Evaluating Civil Society Building in Afghanistan

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Preface:

When we are talking about Civil Society in Afghanistan two terminologies come to mind: one the Civil Society with its new and modern definition which mainly took shape during the middle of last century in Afghanistan with limited coverage. Second the traditional Civil Society which has existed for centuries and has deep relation with our cultural and social values.

Backround:

1- Civil Society with modern definition:

The Civil Society with its new and modern definition has emerged during the beginning of the last century leading to political and social changes under the name of People's Movement for a Democratic Kingdom (constitutional monarchy). They have three main objectives: Changing the existing Autocratic Regime to more democratic regime, Political freedom of Afghanistan and socio-economic developments and reforms. These movements reach to its peak during 1965 to 1973, this is why we call it decade of democracy in Afghanistan. The people can directly be involved in the political life of their country, they participate in parliamentary election. In addition Civil Society Organizations have significantly been developed significantly during this decade. Women also have participated in social and political events officially or unofficially. It was a good beginning, but we can see that the nature of these CSOs deviated because of government influence over these organizations. This is why gradually these CSOs began to work more for the benefit of government rather than Civil Society. This deviation is more significant from 1981 to 1990. Since the communist regime not only created different politically motivated social organization by the name of farmers' cooperatives, youth, women, labor, associations but also they tried to keep other CSOs under their direct control. Obviously the end product was not real CSOs. They totally depended and were directly related to the government rather than civil society. This is mainly because of the autocratic nature of the regime which was brought to power and was sustained with the support and military presence of the then USSR also because of the slow institutionalization of new CSOs in Afghanistan.

But a new element that landed on the ground in Afghan civil society was Non-Governmental Organizations. This element has two important effects on Afghan society. First, this is the first time that Afghan society, especially those who are living as refugees in the neighboring countries and else where in the world, have been exposed to the role, development and active participation of the civil society in different countries and continents. Secondly this new element was a positive signal for Afghans because it raised the question as well of why we do not have our own National NGOs. These two elements created an opportunity for addressing some of the emerging requirement of the afghan communities during internal conflict and the year of war in Afghanistan.

2- Traditional Afghan Civil Society:

Every society has its own cultural and traditional norms and standards. Afghanistan is one of the countries that have a very rich traditional civil society and it has deep roots in the history of the country. For example Loya Girga that gets importance during current political situation in Afghanistan. This is an example that we can understand how we can develop the traditional Civil Society values according to the new requirements of the societies. Further more if we look to the grass roots level there are a lot of traditional institutions/ organizations that their main reason for existing are to provide a peaceful environment and maintain socio- economic relations e.g. councils of elders (grey beards), mosques, campaign days for public works, irrigation water supply system and water manager (mir aab) and a lot of other institutions. But looking to these traditional civil institutions all of them do not play the role for advancement of the society some of them play negative role as well.

3- Our Country in the Last two decades:

What were the consequences of the Communist Regime?
- Thirteen years fighting with the Communist regime and the Red Army.
- 1.5 million Dead.
- Almost 1 million people disabled.
- More than six million refugees.
- Very poor education standards.
- Extreme poverty.
- Emergence of a drug based criminal economy.
- Numerous widows, orphans and many more tragedies.

The civil war regime:

 More destruction
- Ten year civil war. Fighting between different factions started.
- In one day more than 1500 rockets were launched on Kabul the capital city.
- Again migration started internally and into neighboring countries.
- Collapsing of National army and police.
- All the governmental system was badly crushed.

The Taliban Regime: another horrendous experience for Afghans.
- Women were banned from working outside the house; there were no schools for girls, no women walking in the city without a burqa (veil) and Mahram.
- no men without beards and caps, no music, no television, no pictures, no toys for children…the list could go on.

An extended five years drought: further worsened the situation.
- Thousands of families were displaced from their homeland to find drinking water, and bread to fill their stomachs.
- Thousands were placed in Internally Displaced Population camps in Herat, Mazar and Jalal Aabad, the big cities of Afghanistan. They lived in appalling living conditions.
- Motivated people to grow poppy because poppy requireds less water than licit crops and also due to very weak economy of the country.

4- What are the Important Questions?
When we look to this short history, the question arises as:
- How these people have managed to survive and how have they managed to keep their dignity despite huge displacement, extremely dictatorial regimes, internal conflict and natural disasters?
- How could refugees from different ethnic groups, different languages, from different provinces, under extreme conditions in a very hot climate and poverty stricken live together in refugee camps and not only tolerate but also support each other?
- How could this nation resist Russia and its puppet regime, when Mujahidin families – the families of the resistance - lived in very difficult circumstances in Pakistan and Iran?

- How did so many widows and their children manage to survive despite the Taliban not allowing women to work out of their houses when Afghanistan has one of the highest levels of poverty in the world?
- Why is there very little suicide among Afghans when they lost their closest relatives, they have suffered so much tragedy and still they are experiencing these tragedies?

