How Afghans View Civil Society

INITIATIVE TO PROMOTE AFGHAN CIVIL SOCIETY (I-PACS)
Submitted to: Bruce Etling, Democracy and Governance Officer
USAID Afghanistan

The views and recommendations expressed in this report are solely those of the Roundtables Discussion participants and are not necessarily those of USAID.

Under USAID Cooperative Agreement 306-A-00-05-00511-00
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. INTRODUCTION .............................................................................................................................................................. 3

II. CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE CONTEXT OF AFGHANISTAN ............................................................................................... 5
   A. Definitions ............................................................................................................................................................... 5
   B. Participants' Principles of Civil Society ...................................................................................................................... 7
   C. Who are Civil Society Actors? ...................................................................................................................................... 8
   D. Differences of Opinion .............................................................................................................................................. 9

III. CIVIL SOCIETY AND CULTURAL CONSTRAINTS ........................................................................................................... 10
   A. Overview ............................................................................................................................................................. 10

IV. CULTURE AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF CIVIL SOCIETY .......................................................................................... 14
   A. Definitions of Culture ........................................................................................................................................... 14
   B. Important Cultural Elements ...................................................................................................................................... 15
   C. Norms, Traditions and Institutions ......................................................................................................................... 15

V. CIVIL SOCIETY AND CSOS’ ROLE IN ITS DEVELOPMENT .............................................................................................. 17
   A. Overview ............................................................................................................................................................. 17
   B. Specific Roles ....................................................................................................................................................... 18

VI. CIVIL SOCIETY AND ITS BENEFITS ........................................................................................................................... 21
   A. Secure Society ..................................................................................................................................................... 21
   B. Elements of a Flourishing Civil Society .................................................................................................................. 22

VII. CONCLUSION ............................................................................................................................................................. 22
I. INTRODUCTION

Counterpart International is implementing the USAID funded Initiative to Promote Afghan Civil Society (I-PACS) across Afghanistan.

The overarching goal of I-PACS is to increase the role and viability of civil society in Afghanistan. To reach the goal, I-PACS core objectives are to:

1. Ensure informed policy and equitable resource allocation decisions concerning civil society and CSO development in Afghanistan;
2. Assist in the development and enforcement of a comprehensive legal framework to strengthen the CSO sector;
3. Build the capacity of CSOs to design, implement, manage, monitor and evaluate their activities effectively, and achieve organizational objectives with transparency and accountability;
4. Provide funding to CSOs to implement development and advocacy projects.

In addition, there are two cross cutting components of the project, Gender and Media, which are integrated into all I-PACS activities.

In order to facilitate the first objective of I-PACS, Counterpart joined with the Afghan Civil Society Forum (ACSF) and the Coordination of Afghan Relief (CoAR) to conduct a civil society sector assessment. A wide range of civil society organizations (CSOs) participated in the assessment, which took place between January and April of 2005. The participating organizations included non-government organizations (NGOs), jirgas/shuras\(^1\), social and cultural organizations, Community Development Councils (CDCs) and other community councils and groups. The purpose of the assessment was to evaluate the current state of civil society in Afghanistan in order to better understand its composition and status throughout the country.

Following completion and translation of the assessment, Counterpart and Creative Associates International, Inc. (Creative) conducted five roundtable discussions in Kabul and seven in other provinces of Afghanistan including Kunduz, Balkh, Faryab, Bamyan, Paktia, Kandahar\(^2\) and Nangarhar. These roundtables gauged citizens’ perceptions of civil society in Afghanistan and the role that CSOs play in its development. They were also designed to share the assessment findings with a broad range of stakeholders and encourage their feedback.

As a result of the roundtables, I-PACS gathered feedback from 222 participants, 26.5% of whom were women. We anticipated an equal number of female and male participants; however, the security situation coupled with a variety of cultural and traditional barriers limited the number of female participants. This report summarizes the opinions of the participants.

The roundtable participants represented a broad spectrum of Afghan society and included government officials, delegates from professional unions (teachers, businessmen, doctors and journalists), CSOs (NGOs, media unions, shuras, jirgas, community councils etc.), local leaders, Ulemas (religious scholars), Mullahs (leaders of prayer, or priests), academics, writers, politicians, tribal leaders, social and cultural associations and human rights groups.

\(^1\) Dari and Pashto words meaning community consultative councils.
\(^2\) Due to the security issues in Kandahar Province, the participants were called to Kabul to participate in the roundtable discussion. The 13\(^{th}\) roundtable, which was scheduled for Herat, was cancelled due to civil unrest.
The participants were educated and literate as the majority of them were heads of local CSOs, representatives from government institutions, and village elders and therefore had, at a minimum, a primary education. They, therefore, presented views and opinions of the literate part of the Afghan society, or estimated 36% of the population.  

At the beginning of each discussion Creative and Counterpart briefed participants about the I-PACS program and shared key findings from the Civil Society Assessment. Each discussion lasted for two hours, during which the participants were asked to address the following questions:

1. What does civil society mean in the context of Afghanistan?
   a. What constitutes civil society?
   b. What are the fundamentals/principles of civil society?
   c. Who is part of civil society?
2. How does culture affect the development of civil society?
3. What cultural/traditional constraints hinder the development of civil society?
4. What roles can or do CSOs play in overcoming those constraints?
5. How does a vibrant civil society benefit you, your family, your community, the country?

Roundtables in the provinces were organized through the I-PACS Civil Society Support Centers. The CSSCs were given an overview of the purpose of the activity and the desired demographic makeup of participants. Every effort was made to ensure a balance of gender, ethnicity and language.

Local invitations were sent out by the CSSCs and followed up with phone calls and personal visits to ensure adequate attendance and representation. The average participation at the roundtables was 17 people. Roundtables were covered by local and national media in a majority of the provinces and many of them were visited by provincial authorities to include two governors and two deputy governors.

Roundtable discussions were conducted in an open, participatory and interactive environment in both Pashto and Dari. In provinces where one language was dominant, that language was used.

---

3 Definition of adult literacy rate: percentage of persons aged 15 and over who can read and write. Thirty six percent, an estimate by UNESCO, is the highest estimate available. UNESCO’s estimate is considered by some to be high off the mark, as UNESCO uses self-reported data.
Roundtable discussions were held in the indicated locations.

II. CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE CONTEXT OF AFGHANISTAN

A. Definitions

According to the participants, the English term “Civil Society” means “Madani Tolana” in Pashto and “Jamiai Madani” in Dari. These terms were familiar to most roundtable participants. There was a consensus, however, that there is an acute need for public education efforts that create awareness about the interdependence of civil society and democracy.

“Civil Society exists to promote Mardoom Salari⁴ - which is also perceived as democracy. The ultimate goal of civil society is to strengthen democracy in the country.”

