

CSOs' Volunteerism and unregistered CSOs 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 being strengthened by major progress in their activities, capacity, and reach, there are a lot of CSOs mostly performing great volunteer work at the grassroots level which are not registered with the Afghanistan government.

CSOs believe that without an environment conducive to sustain CSOs' operations, their efforts and impact will remain less effective and their very survival will be challenged. Although CSOs have already recognized volunteerism, as reiterated in National Civil Society Week 2019, institutionalizing volunteerism in CSOs' work is weak.¹

The State of the Enabling Environment for CSOs in Afghanistan report published by AICS underscores that CSOs' financial sustainability is the highest concerns. Therefore, the increasingly donor-dependent attitude of CSOs warrants a fresh look at civil society development and their volunteer work. Failure to strengthen CSO volunteerism could have a severe impact on CSOs' sustainability.²

This policy brief discusses CSOs' volunteerism and unregistered CSOs in Afghanistan, 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 data collected in Kabul and key provinces as well as during National Civil Society Week 2019. They also provided a desk review, specifically the CSOs Sustainability Index and the State of Enabling Environment for CSOs in Afghanistan (SEECA) report published by AICS in the last three years.

Context Analysis

Annually, volunteers contribute to the global economy enormously. According to research by Johns Hopkins Center for Civil Society Studies in 2011, "approximately 140 million people in the 37 countries engage in volunteer work in a typical year. Based on this research, it is estimated that these volunteers globally contribute around \$400 billion to the global economy.

Afghanistan has experience with informal volunteerism but formal volunteerism in CSOs is a new phenomenon. Most CSOs have little knowledge or experience in creating management systems for managing formalized volunteer programs. However, the rural areas of Afghanistan have a tradition of Hashar (a type of volunteerism), in which villagers provide voluntary services to improve the community, especially the village infrastructure, including bridges, schools, and mosques. Thus, volunteerism through CSOs is uncommon, particularly for NGOs, which are generally donor-driven and therefore do not seek alternative resources.³ Though less number of CSOs have volunteers and prepared their internal guidelines for this, in some cases this engagement is either ad hoc or symbolic.

Traditional CSOs, who are often unregistered, constitute an integral part of Afghan civil society that deliver great deal of volunteer services to their communities. According to the 2007 Enabling Environment Conference of Afghanistan, civil society is "committed to the public good and powered by private voluntary energies. It includes institutions of education, health, science, and research which conduct activities and/or provide services on a charitable or non-commercial basis. It embraces professional, commercial, labor, ethnic, and arts organizations⁴ and other devoted to religion, communication, environment and the community (e.g. village organizations)." A variety of organizations and structures that fall within the scope of this definition can be delineated into; 1) formally registered NGOs⁵, 2) formally registered associations⁶, and 3) traditional CSOs that are often unregistered.⁷

The brief lays out two major elements including unregistered CSOs in Afghanistan and CSOs' volunteerism.

CSOs' Volunteerism

Though one billion volunteers⁸ contribute to their communities globally, volunteering remains a largely untapped resource with a huge potential to achieve a people-centric and socially inclusive sustainable development. Every year, the world celebrates International Volunteer⁹ Day to recognize the importance of efforts made by volunteers throughout the world. Analysis by the UN Volunteers Program (UNV) shows that worldwide, direct volunteers perform about 70% of volunteer work. Still, in many countries, including Afghanistan, their work is not much seen as contributing to society.¹⁰

In Afghanistan, there is a lack of a volunteering mentality in CSOs, and fewer efforts have been made to improve volunteerism. Besides, there is a lack of an organized online tool and the lack of a concrete and continuous educational process for volunteers by CSOs and government. Most CSOs also lack concrete structures and processes related to volunteering through the provision of a structured online platform, an organized website with ads from CSOs and search for voluntary actions. Furthermore, creating networks of volunteers and providing an exchange of expertise and experience among them is another shortage in CSOs' volunteer work. There is a need to increase public trust in CSOs' volunteer work to enhance volunteerism in Afghanistan.¹¹

The ability of CSOs to work with local volunteers not only brings legitimacy and local knowledge, but it also lends itself to the sustainability of their initiatives. When community members are encouraged to play a role in initiatives, they start to take ownership of their development and see the process as one that they are involved in, as opposed to something that is done for them.¹²

