had low confidence and are perceived to be responsible for creating the high-cost image of the sector, which undermines the credibility of the local CSOs as well.

Role of the Government and Media in Promoting CSOs' Image

In discussing whether government facilitates the development of the civil society sector and its participation in policy making, 51% of SEECA survey respondents responded negatively.¹³ On the other hand, the government has lobbied successfully to have more donor funds channeled through the government as "on budget" donations.¹⁴ CSOs claim that they are not actually involved in the provincial budgeting processes.¹⁵ On the other hand, only two in ten CSOs, surveyed by Counterpart International in 2012 reported a great deal of local government involvement with their work.¹⁶ Therefore, decline in CSOs' involvement in provincial budgeting process and shift of donor fund to government also have affected CSOs reputation in the public.¹⁷

Media can play positive role in strengthening CSOs' reputation and credibility in public by covering their activities and achievements. Rarely, some large CSOs enjoy some media coverage of their activities in the field of good governance, transparency, women's rights and elections. Some CSOs note that media entities show little interest in publicizing their concrete accomplishments, such as renovating schools or providing healthcare, instead of demonstrating more interest in CSOs' large-scale advocacy efforts.¹⁸

With that said, the use of social media platforms to mobilize constituencies and communicate with stakeholders has extensively been used by CSOs. A large number of urban-based CSOs use social media for outreach, advocacy, and information sharing. Some CSOs also use guest appearances on TV and radio broadcasts to promote their own image. Many CSOs make excessive payment to air their Public Service Announcements (PSAs) through these media outlets.¹⁹ However, CSOs in rural and other areas without access to electricity or the Internet are unable to use social media.²⁰

Conclusion

Credible civil society is fundamental to the effective and transparent design of public policies, programs, and services. CSOs' credibility and positive image contribute to more public support as well as to CSOs' sustainability. In addition, people's positive perception of CSOs can lead to public funding which is highly demanded due to scaling down of donors' financial support. In Afghanistan, while the public generally supports CSOs services, all CSOs do not have a positive image in the public and they face various barriers to improve their public image. Constituencies of these CSOs still have limited understanding about them and their work. Many CSOs simply have limited capacity to mainstream media on their work as a result of media's lack of interest in CSOs and weak public relations skills of CSOs and their decreasing financial capacities. In some provinces, accusations of CSOs being foreign agents working for western values is another concern. Besides, lack of self-regulation, poor internal control mechanisms, and no public reporting have also affected CSOs image in public, government and in the private sector. On the other hand, some CSOs even have become increasingly reluctant in promoting their visibility and utilizing media for public outreach due to security threats in some provinces.

In sum, to strengthen CSOs image in the public eye, CSOs should act more transparently and bridge the gap of information through public reporting and prioritizing people's

real needs. The government, private sector, media and donor support is also vital in promoting CSOs credibility and image.

Recommendations*

CSOs should strive to strengthen trust among themselves and with their target constituencies which will allow public to better support CSOs. Ways to do this include strengthening community-based planning mechanisms and institutionalizing public reporting.

Fighting against corruption needs to remain a top priority for CSOs. Corruption is tainting the perception of CSOs from the side of government and the public. CSOs should enhance transparency and accountability in their services by developing and applying self-regulating mechanisms (i.e. adopting AICS certification model, developing an organizational code of conduct and standardizing internal control mechanisms).

CSOs should create and regularly update their websites and social media pages as well as publicize their annual reports and financial information on their websites and through local media. Leading CSOs' and coordination bodies should jointly support establishing a comprehensive national database of CSOs and their projects. This database can boost public access to information about CSOs, CSOs' projects and budgets which will ultimately lead to the better image of CSOs in the public.

There is no generally accepted understanding of the term civil society in Afghanistan, particularly in rural and semi-rural areas of the country. A definition of CSO, or at least criteria for CSO, should be determined, shared and agreed among CS actors which can contribute to increased understanding among the public about the sector and CSOs work and will ultimately remove negative perception in public about the CSOs.