Mohammad Sajad Mohsini, a participant of Bamyan Roundtable and Member of the Provincial Assembly

Most participants defined civil society as it has been outlined in the I-PACS Civil Society Assessment. For example a participant of the Kunduz Roundtable said: “Civil Society is a group of organizations and people that exists between the market, the government and the family that works in partnership for

⁴ Mardoom Salari is a Dari expression used for “democracy” and in Pashto it is Woleswaki. Mardoom and Woles means people and Salari and Waki means rule. Thus it means people’s rule.

Civil Society Assessment – Roundtables Discussion Report
social welfare purposes and helps each other in obtaining their common purpose.” Participants also agreed that while civil society has no universally accepted definition, it is a not-for-profit endeavor run by and for the people.

Many participants also noted that civil society has its roots in the ancient history of Islam and Afghan culture, both of which promote the existence of an active civil society. Some thought the phrase and concept were derived from the word *madaniat* “civilization”, others from the Arabic word *madina* “city”. Participants thought that the values of civil society are in line with the norms and principles of the Afghan people and the religion of Islam. For example, respecting the law and standing against dictatorships is not merely a principle but an obligation for Muslims.

Most of the participants expressed their concern that high illiteracy rates make it likely that damaging misconceptions of civil society dominate the country. Misperceptions often result from efforts to assign new meaning to already defined concepts such as civil society. As one participant said:

“It is very strange that we are seeking definitions for universally accepted ideologies such as civil society and democracy in our own country, rather than trying to adjust ourselves within the scope of those universally accepted concepts.”

Shukria Barakzai, Member of the *Wolesi Jirga*\(^6\) from Kabul Province.

Roundtable participants suggested that recognizing and appreciating the similarities between modern civil society and traditional structures such as jirgas/shuras and religious networks can be an effective way of educating and mobilizing communities around issues of common interest.

Importantly, participants said that CSO activities should remain within the values and belief systems of the Afghan nation and should not contradict the principles of the Afghan constitution.

Participants were of the view that CSOs must come up with a widely accepted set of “moral/legal boundaries and ethics” for democracy and civil society that are within the local context, so that people can work in unison toward these ideals. Participants believed that civil society is about the rights and needs of the people, based on the democratic ideal that citizens hold the ultimate authority, not the state or small groups. Furthermore, if legislators consider the moral, religious and cultural implications of laws, then the people will support and respect those laws.

Participants stated that civil society consists of each and every citizen and myriad physical units, from very small villages with traditional community groups to large CSOs supported by international donors.

---

5 The definition in the Civil Society Assessment Report reads “The sphere of institutions, organizations, and individuals located between the family, the state, and the market in which people associate voluntarily to advance common interests.”

6 *Wolesi Jirga* is the lower house of Parliament, the upper house being *Meshrano Jirga.*
B. Principles of Civil Society

The fundamental guiding principles of civil society articulated by roundtable discussants included:

No personal or political agenda - Civil society exists to uplift people's lives and goes beyond personal and political gains.

Diversity, co-existence and tolerance - There should be mutual respect for everyone regardless of religion, race, ethnicity, sex or tribal affiliation. Individuals and organizations from rural and urban areas should share their knowledge, experience and interests to maximize their impact. This requires equal access to resources.

Rule of law - Civil society is a collection of independent, free organizations and networks that work within constitutional and legal boundaries.

Education - Participants thought that those who have acquired formal or informal knowledge have been able to fight ignorance. Therefore, it's imperative that education and adequate learning facilities be made available to all, with a particular focus on formal education. Most participants said that a nation cannot progress and develop unless its citizens are educated and have an opportunity to apply their knowledge.

Rights and duties - According to the participants, in a civil society the rights of all humans are protected and people understand their duties and responsibilities in the democratic process. One of the guiding principles of a vibrant civil society is that citizens strive to gain their rights and at the same time fulfill their responsibilities. For example, a participant said that freedom is obtained not given.

"Civil Society is like the body of a human being, consisting of various parts, with various functions, but each strives to keep the man alive and functional. Civil Society is similar to this system where social activities are aimed at serving the general public and common interests, despite their different roles."

Obaidullah, Deputy Director, Ulema Council of Kundoz Province.

Cooperation and support - Most of the participants said that every individual within a civil society has a duty to cooperate and support others in the fulfillment of their society’s goals. Decisions should be made collaboratively and responsibilities shared equally. This spirit of cooperation is encouraged by Islam and Afghan culture and can be found in the traditions of Zakat (giving alms to the poor) and Aashar (voluntary community work). Cooperative and supportive processes strengthen community relationships based on respect, unity and care.

Freedom of expression, speech and choice - Almost all said that everyone’s voice must be heard. Media is the backbone of ensuring this and must be utilized wisely and widely to advance freedom of expression. It should be noted that participants used freedom of choice and freedom of press as synonyms for freedom of expression. They also stated that everyone has the right to express their needs, provide input, raise concerns, participate in public gatherings, cast votes and choose the type of jobs they want.

Solutions through peaceful means - Participants used past experiences, where solutions to problems were sought through violence and war, to explain why civil society mechanisms have not developed adequately, since by definition a civil society is one in which people come together to solve problems peacefully. Adherence to these peaceful, cooperative principles was seen as the means of promoting...
national unity. Participants also said that equality among citizens promotes peace, which in turn creates greater equality of opportunity.

"Civil society can play a significant role in the development of national unification."  
- Haji Din Mohammad, Governor of Kabul Province.

"Where there is peace, there is a strong and vibrant civil society."  
- Haji Hazrat, Ahmadzai Tribe representative, Paktia Province.

Responsibility - Participants said that in a functioning civil society everyone should unite, participate and use their own resources to raise awareness and educate their family, village and country.

Following democratic norms and practices - In most cases participants used the term democracy instead of civil society. They said that civil society paves the way for democratic societies, citing pre-election activities, voting and voluntary participation in social, political and cultural activities as being key aspects of a healthy civil society.

Social justice - This was identified as both a purpose of civil society and a condition for having an active civil society. In the absence of social justice, people are subject to discrimination and tyranny.

Mutual accommodation - Participants were of the view that selfishness and disrespect of others destroys relationships among civil society actors. A civil society helps people accommodate one another and their differences, or, as an ancient Afghan expression states, “If I say that only I have the right to exist and you say that only you have the right to exist, then none of us will live, but if I say that you can live and you say that I can live, then both of us will live.”

C. Who are Civil Society Actors?

Participants cited some examples of civil society actors. They include, but are not limited to:

Social and cultural organizations - Participants said that sports clubs, unions, media, academia and social welfare organizations (i.e. those that work for orphans, widows and pensioners etc.) are civil society actors.

Formal and informal community-based organizations and associations - Participants also said that un-registered and informal grass root organizations such as hujuras\(^7\), jirgas, Ulema Councils, youth and women’s groups are civil society organizations and can play an important role in the development of a civil society.