In recent years, afghan CSOs' dependence on the massive flow of foreign funding has severely diminished the culture of volunteerism and local donations, especially in urban areas. In general, CSOs do not proactively cultivate volunteerism and philanthropy, instead of seeking monetary and in-kind donations only during certain campaigns. Due to negative perceptions of NGOs as donor-driven, associations and traditional CSOs tend to enjoy more local community support than NGOs.¹³ Besides, a large number of NGOs have implemented many projects with funding from international donors during recent years. People think that NGOs are rich and that they should pay money to people for everything, including participating in surveys and workshops. One of the undesirable impacts of this issue has been that it has reduced the level of volunteerism.¹⁴

Besides, public awareness and credibility directly affect CSOs' ability to recruit members and volunteers and encourage indigenous donors.¹⁵ Some CSOs do not understand the added value of volunteerism, thus volunteerism remains an untapped resource for most CSOs in Afghanistan.¹⁶

Though youth volunteer initiatives are increasing in urban centers and some rural communities have their mechanisms of volunteer community contribution, the culture of volunteerism, in general, is reported as weak. Concerns about security and high levels of unemployment require households to spend much of their time looking for sources of income, leaving little space for activities largely considered unnecessary if they do not directly benefit the community or family.¹⁷ In CSOs, the common trend for smaller successful NGOs is to pay staff salaries when they had donor-funded projects and then to rely on their volunteerism in between projects with the promise of a paid job once donor funding came through. The ability of bigger NGOs to retain staff and work on their capacity over time allowed them to address the problem of poor technical skills in their human resources, which led to long-term success for these organizations.

To establish a legal framework for volunteerism, a task force consisting of both civil society and government representatives prepared a draft regulation on volunteerism, which identifies and guarantees the rights and obligations of both the organizers of voluntary activities and the volunteers. The Ministry of Labor was expected to move this initiative forward through Ministry of Justice, but this regulation hasn't

been enacted yet.¹⁸

Unregistered CSOs in Afghanistan

CSOs are defined "broadly as any organizations, whether formal or informal, that are not part of the apparatus of government, that do not distribute profits to their directors or operators, that are self-governing, and in which participation is a matter of free choice. Therefore, not-for-profit health providers, advocacy groups, social service agencies, anti-poverty groups, development agencies, professional associations, community-based organizations, unions, religious bodies, recreation organizations, cultural institutions, and many more are embedded in this definition".¹⁹

As far as CSOs' registration is concerned, associations (including social organizations, foundations, and unions) registered with the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) and NGOs registered with the Ministry of Economy (MOE), there are also numerous informal and unregistered CSOs, including village-based Shuras (community-based councils), Jirgas (tribal assemblies of elders), and youth movements advocating for change in their communities.²⁰

Traditional civil society ranges from small informal units to highly structured organizations. Compared to modern civil society organizations, traditional civil society organizations are less specialized and less formal. In Afghanistan, traditional civil society includes, but is not limited to, religious groups and institutions that gather at purpose-built khanqahs, mosques, madrassas, and takiakhanas (places of Shi'ite worship), as well as water management committees, local community councils of elders called shuras and jirgas, tribes (qawm), and cultural and literature organizations such as reading groups. Cultural and artistic organizations such as music groups, reading groups, artistic consortiums, traditional craft associations, local museums, and heritage foundations are also among them.²¹ These organizations are often informal and are not registered.²² These types of structures have historically constituted the building blocks of afghan society and are essential to the afghan social fabric. They enjoy the legitimacy acting as bridges between communities and authorities, building consensus on collective issues and resolving disputes at the community level.²³

As traditional civil society often engages in irregular and informal activities, international donors have often failed to meaningfully engage with them as they need to take better account of how traditional CSOs can be involved in the country's development.²⁴

Unregistered CSOs in some cases have been carrying out their activities for an extended period before 2011. The incentive to these groups to register with the government is weak and many prefer to work independently and not report to the government. Though registration provided CSOs with greater legitimacy and subject them to a level of transparency and accountability, these groups have seen registration as exacerbating dependence on the government and they revealed that they have limited capacity regarding report writing to the government every six months.²⁵ Some government institutions' staff believe that unregistered CSOs are not obeying the law and sometimes they are engaged in political or unallowable activities. On the other hand, CSOs believe that interference by and corruption in government caused them to prefer their unregistered status.²⁶

Conclusion

Volunteerism is key to CSOs' sustainability. It strengthens communities' engagement, inclusion, ownership, and solidarity in CSOs' work. Volunteerism can also increase the scale and inclusiveness of the CSOs projects both at the local and national level. on a larger scale, it is key for CSOs' meaningful participation in the implementation of sustainable development goals (SDGs) in Afghanistan. Unfortunately, there is a weak concept of volunteerism in CSOs; therefore, building public awareness, creating legal formwork for volunteerism as well as establishing systems for managing CSOs' volunteer projects will help to institutionalize volunteerism in CSOs' work in Afghanistan.