CSO should strengthen their relations with media entities and develop consolidated public awareness campaigns through both national and local media entities. This will improve public image about CSOs and their activities as well as attract community contributions for CSOs sustainability.

The donors including UN agencies also need to work towards building the technical capacities of CSOs to conduct regular assessments form their community needs, implement quality need-based projects and strengthen their public reporting capacities.

Donors, UN agencies, and the government should validate AICS certification model and consider CSOs' certification as significant support for CSOs' credibility specifically for those who partner them for public projects. CSOs should pursue certification as it will ultimately contribute to their transparency, improved performance, and public trust.

Donors, UN agencies, and government funding modalities should give more space to CSOs and they should also set their funding priorities in consultation with CSOs that closely work with local communities. This can contribute to the financial sustainability of CSOs and strengthen their ties with their constituencies.

Media support organizations such as Nai, Mediothec, and Internews and other networks of media organizations should continue building CSOs' capacities to more effectively use media for advancing their public image.

Afghanistan has 31% unemployed²¹ youth including young, energetic and educated graduates. Many of them are searching for opportunities to serve their communities and obtain work experience. Using this opportunity, CSOs should recruit volunteers, internees and low paid community workers from their target communities who can not only ease implementation of their project but also enhance their public image as well as help CSOs to raise fund from local businesses, individual and local government.

CSOs have to make an intensive effort to use the media for the purposes of promoting the role of CSOs and educating and mobilizing the public. CSOs should initiate planned systematic efforts to publicize their community development activities in the media and/or initiate joint projects with media entities aimed at enhancing public knowledge about the role of the civil society as a whole.

CSOs should regularly organize provincial, regional and national forums bringing together CSOs, government, media, and private sector along with local community representatives to increase mutual understanding, coordination and collaboration as well as improve CSOs image among public and other sectors of the society. National Civil Society Week²², Partnering for Public Good²³, Framework for Cooperation (FFC)²⁴ are examples of similar national events.

CSOs have to build their capacities in public relations and marketing. Donors should fund and support CSOs' systematic, tailor-made and result-oriented capacity building activities specifically focusing on marketing, public relations, public reporting and producing PSAs.

CSOs should demonstrate they are trusted partners for the private sector and are a credible voice for the public. Therefore, CSOs should prove accountability not only to donors and government but to the public and private sector as well. CSOs reputation and image among the private sector is dependent on their technical expertise and specialization, efficiency and cost-effectiveness.

About Afghanistan Institute for Civil Society

To Support a credible and competent civil society sector in Afghanistan by linking CSOs, donors, government and capacity building services through culturally appropriate certification schemes. The institute will encourage the growth of a vibrant civil society, promoting pluralism and participatory, non-discriminatory development in Afghanistan.

AICS's Objective

1. Raise credibility of the civil society sector by certifying local organizations against locally defined and internationally recognized standards;
2. Systematize capacity building efforts of local organizations by coordinating initiatives against measurable performance indicators;
3. Strengthen the role of civil society in Afghanistan's development through collective efforts of policy dialogue and active engagement with government, donors, the private sector and the broader civil society sector;
4. Provide a channel for resources for civil society by strengthening philanthropic and corporate social responsibility efforts.