NGOs - According to the participants, local, national, regional and international non-governmental organizations are the modern civil society institutions.

Individuals – Participants viewed some individuals, such as community leaders, shura members, poets, writers, elites, elders, Ulemas and Mullahs, as important civil society players that have been present as such throughout much of Afghanistan’s history.

---

\(^7\) Hujura is an Arabic word which means “cell”, but in this context it refers to a gathering place for the village elders and a venue for village council meetings.
Some governmental institutions - Those involved in social development activities, urban and rural groups, such as the Ministry of Information and Culture, Women’s Ministry, Public Welfare Ministry, Ministry of Martyrs and Disabled, Ministry of Education and Government media.

Professional associations - Participants said that professional unions or associations such as teachers, doctors, traders, journalists and lawyers are also civil society organizations.

Religious institutions and groups - Participants were of the view that Mosques, Takia Khana, Khanqah and Madrassas are religious institutions that can play an active role in the development of civil society.

D. Differences of Opinion

Participants held different views on the following groups:

Political Parties - Many held the view that, when serving as platforms for dialogue on political issues, political parties can constitute a part of civil society. But when parties are working to obtain power they cannot be considered part of civil society because their policies might contradict the public good.

Government - Some participants held the view that certain government organizations can be part of civil society as they provide feedback and recommendations that serve to improve the government’s performance. A few said that the government is part of civil society, because it provides services to the people, but the majority expressed the belief that the government as an entity, by definition is not part of civil society. They also said that organizations connected to the government either fiscally or organizationally should be excluded from civil society.

In this context, they said civil society can and should relate to the government by acting as a check on its policies and providing practical recommendations that improve citizens’ lives. Civil society actors should not support a particular party or candidate, or specific governmental agenda; instead they should support policies that are in the public interest. Some participants also mentioned that civil society serves as a bridge between the government and its citizens by raising voices and issues and making sure that services reach the people – especially vulnerable and marginalized groups.

“Civil society has to supervise what government does, provide the state with alternatives, distribute information, advocate and ensure that all individuals in the community have equal access to available resources.”

Mr. Suleiman, Director of Cooperation for Peace and Unity

Attendees unanimously agreed that individuals are part of the civil society milieu. Some, such as Azizullah Waziri, Director of the Attorney General Directorate in Kabul said, “Everyone is part of civil society” arguing that “government is from the people and is nothing apart from them.” His view that civil society organizations and actors are actually about people’s ability and willingness to mobilize, educate, organize and improve their lives was widely agreed upon.

8 Takia Khana is the Shia Muslim’s gathering place for prayer and other social activities. Khanqah is a get together of Sufi Muslims for the purposes of prayer and meditation. Madrassa is an Arabic word which is applied to school, but in Afghanistan it refers to registered and unregistered religious schools that are primarily located within Mosques.
Private Sector - Only one participant said that the private sector is part of civil society. Others voiced the opinion that civil society is like one side of a triangular structure, with the other two sides being the state and the private sectors. Each is dependant upon the other for support.

“CSOs can facilitate the growth of the private sector. A private sector can only develop in a democratic society.”

Mrs. Latifa, teacher at the Fatimatu Zahra School in Kundoz Province

In relation to a market economy, it was stated emphatically that civil society organizations are not-for-profit. It was, however, repeatedly said that CSOs and CBOs can generate income by providing services to their members as long as the revenue is reinvested in the organization to further their organizational goals.

Participants agreed that civil society, defined by its structure, includes everything except the government, political parties and the private sector. However, defined by function, it does include the government, political parties and private sector, provided they are acting within the scope of the civil society sector. For example, the Academy of Science and the Independent Human Rights Commission were established by the government, but their function and role are similar to those of CSOs, therefore, despite being government institutions, they are part of civil society.

Government media - Some of the participants proposed that media that is supported by the government or that work to promote the government’s agenda is not part of civil society, because in many cases it supports policies that are against the interests of the population. On the other hand, there were participants who said that the government media is a part of civil society, because they not only promote government policies but also provide information about the needs of the people, criticize certain government policies and identify the dangers that society may face.

III. CIVIL SOCIETY AND CULTURAL CONSTRAINTS

A. Overview

Participants talked in detail about cultural obstacles that hinder the development of civil society in Afghanistan. A significant number believed that these should not be considered as obstacles but as challenges for CSOs to address in the course of their efforts. Gender related constraints were emphasized in almost all roundtables. Some of the constraints brought up by the participants were not cultural such as security, poverty and illiteracy etc.

B. Constraints

Confining women to their homes - According to the participants, the domestic environment is not empowering for women and girls. They must seek permission from their father, brother, uncle, grandfather and the entire collage of male family members before performing simple activities outside the home, such as joining an organization, attending school or university, socializing with friends, etc.. Confining women to the home and depriving them of education, while prevalent in Afghanistan, is not based on Islamic beliefs as illustrated by a saying of the Prophet Mohammed: “Talabul Elme Faridathon Ala Kole Muslimen wa Muslemathen”, which means that seeking knowledge is obligatory and compulsory for every Muslim.

9 Structure - participants referred to the triangular i.e. Civil Society, Government and Private Sectors.

Civil Society Assessment – Roundtables Discussion Report 10
Wearing Burqas - In nearly all roundtables, the participants said that the common opinion of Afghans is that practices not in accordance with Islam are also against the principles of civil society, especially traditional practices that ignore women’s rights, including wearing a burqa. Wasiq Ahmad Hameem, a religious scholar and roundtable participant said that in the religious books of the Hanafi10 sect, such as Noor-ul-Izah11 and Maraqi Fil Falah12, it is clearly stated that a woman’s face is not part of hijab13. Other participants stated that the burqa is not an Afghan tradition as it was introduced by Mogul aristocrats when Kabul had a Mogul governor. Furthermore, a few participants to the Kandahar roundtable mentioned that hijab (as described by Islam) does not impede women from working, rather it encourages them to take part in social gatherings, seek education and participate in other political and economic aspects of society while maintaining modesty.

Choosing a Husband/Wife - Participants noted that forcing a man or a woman to marry without their consent is not an Islamic practice and is against the principles of a civil society. Walwar or Toyana14 is also against Sharia or Islamic Law if it is not given to the daughter. Some participants considered this practice as “selling of the girl for personal and economic purpose.” Mahar15 is in accordance with Islam, but it is the bride’s property and not that of her father. The practice of marrying children, such as five year old girls, to 40 year old widowed men is not in accordance with Islamic values.

Girls’ Education - Among the participants, the nearly unanimous opinion was that there is massive misunderstanding and lack of awareness about girls’ education.

"If a person sends his adult daughter to school people accuse him of immorality and thus they lose the respect of their village. It is said that every cruel person has grown up in the lap of a cruel father or mother. Our educational system was always subjected to various changes by different dictatorial regimes and the after effects remain to this day."