The use of volunteers is mostly part of CSOs' (mostly unregistered, traditional and informal CSOs in rural Afghanistan) approach when they work with communities. This approach has been considered essential by them to

sustain their services and ensure long-term development. There is a need to sustain CSOs' engagement by creating an enabling environment and legal framework for CSOs' volunteerism.

Recommendations*

The Afghan government and leading CSOs should jointly develop a supportive mechanism to encourage unregistered CSOs, who are already doing great work for their communities, to get registered.

The Afghan government in collaboration with CSOs should address the legal constraints impeding the finalization of drafted regulation on volunteerism.

To sustain and gain more credibility, CSOs should demonstrate that they are trusted volunteering partners for their communities. In doing so, CSO should demonstrate accountability not only to donors and government but to the public and their volunteers.

CSOs should take measures to institutionalize knowledge exchange between them and traditional and grassroots CSOs to increase and retain knowledge and build expertise.

Volunteerism development begins with the organization's structure. CSOs should pay a lot of attention to volunteerism development. In another world, most organizations must start to assign a person who is responsible for volunteer programs, and include the development of volunteer programs in their strategic plan.

The government and CSOs through initiating education programs, establishing award prize, and giving recognition to volunteers should encourage volunteerism in public, private and nonprofit sectors.

CSOs should encourage corporate volunteer programs through regular contact with companies to encourage their employees to donate time or to be members of the CSOs' volunteer programs.

CSOs can work with youths (in communities, schools, and universities) to promote youth volunteerism through education and serve programs that combine learning with community volunteering service activities.

Volunteers' management is key for CSOs' volunteering. They need to consider volunteer program planning, needs assessments, recruitment, matching, interviewing, orientation and training, supervision and motivation, recognition, evaluation, and retention when they recruit and engage volunteers. The presence of such a structure strengthens the effective management of volunteers in CSOs.

CSOs must work in partnership with the government, private sector, and media to promote volunteerism in the country.

Donors and INGOs can facilitate and support CSOs for dialogues with the government and private sector regarding the value of volunteerism and civic participation as a strategy for addressing local and national development priorities.

CSOs should create effective schemes and modules for engaging volunteers from all levels of society including unemployed youth and elders.

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

CSOs should create and regularly update their websites and social media pages with information on their volunteer programs as well as publicize their annual reports on their websites about their volunteer projects.

Afghanistan has 31% unemployed youth²⁷ 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 funds from local businesses, individuals and local government.

CSOs have to make an intensive effort to use the media to promote the role of volunteers and educate and mobilize the public about CSOs' volunteerism.

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 and boost volunteerism in local communities.

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.

Our Vision

A Credible Afghan Civil Society

Our mission

Empowering Afghan Civil Society through engagement, partnerships and organizational strengthening.

Strategic Themes

1. Certification

Improving CSO credibility through certification against local and international standards

2. Knowledge & Learning

Strengthen CSOs through the collection, analysis and sharing of information and learning

3. Policy engagement

Facilitating Policy dialogue and engagement with stakeholders

4. Self-Reliance

Diversifying and strengthening CSO funding bases

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Date of publication: 29/Dec/2019

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- ⁴ Overview Paper, paper prepared for the Enabling Environment Conference: Effective Private Sector Contribution to Development in Afghanistan, June 2007
- ⁵ The 2005 Law on Non-Governmental Organization (NGO Law) defines an NGO as a "a domestic or foreign non-governmental, non-political and no for-profit originations".
- ⁶ The law on Association take associations to "refer to communities, unions, councils, assemblies, and originations which are voluntarily established by a group of real or legal persons as nonprofit, nonpolitical entities, in accordance with this law"
- ⁷ 2013 Afghanistan Civil Society Assessment: Counterpart International's Initiative to Promote Afghan Civil Society (IPACS II), report prepared by Langer Research Associates, January 2014.
- ⁸ According to the Microsoft Encarta Dictionary (2006), a volunteer is defined as "somebody who works for nothing; somebody who works without being paid." It also refers to "somebody acting without legal obligation: a participant in something who is not legally bound to participate and does not expect to be paid." In another perspective, a volunteer is therefore someone who offers to do charitable or helpful work without expecting any rewards either by way of payment or compensation for the service(s) rendered.
- ⁹ There are several definitions of volunteering, but in most we find four elements: it is non-obligatory, it is unpaid, it takes place in an organized context, and it is carried out (also) for the benefit of others, society as a whole or a specific organization (Govaart et al, 2001: 16).
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* Supported by referenc documents of this policy brief.