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http://www.langerresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/l-PACS_II_Report_Web_Final.pdf
 - 2 The 2015 CSOs Sustainability Index for Afghanistan:
<https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1866/2015-CSOSI-report-Afghanistan%2009-16-2016--DEC.pdf>
 - 3 The 2015 CSOs Sustainability Index for Afghanistan:
<https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1866/2015-CSOSI-report-Afghanistan%2009-16-2016--DEC.pdf>
 - 4 Definition of CSO Credibility: in "Credibility of Civil Society Organizations in CSO-Business Partnerships" published in 2011: Credibility is related to a number of other concepts such as legitimacy (Scott 1995; Suchman 1995; Lister 2003), accountability (Kumar 1996; Najam 1996a; Edwards & Hulme 1998a), transparency (Vernis & ET AL 2006; CIVICUS 2010) and status and reputation (Deepphouse & Suchman 2008). In this way, credibility can be explained through the use of these other concepts.
http://studenttheses.cbs.dk/bitstream/handle/10417/2046/marianne_due_og_mett_e_pfeiffer_joergensen.pdf?sequence=1
 - 5 Civil Society Legitimacy and Accountability: Issues and Challenges-2007:
https://cpl.hks.harvard.edu/files/cpl/files/workingpaper_32.pdf: The concept of legitimacy refers to perceptions by key stakeholders that the existence, activities and impacts of CSOs are justifiable and appropriate in terms of central social values and institutions. For example, Edwards has defined legitimacy as "the right to be and do something in society—a sense that an organization is lawful, admissible, and justified in its chosen course of action."
 - 6 FGD 2017
 - 7 The 2015 CSOs Sustainability Index for Afghanistan:
<https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1866/2015-CSOSI-report-Afghanistan%2009-16-2016--DEC.pdf>
 - 8 AICS Policy Brief of CSOs' Financial Sustainability in Afghanistan:
http://aicsafg.org/index.php/Main/newsletter/Policy_Brief
 - 9 FGD 2017
 - 10 International Affairs Review Volume XX, Number 2, fall 2011, building afghan civil society from the outside; the Role of Global Civil Society Actors and the Impacts on Perceived Local Legitimacy:
<http://iar-gwu.org/sites/default/files/articlepdfs/Building%20Afghan%20Civil%20Society%20-%20van%20den%20Boogaard.pdf>
 - 11 The Role of Civil Society in Promoting Good Governance in Afghanistan-2016-<http://www.germancooperation-afghanistan.de/sites/default/files/The-Role-of-Civil-Society-in-Promoting-Good-Governance.pdf>: Council or shuras (in Arabic and Dari) or Jirga (in Pashto) refers to a collective group with a hierarchical leadership. There are various forms of traditional and modern councils in Afghanistan such as the National Council (or Parliament), elders' council, religious council, development council, education council, etc. The focus of Shura is on immediate problem solving, including the resolution of local conflicts.
 - 12 Survey of the Afghan People by The Asia Foundation 2017:
https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/2017_AfghanSurvey_report.pdf
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<http://www.acbar.org/upload/1509511098944.pdf>
 - 14 ACBAR Workshop for Donors, NGO Coordinating Bodies and Civil Society, 2015:
<http://www.acbar.org/upload/1477374538411.pdf>
 - 15 The role of Civil Society in Provincial Budgeting in Afghanistan-2015:
<http://www.acbar.org/upload/1485673266314.pdf>
 - 16 Civil Society in Transitional Context, published by Civil-Military Fusion Center, 2012:
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 - 17 Key Informant Interview 2018
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 - 19 Key informant interview 2018
 - 20 The 2015 CSOs Sustainability Index for Afghanistan:
<https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1866/2015-CSOSI-report-Afghanistan%2009-16-2016--DEC.pdf>
 - 21 Afghanistan Living Conditions 2016-2017:
[http://cso.gov.af/Content/files/Surveys/ALCS/Final%20English%20ALCS%20Highlight\(1\).pdf](http://cso.gov.af/Content/files/Surveys/ALCS/Final%20English%20ALCS%20Highlight(1).pdf)
 - 22 It is an initiative by AICS aimed to bring together different civil society organizations, from different regions and backgrounds in Afghanistan, and provide them with an open space for reflection, learning and networking on issues related to the enabling environment for CSOs and CSO development.
 - 23 It is an initiative by AICS aimed to bring together CSOs, government, private sector and media entities to agree on shared national priorities and initiate joint actions to address shared challenges.
 - 24 It is framework established by CPI to strengthen cooperation between civil society, government and media in Afghanistan.
- * Supported by reference documents of this policy brief.

Disclaimer

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