Mrs. Safora Raikhani, Member of the National Assembly from Bamyan

10 It is one of the four jurisprudence classes of the Sunni sect of Muslims. The founder was Imam Abu Hanifa, Noman Bin Sabit who was born at Kofa in Iraq in 703 and died at the age of 70.
11 Noor-ul-Izah is the course book taught in the religious schools in Afghanistan, Pakistan, India and Central Asia. It was written almost 200 years ago by Ali Al-Sharnbalali, a Scholar from Sham, the current Syria, Lebanon and Palestine.
12 Maraqi Fil Falah is the interpretation and description of Noor-ul-Izah.
13 Hijab is the modern word for the practice of dressing modestly which all practicing Muslims past the age of puberty are instructed to do in the Qur’an. No precise dress code for men or women is set out in the Qur’an (the most specific part being 33:59 mentioning that believers “draw their cloaks close round them [when they go out!”) and various Islamic scholars have interpreted the meaning of hijab in different ways. The basic requirements are that when in the presence of someone of the opposite sex other than a ‘close family member’ (Mahram) a woman should cover her body and walk and dress in a way which does not draw sexual attention to her and that a man should be covered from at least the navel to his knees and similarly not wear figure-hugging clothes that draw sexual attention to him. Generally drawing sexual attention is only allowed and also highly encouraged between couples and they do not need to cover any part of their body in presence of each other (other Mahrams should hide at least their sexual organs from each other). It is claimed that hijab strengthens the family and therefore improves the children’s mental health. As a rule of Islam “in the case of necessity for example for saving lives or avoiding severe hardship hijab rules are waived”.

The word hijab is also frequently used specifically to mean a headscarf worn by a Muslim woman. In this case it most often refers to a square scarf which is folded diagonally and worn over the head to cover the hair, ears and throat but not the face. The word used in the Qu’ran for a headscarf is khimar which might be better to use when referring to headscarves in general as many people argue that this use of hijab is incorrect and it can certainly lead to confusion. http://www.freeglossary.com/Hijab
14 This is wedding money and is mostly taken by fathers or brothers, not given to the daughter or sister. It ranges between 6,000-16,000 USD depending on the region and province.
15 Mahar is an Arabic word and is widely used in Pashto and Dari languages. It is the dowry paid to the bride by the groom.
According to the participants, denying the pursuit of an education to females of all ages is seen as a substantial problem that mitigates Afghan society’s ability to achieve its goals, because a large majority of the population does not have the requisite skills or knowledge.

Some participants gave the example of Swara\textsuperscript{16}. The practice of Swara, or the exchange of daughters and/or sisters for reconciliation between families, tribes and villages, also violates the principles of Islam. For example, one person kills another and the family of the murderer gives their daughter to the murdered person’s family as compensation. Women are the clear victims in all instances.

\textbf{Badal}\textsuperscript{17} - According to the participants, the practice of Badal has led to much domestic violence. This is usually practiced in poor families who don’t have enough money to pay for a wedding. Instead of an exchange of money there is an exchange of women whereby two men marry the daughter or sister of the other. In many cases, if the relationship of one of the couples begins to deteriorate into violence, the other husband also begins to treat his wife badly.

\textbf{Women’s Right to Inheritance} - Participants held the view that, according to Islam, property left by the deceased should be distributed to the surviving men and women, although not usually in equal amounts. In Afghanistan, families generally do not give inheritance to women, but instead divide it among the men.

\textbf{Women’s Employment} - Some participants commented that only men work in NGOs, because women do not have equal opportunity. Another reason is that educated men do not let their wives work, for if they do they will be ridiculed by their community.

\textbf{Illiteracy} - This was repeatedly cited as the main constraint to building a strong civil society and a stronger Afghanistan. Most Afghans cannot distinguish between religion and culture, because local education has a strong base in religion, which is very often culture misinterpreted as religion. People are not aware of their rights or obligations. Lack of effective education systems and qualified teachers adds to this problem. Participants at a roundtable in Kunduz said that if people were literate they would not be as cruel to their own brethren\textsuperscript{18}; that there would be greater efforts towards gender and ethnic equality. Women do not have enough knowledge to demand their rights under Islam. Men interpret Islam according to their own agendas and, because of the lack of knowledge, women cannot counter this.

\textbf{Poverty} - This was also a constant in the replies of the participants. The poor economic condition of the people is a major issue that prevents them from focusing on anything beyond subsistence, much less modern concepts or new skills.

"Their first need is how to get a loaf of bread, only then can they think about civil society or democracy. They devote their time to earning enough for food and don’t have time to participate in the development of civil society initiatives. Violence is also a result of low economic conditions."

Mrs. Saliha Payman, Director of Social Works at Faryab Province

\textsuperscript{16} Swara in Pashto and \textit{Da Badi Dadan} in Dari mean the exchange of daughters or sisters for reconciliation.

\textsuperscript{17} In both in Pashto and Dari Badal means the exchange of daughters or sisters and in Islamic jurisprudence it is called Sheghar.

\textsuperscript{18} In Islam, two Muslim men can be called brothers, even if they are not blood relatives. There is a saying of the Prophet, "A Muslim is the brother of another Muslim".
Corruption - Corruption, to include nepotism, bribes, outright stealing of money, hiring unskilled and unqualified people and favoritism in government and non-government organizations was often mentioned as the biggest obstacle to the development of a civil society. Participants opined that the root cause of corruption is poverty; however, some argued that it is an ethics issue because educated and better off people take bribes, not the poor. Some cited ineffective systems that allow these phenomena to grow and spread. A few noted that corruption has become part of the culture, arguing that without paying bribes it is nearly impossible to accomplish everyday tasks.

Security - Lack of security was named as the biggest challenge by a significant number of participants. It prevents development of the sector, particularly for modern, active and high-profile CSOs such as NGOs. As far as traditional CSOs are concerned, it was not seen as much of a concern or barrier. Most of the Ulemas and jirga members were of the opinion that it does not hinder their work. One participant at the Kandahar roundtable stressed the need for skilled people to develop Afghan society adding that individuals from the Afghan Diaspora, who can provide much needed skills, will not come back until the security situation improves.

Ambiguity About Civil Society - According to some participants, average citizens do not understand democracy, civil society, the value of each and their inherent gender equity requirements. Unfortunately, many people perceive democracy as immorality and adultery existing in a society without social norms, ethics, legal boundaries or limitations. They view it as a system being imposed upon them by the west and defined by a “do whatever you want” attitude.

Mullahs' Limited Knowledge - Due to the restrictiveness of past governments, Mullahs were confined to very basic books of jurisprudence such as Khulasa and Qodoori that are written in Arabic, consequently their understanding of Islamic teachings is limited and, according to the participants, this presents a challenge for Afghan civil society. Most Afghan Mullahs are not well versed in the Quranic teachings and lack knowledge about other sects of Islam; therefore it is not reasonable to expect them to know and be tolerant of other religions and modern or social sciences. This has unforeseen but important ramifications. It was asked, for example, “since Mullahs lack basic math skills, how can they divide a deceased person’s wealth among the rightful inheritors?”

