

## CSO's Advocacy and Participation in Public Policy Reforms in Afghanistan

### 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 a large number of actors, CSOs capacity for human rights advocacy is still limited. CSOs have developed skills in raising human rights issues and drawing attention to them, however, a clear understanding of the advocacy cycle, and appropriate ways to position an advocacy<sup>1</sup> campaign<sup>2</sup>, are still skills in development.<sup>3</sup>

In the last 15 years, Afghan civil society has developed some capacity in advocacy, with notable achievements in advancing legal frameworks and policy agendas as well as in consultative processes.<sup>4</sup> CSOs advocated for and in many cases succeeded in bringing about new policy and legal reforms, such as changes to the national family law, amendment of the NGO law, participation in the national budgeting process, contributions to the development of the national youth policy, the Access to Information Law, and the Law of Rights and Privileges of Persons with Disabilities. Government failures to implement legislation, however, have made many<sup>5</sup> of those advocacy successes of little or no consequence.<sup>6</sup>

CSOs still rely on international partners to engage in successful advocacy processes. Much of the assistance is either through specific donor-funded programs or as part of partnerships with international NGOs operating in Afghanistan and engaging local partners through aid coordination platforms such as ACBAR<sup>7</sup>.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, some CSOs are lacking the capacity to understand a policy context, access or generate rigorous evidence, package it for different audiences, engage with policy processes, and network and communicate with a range of partners. This requires financial investments and a wide range of technical capacities.<sup>9</sup>

Besides, monopolization of civil society voices by particular individuals or organizations that control the messages going out to the government and public on behalf of civil society, the dominance of patronage politics<sup>10</sup>, weak vertical relations between CSOs and the people, weak advocacy capacities especially at the subnational level; media censorship; negative impressions and misperceptions about the civil society are among the other challenges weaken CSOs advocacy efforts.<sup>11</sup>

This policy brief discusses CSOs Advocacy and Participation in Public Policy Reforms in Afghanistan, including achievements, key challenges, and opportunities. It provides relevant recommendations to the CSOs, the 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 three years.

### Context Analysis

Though the basic role of civil society is advocating for public needs and acting as an intermediary between the public and government, just 11 percent of Afghan CSOs cite advocacy as the chief focus of their activities indicates room for greater training in the important role of advocacy in civil society.<sup>12</sup> These CSOs cover a wide spectrum<sup>13</sup> of advocacy issues and the overall score for the dissemination of their advocacy results is 57 percent. 76 percent of CSOs play an active role in setting the agenda to deal with significant advocacy issues and 77 percent of CSOs dedicate sufficient time for advocacy activities. However, reactive advocacy rather than proactive advocacy, lack of support from the government, and the lack of adequate advocacy budgets are among the challenges CSOs face when involved in advocacy activities.<sup>14</sup>

Advocacy efforts in Kabul are appraised much more positively and the common sentiment was that some of the Kabul based large CSOs were good at gaining access to the government for advocacy efforts. However, problems were still noted and division within the advocacy efforts were apparent. In some provinces, it appeared that various personalities, both inside and outside the government, and warlords had monopolized the flow of information to CSOs and their understanding of the government policy.<sup>15</sup> In general, 75% of the CSO members find it difficult to receive needed information from the government<sup>16</sup> which directly impact CSOs participation in policy reform processes.

This brief lays out three major areas that describe CSOs advocacy and their participation in public policy reform processes.

## CSOs Advocacy Capacity

Low capacity for advocacy works was identified as a major issue limiting the scope for initiation effective advocacy processes by CSOs in Afghanistan.<sup>17</sup> There is a lack of practical knowledge among CSOs on how to conduct advocacy and there is a need for capacity in a number of issues such as stakeholder analysis, identification of groups of interest, understanding of points of entry for advocacy, and development of advocacy strategies. Just 19% of CSOs reporting that they had a developed plan for their advocacy programs.<sup>18</sup>

Advocacy needs to be based on evidence, structured through greater collaboration between civil society actors, and complemented by clear recommendations.<sup>19</sup> Using research<sup>20</sup> based evidence in advocacy can increase the legitimacy and effectiveness of CSOs' advocacy efforts.<sup>21</sup> Afghan CSOs have a limited capacity to use evidence in policy processes.<sup>22</sup>

In most cases, CSOs are only engaged in the government policy formulation process, either after the policy is finalized and approved, or not at all. They need to be understood as a constructive dialogue process based on clear and well-founded proposals.<sup>23</sup>

## Networking and Partnership for Advocacy

Networking and Strategic Partnership is a driver for success in advocacy.<sup>24</sup> Acting alone advocacy will have limited impact, scope, scale and sustainability.<sup>25</sup> Increasing coordination will most directly improve advocacy efforts, resource sharing and the ability to learn from each other's strengths and specializations.<sup>26</sup> In Afghanistan, The emergence of sectoral networks and thematic groups, pooling together expertise has improved the ability of CSOs to structure their advocacy efforts. Benefitting from increased collaboration, coordination has also been improving, though at a much slower rate and with mechanisms rather ad hoc than systematic.<sup>27</sup>

Some CSOs also shared the concern about possible efforts by the government to somehow control civil society voices. For instance, some CSOs express their concerns that whether this move of signing a MoU with the government will affect their impartiality and independence or whether their advocacy is under the direct influence of the government or controlled by state institutions in general.<sup>28</sup>