A lot of similar questions we may ask about this nation.

6- Afghan Society Response to all these disasters:

Afghans especially in rural areas have a strong culture and belief of supporting each other no matter how little or plenty they have to offer but they do offer at times of dire need. They cannot see their neighbor suffer from hunger. Though many painful stories of Afghans during the Taliban regime are still fresh in our minds, Afghans have been able to help and support each other in general. These conditions have been observed in villages to a greater extent than cities during the years of Taliban and that is the reason why people, including educated people, were moving to villages during that time.

In the beginning, there were spontaneous revolts by people in cities and suburbs which were totally self-determined. Migration to neighboring countries began. Resistance against the communist regime and Russia grew. *The revolt in* Kabul on 24th of February 1981 and in Herat on the 21st of the same month which left several thousands dead (24,000 people were killed in one day in Herat) are examples of community reaction. Both men and women were participating in these revolts. The same uprising against the communist regime started all over the country. The solidarity of Afghans against the communist regime and Russia demonstrated a strong community-based social capital for this nation which enabled Mujahidin and their families to support the movement despite the fact that they were living in an extremely bad situation.

We witnessed the largest immigration of different ethnic groups of Afghan people in the 20th century. These immigrations were voluntary, occurring because their beliefs and social values were being attacked by the communist regime. Most importantly, different Afghan ethnic groups with different languages from different provinces, with both poor and rich backgrounds and from different walks of life lived together in refugee camps. People had a very difficult life, but they suffered equally and tolerated and supported each other. Fortunately we cannot find an instance of mass starvation or a war of race or religion ever happening among Afghan people during the mass migrations. All

these in fact show that Afghans help each other in times of crisis. These are the values that demonstrate Afghan social capital during crises.

Current Situation:

After September 11, Afghanistan came under the world's attention. This event is undoubtedly to be condemned but if it had not happened, Afghanistan would not have come to the world's attention for years. We have seen many positive changes since the demise of the Taliban regime.

We know one should not expect that the problems that have taken root in the last twenty years can be washed away in days or years. The relative economic growth of communities, and some other developments in Afghanistan, for example, women right to work, to be educated, to vote, to conduct business and to voice their concerns; open school doors for girls, participation of people in the presidential election, pledges and donations of the international community to Afghanistan, forming of the national police and national army, establishment of new radio and television channels, publishing of almost 300 newspapers and magazines, the free press that have made people become more interested in their lives, their country and the world. However there are still a lot of challenges.

We need to exercise some Caution

There are still critical concerns about the current situation and their future that may cause Afghans to feel that their social capital and dignity has been put under a question mark. Afghans mainly rise up against threats which undermine their cultural and values and if the government, the international community and other important players do not take them seriously in this game, this nation may again face huge tragedies which will be beyond repair for both the Afghans and the international community. Unfortunately certain instances of this are felt and the examples are:

Firstly Importation of ideas

Some new approaches and strategies were introduced or imported to Afghanistan after 9/11 e.g. democracy, advocacy, civil society, human rights, gender issues, livelihoods approach, Poverty Reduction Strategy, and other terminologies and concepts related to democracy in developed countries with properly adopting them to the afghan society, its culture and social values in a harried way.

At the first glance all these concepts look good and are important to have them in Afghanistan. However, the question is; can a "sick body" absorb all of these? Can he digest them? Can he utilize them properly? If yes, how? When? …….

As we understand, all these good models have been developed mainly in Western countries, step by step in line with the development and advancement of their respective communities. They had their failures and successes, most of the time learning from their failures, steadily progressing forward. What are now supposed to be introduced into Afghanistan are already structured concepts, which did not grow with the Afghan community. I do not imply that every notion of change must grow parallel with the Afghanistan community; however, I am sure you agree with me that the Afghans must at least be allowed to gain a good understanding of all these new terms, before real change can take place.

All the above are values but if these are introduced to us in a Western fashion without considering the values of our nation and are sent to Afghanistan without proper orientation, people will doubt their significance and consider them simply as they were foreign expressions or words.

Secondly Trade

With issues of trade, the terminology of a free market is usual and the markets of Afghanistan are open to all foreign goods including from countries such as China, Pakistan, India, Iran, Turkey, Central Asian countries and western countries. What affect has this had in Afghanistan? One of the realities is that a post conflict Afghanistan is in a free market economy kindergarten as opposed to the countries dealing with us who have already completed university. Of course the masters in this business are also the winners. Let me give some practical examples: Afghanistan has good shoe makers but people are not buying their products any more as much cheaper Chinese shoes are available in the bazaar. We have been witnessing many instances where small shoe making factories have been closed down. Consequently, they will not only lose their machines and other tools, but will forget their skills/ art as well. In fact we ruin the livelihoods of families. Where people have pooled money for the collective benefit this has often failed because the company has no idea of how to operate business in a free market. This has caused distrust among people which poisons social capital.