Enabling Working Environment - Participants, particularly representatives from NGOs, said that the Government’s policies and systems are not clear or enabling for civil society activity.

"It will take you years to understand the complicated systems, specifically if your case is related to the courts."

Mrs. Nahida Naweed, Human Rights Official in Faryab Province

No Mashwara\(^\text{19}\) - Participants stated that it has become part of the culture to do everything single-handedly. On critical issues, formal and informal leaders no longer consult stakeholders, which is obligatory in Islam. For example, a father rarely consults his son before choosing a girl for him and parents unilaterally make decisions for their children in regards to their education, profession and marriage.

Lack of Creative and Effective Media - In some roundtable discussions, issues of a dearth of creative and effective media and professional journalists were raised by the participants. Consequent to the inadequate capacity of media professionals and organizations in the country, the quality of reporting is

\(^{19}\)Mashwara is an Arabic word, but is now part of the Dari dialect and it is called Sala in Pashto. Another synonym is Nasihat. It means Consultation or Advice.
very low and it is particularly so in the provinces. There is also a shortage of necessary modern equipment and resources. In addition, a female participant said that Afghan women do not have the freedom to discuss things openly in the media, and the lack of qualified female staff in local media is all too obvious.

Awderzadagi or Turbgani\textsuperscript{20} - According to the participants, Awderzadagi results in disunity and intolerance and creates mistrust and discrimination against other families. It is also the cause of hatred and jealousy between cousins. There have been many cases where a person was killed by his cousins for nothing more than being wealthy or highly educated. Families want their cousins to be isolated, poor and status-less in the eyes of the community. This was particularly mentioned at the roundtables held in Paktia, Kabul, Faryab, and Kandahar.

Poor Image of NGOs - Participants were of the view that NGOs have a bad image among the public and government and that this hinders the progress of society. People are not aware of NGO activities, their methods of operation and the resources that go into them. It is important to note that in most cases even high ranking government officials and educated people could not distinguish between the United Nations, contractors, local and international private companies, corporations and NGOs.

IV. CULTURE AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF CIVIL SOCIETY

A. Definitions of Culture\textsuperscript{21}

Culture is the totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought.\textsuperscript{22} Tradition is the passing down of elements of a culture from generation to generation, especially by oral communication, or a mode of thought or behavior followed by a people continuously from generation to generation.\textsuperscript{23}

In Afghanistan, culture, customs and traditions play a significant role in the promotion or demotion of an ideology or agenda; harmony between them will result in a positive culture that paves the way for a strong civil society. Participants were referring to Islamic culture and Afghan tradition and were of the view that most traditions contradict Islamic teachings and, therefore, harmony and true distinction between them should be established. A positive, strong culture can also be the source of respecting and enforcing the rule of law. If there is imbalance in knowledge and understanding of the relationship between culture, tradition and religion, a weak and unbalanced society, which does not allow for the growth of various facets of civil society, results.

Participants said that Afghan culture is very rich, but that it has not been allowed to develop freely, so it is stagnant. They mentioned that the culture was not influenced by new ideas and development concepts until recently; therefore, it remains as it was years ago. They also commented that the underdevelopment of their culture is a reflection of the underdevelopment of the country as a whole.

\textsuperscript{20} Turbgani is Pashto and Aawdarzadaqi is Dari which means the state of being the cousin. Cousin is used for the sons of your uncles or their sons and beyond that. Sometime it also applies to the people of a person’s home village or community. Turbor is the noun and means the cousin. If someone wants to do a bad thing, but his/her Turboor may learn about it, doing that bad deed is, therefore, avoided. Because shame is one of the forces that drives people’s actions (as Afghans say), the fear that your Tarbor may learn about you doing something wrong prevents you from doing it.

\textsuperscript{21} Even though the question for discussion was how culture hinders the development of civil society, many participants also spoke about the positive role that culture can play in CS development.

\textsuperscript{22} http://education.yahoo.com/reference/dictionary/entry/culture

\textsuperscript{23} http://education.yahoo.com/reference/dictionary/entry/tradition

Civil Society Assessment – Roundtables Discussion Report 14
B. Important Cultural Elements

Participants at all of the roundtables stressed the importance of these cultural elements:

Religious Institutions and Leaders - In all roundtables, the role of religious institutions and leaders such as Ulama and Mullahs were identified by the participants as people who reach into each village and are heard in every corner of the country. Mosques are the places where the Ulama and Mullahs deliver their sermons and speeches, but they also use other public spaces such as religious teachings at Madrassas. Therefore their reach and influence is wide and the public considers them the first source for reliable information.

"Nothing in our religion is contradictory with the fundamentals of civil society. Therefore, it is an opportunity to promote civil society through Islamic teachings."

Maulvi Ghulam Serwar Manzoor, Balkh Province

According to some representatives of religious institutions who participated in the roundtables, in Afghanistan, Ulama and Mullahs are considered the “Pillars of Religion” or “Inheritors" of the Prophets and therefore they play a significant role in the development of civil society. Their role was prominent in the struggle against King Amanullah, in support of the Jihad against the Soviet invasion and in support of the Taliban regime. The Ulama and Mullahs used fatwas to legitimize the early Taliban regime and they retain their prominent and influential position in society today - during the presidency of Mr. Hamid Karzai.

Community Consultative Councils - According to the participants, the jirga/shura has a long standing history in Afghanistan and its role in conflict resolution, reconciliation and national unification has been significant. It is a traditional institution that promotes the development of a civil society. It is not a dead institution, but has the capacity to modernize and change to take on contemporary challenges. According to the participants, it is structured around the hujra where most community issues are discussed. It’s also a gathering place for the village elders and a venue for village council meetings. This phenomenon is the custom of aashar, or voluntary community work, where all people of a community work in unity towards the common good. Participants emphasized that this is voluntary work and that it is not undertaken for the benefit of an individual, but rather for the benefit of the entire community. According to the participants, the biggest challenge facing CSOs is the inclusion of women in these councils. The participants recommended that there be male and female shuras in the provinces, but went on to say that women are often prohibited from participating.

Voluntary Associations and Interest Groups - In the participants’ opinion, voluntary associations and other interest groups are, for the most part, supported by international donors, have a clear vision and mission and are more structured than traditional community groups. They are perceived to function mostly in the major cities and have adequate resources. They have been established to do academic and scientific research in the social, political, literary and economic fields.