## CSOs Participation in Consultation and Policy Reform Processes

In recent years, CSOs have become increasingly active in legislative and policy processes, advocating for their expertise to be taken into account, making recommendations for policy reform, participating in consultations on policy reform, and technical and advisory boards for policy implementation. Some international donors have been pressing the government for more inclusion and better recognition of civil society's role. The government also demonstrates a willingness to

include civil society representatives in reform processes and to consult with them on a more regular basis. To date, however, Afghan civil society's involvement remains sporadic. There is a lack of systemic interactions between civil society and the government on policy development. This is attributed both to vagueness in the legal framework surrounding the definition of civil society and its legitimacy in effectively participating in policy formulation, and the mistrust between civil society and the government. There are notable concerns that consultations of CSO representatives on policies and legal reform are largely cosmetic, with recommendations rarely taken into account in the final product. Initiatives by civil society itself to engage in policy processes remain mostly inconsistent, ad hoc and lack coordination.<sup>29</sup>

In discussing whether the government facilitates the development of the civil society sector and its participation in policymaking, 51% of SEECA survey respondents responded negatively.<sup>30</sup> Also, there is a believe that CSOs partnership with the government for service delivery often undermines CSOs capacity to take part in vitally important activities such as advocacy work.<sup>31</sup>

UNAMA's civil society mapping revealed that civil society engagement in policy dialogue is growing only at the national level.<sup>32</sup> Local governments often show reluctance to actively engage CSOs in policy making processes.<sup>33</sup> At the provinces, there seems to be a certain level of resistance among some government officials at all levels regarding the consultation and participation of CSOs in the provincial development process. This challenge could be the result of an unclear framework regarding the participation of civil society.<sup>34</sup>

## Conclusion

In general, CSOs are having a limited impact on public policies due to their low advocacy capacity and reactive advocacy efforts. CSOs should build their capacities, improve their public image, strengthen their relations with the government and improve their networking both at the capital and subnational level. The government, the private sector, media, and donor support is also vital in promoting CSOs advocacy efforts. Furthermore, CSOs' financial dependency and their lack of the capacity to become sustainable have also impacted their efforts for well-structured advocacy interventions.

Besides, there is a strong need for government to recognize that a vibrant, independent and sustainable civil society contributes and complements the government in addressing various needs. Government needs to establish trustable relations with civil society and give them a meaningful role in the formulation of public policies. The Civil Society Joint Working Group (CSJWG) and key networks should lead to establishing trustworthy relations with the government for more proactive civil society advocacy and effective participation of CSOs in the policy formation process.

## Recommendations\*

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 which ultimately reduce CSOs advocacy results. CSOs should enhance transparency and accountability in their services by developing and applying self-regulating mechanisms.

CSOs should strengthen their relations with media. CSOs should encourage media to provide more coverage on the laws and policies as well as relevant advocacy initiatives.

CSOs have to build their advocacy capacities. Donors should fund and support CSOs' systematic, tailor-made and result-oriented capacity building activities specifically focusing on research, advocacy, negotiation skills, policy formulation, and stakeholder analysis.

CSO advocacy needs to move beyond the reactive mode with its condemnation or protest of any event or case. The strategy of civil society advocacy should be updated by CSOs, while strong emphasis must be added to the follow-up part of what is decided in a meeting, national documents, public gathering, or speech by a senior government official.

Advocacy networking between CSOs should be supported. Provincial CSOs should be connected with Kabul based CSOs to undertake effective advocacy campaigns. CSOs should move away from a culture of competition and encourage knowledge exchange for better advocacy.

The signed Access to Information Law needs to be operationalized through government initiatives, which will allow civil society to access relevant information for their advocacy and policy consultation efforts.

For an effective and successful policy engagement, CSOs need to keep themselves updated about national policy priorities, policy processes, and key stakeholders and accordingly design their advocacy strategies.

The Civil Society Joint Working Group (CSJWG) should prioritize action-oriented mechanisms for inclusive civil society consultations in the formulation, design, and implementation of the government policies and programs and set measure indicators of assessing the results of their advocacy efforts.

CSOs should listen to the concerns of the community on local issues before designing and implementing advocacy strategy and messages

The government needs to establish a relationship of trust with CSOs. Enabling a meaningful engagement of CSOs in public policy formulation, sustained CSO-government dialogue, and increased information sharing as well as recognizing each other's roles can help to build trust between CSOs and government.

## 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.

## References

- 1 Advocacy simply means actively supporting a cause, and trying to get others to support it as well. Advocacy is speaking up, drawing attention to an important public issue and directing decision makers toward a constructive solution. Civil society must be careful to actively pursue a cause and collect support from other organizations and individuals. The purpose of advocacy, defined by UNFPA, is to promote or reinforce a change in policies, program or legislation, not only to flag with or bring changes at community level but also for influence on policy level and to bring changes in legislation. Rather than providing support directly to clients or users of services, advocacy aims at winning support from others for instance creating a supportive environment. [https://www.academia.edu/13254199/Panorama\\_of\\_Civil\\_Society\\_Organization\\_in\\_Afghanistan](https://www.academia.edu/13254199/Panorama_of_Civil_Society_Organization_in_Afghanistan)
- 2 Campaign is as a series of actions aiming to bring about a (policy) change. Campaigns are seen as valuable instruments for CSOs to mobilize the political will necessary to improve development policy and practice. Campaigns can help by increasing awareness and support, bypassing traditional channels and pooling resources. As a result, many NGOs and CSOs in international development employ campaign strategies. Perhaps one of the most effective campaigns at the global level was the international campaign to ban land mines. Policy Engagement-How Civil Society Can be More Effective by Overseas Development Institute: <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/200.pdf>
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\* Supported by referenc documents of this policy brief.

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