Thirdly Poppy Growing

Another issue which will have horrendous effects on our community in terms of social capital (including spirituality) is implementation of the policy to eradicate poppy cultivation. Poppy production and trafficking is certainly led by international networks and we can see that these act very powerfully in Afghanistan. The system is strongly monitored without a visible infrastructure. Their small credit systems for Afghan farmers are functioning strongly. As a result farmers involved in poppy cultivation are mostly indebted and need to pay back their loans. If not, then what? There are many cases of farmers whose poppy harvest failed selling their daughters to pay back their debts. Consequently when people lose their social dignity then it is not important to support government or any development process. We have had this experience during the communist regime in Afghanistan.

Looking to this background and challenges, what are the challenges in front of Civil Society?

Looking to the background and all these cautions it must be an extremely complicated context for a post conflict country like Afghanistan. Dealing with this complex environment, with different stakeholders including Government, coalition forces., Private sector, warlords, International Civil Society and community will be not an easy job for Afghan Civil Society. Especially with the following weakness of civil society:
• Lack of coordination and initiatives.
• Low level awareness/understanding of CS
• Lack of focal point and forum for debate and dialogue
• Mistrust of CS entities
• 'Western' participation in the country's political, economic and social issues
• No clear long term vision
• Lack of common strategy
• Reactive (traditions)
• Economic dependency
• Weak economic status
• 'Western' publicity, advocacy
• Competitive behaviors
• Insecurity
• No clear policy of Government to support/strengthen CS in Afghanistan
• CS Resistance for change/improvements
• Prevailing ignorance in Afghan society

- Influence by external actors
- Discrimination and integration
- Imposition of foreign agendas and values
- How to respond effectively to the new paradigms.

However the following strengths would be an energizer to be more optimistic about Afghan CS.

- Traditional structures
- Long history of CS groups in Afghanistan
- Access to grassroots and the masses
- Immediate response to needs of people
- Pro-active but needs further improvement
- Willingness to work together and come together for common purposes
- Wide range of coverage and more community based initiatives
- Diversity of types and organizations involved and programmes initiatives
- Inclusive/reaching marginalized groups
- Initiative, creative suggestions, flexibility
- Access to remote communities.
- Effective in terms of service delivery.
- Availability of funds and donor commitment increasing.
- Relatively better working conditions (eg constitution, election, government, NGOs' code of conduct, NGOs law).
- Interest of communities in NGOs activities.
- Existence of active CS abroad and the will to support national initiatives.

By considering the background, challenges, weaknesses and strengths of Civil Society there is an important role for CS to address the following:

1- Key Cross-Cutting Themes and Issues

To be addressed and built-in throughout Strategies and Processes	
➢ Gender: a priority in each and every sector	➢ Environmental Protection & Regeneration
➢ Media and Freedom of Speech	➢ Land Rights and Repossession
➢ Youth	➢ Food and Water Sovereignty
➢ Education	➢ Accountable Governance
➢ Vulnerable groups eg disabled,	➢ Religion

blind, widows, orphans, etc ➢ Culture including the arts, poetry, music, drama, etc.	➢ Advocacy and Influencing ➢ Conflict Transformation for Peace and Justice

2- Building Cooperation, Coordination and Capacity

Broadening cooperation and resources to support and strengthen the capacity of CS including networks, associations etc from the grassroots up and at all levels

3- Planning and Mobilization for Actions

This will be a continuous process, with particular focus given to establishing the processes within the first two years, enabling it to expand organically in future years. The first few years are therefore particularly important to ensure that initial planning and mobilization form long term inclusive strategies and strong foundations; participatory and complementary processes, resulting in more empowering and effective actions. This will use multiple strategies and take advantage of all connections and contacts of those organizations and individuals involved

4- Building Political Representation from the 'Bottom-Up'

This will be integral to these processes in that planning, mobilization and action will enable leaders to emerge in an appropriate and representative way of the people from the 'bottom-up'.

5- Nation Building and Constructive Interaction with the Government

- Research, Documentation and Make Recommendations.
- Research, Advocate and Take Action.

6- Strengthening National Human Resource Capacities
- National Civic Education Manual (NCEM)
- Develop a National Institute of Learning .
- Safe Spaces and Capacity Building for Women

Building on safe spaces already developing for women - often too few and far between - this programme will support 'safe spaces' to be identified and developed further with and for women nationwide. All planning processes, however, will include men to ensure they are aware, involved and informed. These might start as small but would develop towards compounds, including wherever is feasible and appropriate to the needs of the community.
- Personal Healing, Self-Awareness, Effectiveness and Health

7- Joint Advocacy, Linkages, Media & PR Initiatives: 'Building a United Voice'
- Strengthen and Develop International Linkages and Cooperation
- What specifically Afghanistan can offer the global environment?

8- Inter-Evaluation and Learning Processes