C. Norms, Traditions and Institutions

Inheritors here referred to the inheriting the wisdom, knowledge and missions of the prophet by the Ulama, not the property.
According to the participants, in most rural areas where the majority of the population is illiterate there are laws and principles that are not written or documented, but are strictly adhered to and respected. These cultural norms and principles often support positive community relationships and are used for social and developmental change. These are community driven initiatives that can be used to sustain any type of change and/or development. Some of the following traditions are used for national reconciliation, conflict resolution, community development, ethical uplift and helping the poor and most vulnerable. The participants suggested these cultural norms as tools for the development of civil society which will be more acceptable to Afghans than other more “western” concepts.

The norms noted by participants include:

**Aashar** \(^{25}\) - According to the participants *aashar* is collective voluntary community work and is highly visible in rural areas during wheat cultivation season or during seasonal campaigns or other community social work. Neighbors often help each other during tree planting, weddings and times of trouble or need. *Aashar* is free and voluntary and is performed when a person or village cannot complete a job or project without assistance.

**Arbakies** \(^{26}\) - According to the participants of the roundtable in Paktia and some from the Kabul discussion, *arbakies* are informal, voluntary tribal individuals/forces representing all tribes in the province/district and are used for a variety of security, social and development purposes. Currently they are being utilized primarily for security and the participants therefore recommended that the *arbakies* be used for social and developmental purposes as well. They pointed out that necessary resources should be given to *arbakies* so that they can help society progress.

**Uzor** \(^{27}\) - This is a tradition used for reconciliation between two persons, families, tribes or *quam*. When the *jirga* resolves a conflict and concludes that one party was unfair to the other, they ask the perpetrator to perform a *nanawati*. The *nanawati* team, comprised of community members, goes to the family of the victim and asks for pardon. When going to the victim’s home they sometimes take the Quran and/or women to show the utmost respect and to beseech their mercy, particularly when the transgression was severe, as in the case of a death.

**Zhaba** \(^{29}\) - The participants agreed that this is widely used in business, personal relations, conflict resolution and marriage arrangements. There are many examples that demonstrate that even in today’s globalized world people in rural areas still formalize large sophisticated transactions by a hand shake.

---

\(^{25}\) *Aashar* is Pashto word and is also used in Dari and it is common almost in all parts of the country.

\(^{26}\) This is a Pashto word and the custom is practiced mostly in the South, South East, South West and in Nooristan. Its characteristics are that they have a purpose (generally security), people select them, participants come from different tribes, the duration is fixed, they are disciplined and the number varies from ten to thousands. They are used in emergency situations, natural disasters and can also be called and dismantled immediately. However, since this force was used by previous governments, and particularly by Russian backed regimes, for fighting and border security issues, usage for civil society purposes must be with extreme caution and be well planned and thought out.

\(^{27}\) *Uzor* is Dari and in Pashto it is *Nanawati*, a tradition in almost all parts of the country.

\(^{28}\) *Quam* is an Arabic word that is used in Dari and Pashto and it means “Nation”. It is also the equivalent of *Millat*. *Millat* is Arabic and it is used in Dari, in Pashto it is *Woles* and/or *Kam*. The combination of various tribes and sub-tribes and sub-*quams* are also called *Quam*. Such as Hazara, Pashto, Uzbek, Turkmen, Aimaq etc.

\(^{29}\) *Zhaba* is Pashto, in Dari it is *Lafz*, which means a hand shake.
**Jawanmardi or Zwami** (manhood/honor) - Some participants said that this is used in war and other social transactions. For example, if a woman or a weak or poor person is oppressed, the community sees it as their honorable duty to protect him/her. If a man is wealthy and he does not support the needy, community members call him *namard* which is an insult, literally meaning “no man”. Also, if a person promises something and then does not deliver on this promise, the person may be considered as *namard*.

**Guzashat or Bakhana** (forgiveness) - According to the participants, in order to promote reconciliation and peace, *guzashat* should be adopted by CSO staffs in their work, and particularly when they are dealing with war, security and reconciliation issues. *Guzashat* in Dari or *bakhana* in Pashto is a moral value which is very helpful and useful in complicated conflicts, especially when it comes from elders: the powerful and strong recognizing, through forgiveness, the young, weak and poor.

**Yateem and Yaseer** (orphans) - Some participants said that *yateem* is used for the orphan whose father has died and *yaseer* for the orphan whose mother has died. They are both Arabic terms. Islam has ordered its followers to be kind to orphans and widows, proclaiming that all Muslims have special recognitions and courtesies they must observe for these groups of people.

**Sia Sar or Toorsari** (Women) - This is a respectful cultural term and everyone must have and exhibit high respect for women in general and elder women in particular. Islam requires that Muslims respect the lives of women, children and the elderly community members of their enemies, even in times of war.

**Taahood** (promise or commitment) – Participants agreed that CSOs should uphold their commitments and fulfill their promises. *Taahood* is an Arabic word that is used both in Pashto and Dari. Once a promise or commitment is made, it must be carried through. This includes obeying agreements between two parties in business, war, reconciliation or any other social or political deal.

**Wafa** (faithfulness) - According to the participants, CSOs should always remain faithful to the people. *Wafa* is again Arabic and is used in Pashto and Dari. *Wafa* is considered a high moral value and a person who adheres to it is called *Ba Waf*, which means faithful and is used particularly when a man or women supports others despite difficult circumstances. Patriotism, love of people, loyalty within the family, honesty, devotion and sacrifice for a friend, family or cause is also considered *Wafa*.

**V. CIVIL SOCIETY AND CSOs’ ROLE IN ITS DEVELOPMENT**

**A. Overview**

According to the participants, the struggle against illiteracy, poverty, political instability, insecurity and terrorism should be used as catalysts to aid in the development of civil society. The reform of tribal systems and institutions as well as increasing the role and capacity of religious and cultural institutions are also seen as important building blocks of a civil society. In order to promote civil society, these five elements (illiteracy, poverty, political instability, insecurity, terrorism) should be addressed at the outset so that CSOs can effectively carry out their role. Participants emphasized that the role of CSOs is to update traditional systems so that they can apply modern concepts without any significant barriers.

Participants said that the growth of a healthy civil society in Afghanistan is dependant upon its CSOs’ ability to push for review and possible reform of Afghan civil laws; the proper use and involvement of
media and government and the attainment of international help. Raising the capacity of civil society organizations and helping them develop specialized capacities were cited as integral elements of this effort.

B. Specific Roles

**Information, Education and Guidance** - According to almost all participants, civil society in Afghanistan is in its early stages and therefore the public has mixed perceptions and reactions. It was stated that CSOs should provide an agreed upon definition of civil society in the context of Afghanistan. The definition should come from experts and leaders of civil society, taking into consideration current public perceptions. CSOs should increase opportunities for dialogue and discussion among all involved groups, specifically media organizations, NGOs and the government.

"CSO activities should be designed in a way that they bring together the government, media and NGOs and remove the distance incurred by lack of proper understanding. This can be done through increased dialogue and information exchange."

Mrs. Farzana Tawakooli, independent journalist in Faryab Province

According to the participants, CSOs should also work to incorporate Islamic principles that promote civil society into their work-plans. They said that sessions and discussions on Islam and democracy have to be designed and planned specifically for Ulemas and youth.

**Encourage Partnerships** – Most of the participants said that CSOs should utilize radio and television broadcasts to increase awareness of CSO and government goals and accomplishments and to promote public understanding of the basic concepts of democracy, civil society, gender and human rights within the context of Islam. Media, as an influential player in civil society, can be a valuable partner in public education and increased public awareness. Due to poor coordination and capacity mechanisms, such a partnership may be a challenge for CSOs at this time.

"Civil Society is not anti-government, but provides solid and practical recommendations to improve government performance."

Mr. Fareshta, Faryab

Nearly all participants agreed that civil society acts as a bridge between the government and the people. A stable relationship between government and non-government actors, if achieved, would be very productive and beneficial for Afghans. Creating monthly or quarterly meetings and gatherings amongst regional and national CSOs to measure the development of the sector would be another helpful step.

Most of the participants were of the view that CSOs should work to increase the capacity of the media to produce quality publications and news. This capacity building should include training, technical assistance and provision of adequate resources. Some mentioned ineffective or limited infrastructure for media professionals. Limited resources and lack of institutional capacity within the media affects the quality and the efficacy of these organizations and also curtails the important role that media can play in the development of society.

**Capacity Building** - According to the participants, increasing the skills and abilities of CSOs the government and media and their staff is an important step. CSOs should conduct a comprehensive survey to determine the fundamental causes of people's problems and attitudes and, based on the results of this research, they should develop innovative and easy to understand capacity building programs, including gender and human rights education. Through these programs, CSOs should not
only raise the capacity and awareness of religious and cultural institutions, they should also ensure that the capacity is institutionalized so that they are prepared to face the political, social and economic challenges of today’s world. Of utmost importance is the education of shura/jirga members as in many communities women are not even considered to be human beings; capacity building and education can serve to redirect this misguided tradition.

“We should help shuras make the right decisions. People are ready for a change.”

Anonymous participant

The foundation for a vibrant civil society is built on long-term commitment from donors and local businesses. CSOs require adequate financial and technical assistance to steadily increase their capacity and potential to manage their long term objectives.

Focus on Family, School and Classroom - The participants recommended that CSOs work with parents, teachers and students for a strong civil society. Ethics is a required subject in all Afghan schools, the curriculum should include the principals and values of civil society and should not be limited to general appearance and appropriate dress. Work with the Ministries of Education and Higher Education to include curricula that will increase the understanding of both secular teachers and Mullahs about the true spirit of Islam, democracy, gender issues and human rights, was also suggested. CSOs should advocate for integrating subjects that are focused on increasing the function and quality of the family, schools and classroom in terms of responsibility, environment and curriculum that will positively affect the lives of their children.

“Civil society is a guarantee for the family. A good family impacts the community. If you have a good family, a married girl will live a good life with in-laws. If we train the family we train the entire community.”

Miss Yasamina Serai, Kandahar Public Library.

Cultivate Belief and Then Practice it - Participants were of the view that having faith in something forces people to internalize what they learn. Most of the participants said that CSOs should work out strategies, goals and objectives with their staffs and then partner with other organizations to cultivate relationships and encourage society to adopt the concepts and values of a strong Afghan civil society. Participants said CSOs should conduct an assessment of people’s behavior and actions that contradict the values of civil society and, in light of the assessment, develop an action plan to change people’s attitude and behaviors.

“We are born to follow our faith, serve our community and worship God. None of this is possible without civil society.”

Badi Ahmadi, I-PACS Grants Officer

Encourage Peoples’ Participation - CSOs should work with citizens to develop society. People’s support is the key; if CSOs lose at the community level then there is loss at the policy level. They should promote a spirit of volunteerism, because the development of civil society is social/community work and everyone should be involved in the process, according to the participants. Academic institutions and CSOs should share information and resources to ensure that programs are adequately informed, cost effective and efficient. People who work for CSOs should serve as models for others; this can be done by developing their capacities and increasing their awareness.

Reach Out to the Remotest Rural Areas - According to almost all of the participants, CSOs should develop strategies and programs that will increase literacy rates in the remotest areas. It is vital to involve villagers and elected representatives, such as elders, shuras, and Ulemas, in ensuring program
sustainability. Media can play a key role in making this happen. Mullahs have strong connections at the village and even family level and therefore their voices are heard. CSOs have to encourage these voices to promote a pro-civil society and pro-democracy environment by working in concert with them. CSOs must play a complementary role and exert pressure on the government to preserve public interests.

"Assist the government in reaching out to the most remote areas where the government has little or no access. They should extend their program reach."

Mr. Eng. Mohammad Hassan Ahmadzi, Paktia Provincial Representative, CARE Afghanistan

Work with Women and Children - According to the participants, the most isolated segment of Afghan society is women and they play a key role in bringing up future generations. They are the central source of a balanced and progressive education. Participants said that a woman’s own abilities and understanding of issues have a direct effect on her children’s psychology and attitudes.

“We should ensure that we can live in compliance with the principles of our religion. Ensure that our mothers, sisters and daughters are safe and that they can enjoy their rights as they want.”

Mrs. Saleha Azerbaki, Principle of Bibi Aiysha Sediqa High School, Kundoz Province

Increase Economic Opportunities - Almost all participants said that the most important purpose of CSOs should be economic development for individuals, families and communities. They should work in harmony to achieve this purpose, because the first questions people ask CSOs are about food, clothing, shelter and health, the basic requirements for life.

“Having a strong economy can provide an enabling environment and opportunities for individuals and communities to participate in the promotion of civil society. They will have minds free from economic worries and personal problems."

Sayed Hashem Basirat, Head of the NGO Department of the Ministry of Economy

Utilize Cultural Opportunities - Participants were of the view that CSOs should use positive aspects of the culture as opportunities to rectify the negative ones. This should be done through well thought out culturally and socially accurate programs that incorporate a gradual process and will thus avoid creating tension and mistrust.

Address Local Interests - Some participants were of the view that CSOs, and particularly NGOs, should better understand the communities in which their programs are being implemented and tailor them accordingly. CSOs should take the time to research and understand local opportunities and limitations; they should work with local partners to develop and design work plans that identify the needs, constraints and opportunities of the people prior to beginning program implementation.

Work for National Reconciliation – CSOs should create hamdily (bringing hearts together) for national reconciliation. According to one participant, hatred and distrust are two by-products of nearly three decades of war and have ruined national unity. People have disintegrated into opposing groups holding different beliefs. All civil society organizations - and especially media - should play a role in addressing this serious issue.

Integrate Modern and Religious Studies - According to the participants, the difference between Madrassas and Maktab (secular schools) should be clarified and resolved, as there is currently a lack of understanding on both sides. The two have different definitions of democracy and civil society and these will be difficult to reconcile. In Afghanistan, phrases such as liberal democracy were misused by representatives of past regimes and most of these people were from secular schools. In the public’s...
mind that legacy still exists and they are mistrustful of students of modern subjects, fearing that they will misguide the nation as they did during the communist regime. Participants stressed the need for continuous dialogue between the religious and secular elements to encourage understanding and to bring them together in the promotion of civil society.

Work with Youth - Almost all participants stated that politicians and nay sayers can and will use the younger generations for negative purposes. Participants from every roundtable stressed the importance of working with youth to avoid this problem.

“Work with the younger generation, educate them, send them to school.”
M. Ilyas Wahdat, Pajhwok Correspondent for the Southeastern Region

Provision of Services - It was often said by the participants that CSOs should make certain that adequate human and financial resources are allocated to civil society as a whole in order to provide prompt, timely and quality services to the people. This will require coordination and cooperation among all actors in all sectors. Poverty alleviation, economic development, educational opportunities and employment were stressed time and time again. It was also said that these issues are interdependent and one cannot be alleviated without the others.

Accountability - Most of the participants stated that CSOs should build their capacity as citizens to hold the government accountable for policies that have a negative impact upon the people. They should also help other CSOs be transparent and accountable to the community in which they work.

VI. CIVIL SOCIETY AND ITS BENEFITS

A. Secure Society

Everyone at the roundtables indicated that the development of a robust civil society in Afghanistan would make the country a more secure place. Participants said that this would strengthen democracy, ensure individual rights and teach people to acknowledge their individual and collective responsibilities and to respect each other’s rights. It was agreed that a well developed civil society can help a nation’s people secure a strong, responsible, democratic and corruption-free government and safer communities.

Participants were of the view that without a strong civil society it is impossible to ensure democracy, human rights and justice, because they believe that civil society is a “bridge” between the people and the government. Some participants, when mentioning the benefits of a civil society, said that in a functioning civil society people understand their rights and their duties. These participants acknowledged that only “understanding rights” without “realizing responsibilities” will not create sustainable change.

Some were of the opinion that CSOs can help the government understand the needs of the people by providing information from the grassroots level, local institutions and remote areas. By understanding their needs, participants said the government will be able to provide its citizens with the type of services that are needed and wanted and, at the same time, trust between the government and the people is built.

Everyone said that civil society is beneficial for the government, the business community and the people. A functioning civil society will allow all citizens to have access to resources, develop the country and make life prosperous for everyone.
“Now I can’t go to the bazaar; in a civil society, I would have the freedom to live freely in my own country and community.”

Miss Farzana Ebrahimi, Kandahar Radio and TV Programs Producer

B. Elements of a Flourishing Civil Society

According to participants, a strong Afghan civil society will:

- Encourage fundamental changes that will benefit everyone in Afghanistan.
- Improve most aspects of daily life, including social, professional and personal areas. This gives hope for the future of the country.
- Ensure justice and the rule of law. Everyone will understand their rights and will feel responsible towards their country including its people, animals and environment. This will reduce crime and help improve the judiciary systems while also preventing large scale corruption.
- Alleviate suffering of individuals and ensure human dignity and mutual respect.
- Foster freedom of expression.
- Facilitate coordination and cooperation among all players that will result in thriving democratic institutions.
- Allow women to live and work, to be safe and to enjoy their rights while living in a healthy environment that encourages respect for the principles and guidelines of Islam.

The participants were of the unanimous view that a strong civil society results in safer lives, equal rights, educated people, better living standards, civil rights, and a better future for their children.

VII. CONCLUSION

Civil society exists to promote democracy and good governance and the ultimate goal is to give people a voice on issues affecting their lives. Civil society organizations, institutions and associations in Afghanistan are, for the most part, traditional organizations and their work in villages, districts, and provinces is diverse and far reaching. The recent Loya Jirga is a good example of civil society engagement in the political and democratic processes of Afghanistan.

Civil society and democracy are in fledgling stages of development and increased public awareness, education and guidance are needed. CSOs are viewed as the bridge between the government, private sector and citizens; however, lack of awareness of the importance of strengthening the bridge and of capacity to develop the mechanisms hinder the development of civil society. Mistrust between the sectors further hampers partnerships that would lead to a healthy, strong civil society.

30 Loya Jirga, occasionally Loya Jirgah, is a large meeting held in Afghanistan, originally attended by all ethnic groups in the country. The word is from the Pashto language -- loya means "great" or "grand" and jirga means "council", "assembly" or "meeting" (originally of Turkic origin, meaning "tent"). The attendees of a loya jirga variously include tribal or regional leaders, political, military and religious figures, royalty, government officials, etc. The meetings are called irregularly, often by the ruler. Some historians maintain that the tradition is 1000 years old. There are no time limitations in a loya jirga and it continues until decisions are reached. Decisions are made by consensus and no formal votes are taken. Many different kinds of issues can be addressed, such as foreign policy, declaring war, legitimizing rulers, or introducing new ideas and policies. A 502-delegate loya jirga convened in Kabul, Afghanistan, on December 14, 2003, to consider the proposed Afghan Constitution.
There is common agreement among the participants, who represent all sectors of society, about the need to empower women and give them their due place in society. No one held negative attitudes towards women’s involvement in social, political, cultural, economic, educational and developmental activities. Many stressed the importance, however, of observing moral norms and Islamic values. Everyone was of the view that civil society cannot progress without giving women their due rights, as outlined by Islam. Views of the roundtable participants echoed the findings of the Civil Society Sector Assessment that demonstrated awareness of CSOs of the importance of women’s issues and of their efforts to include women in the work of reconstruction; one-third of survey respondents reported working to promote women’s equality. Roundtable participants also recognized women’s groups as part of civil society.

Poverty, illiteracy, security issues, lack of understanding about the true teachings of Islam and civil society, unfavorable civil laws, the dearth of or inefficiency of functional systems and some customs are major obstacles to a successful civil society and the future of Afghanistan.

Because of the high illiteracy rate in the country, people are not able to adequately participate in decision making and this has a deleterious effect on the development of a civil society. In addition, many Mullahs, community leaders, elders and others that can make a difference have limited skills, knowledge and opportunities and therefore, if their capacity and understanding of civil society is increased, they can be important partners in developing civil society.

Participants stressed the importance of engaging religious institutions and leaders, Community Consultative Councils, voluntary associations and interest groups in issues of concern for civil society organizations. In all roundtables the role of religious scholars and Mullahs was emphasized and, in particular, recommendations to increase Mullahs’ awareness of civil society and democracy were made. All participants agreed that Ulemas can play a significant role in the development of civil society.

Afghan culture and Islamic religion are rich and there are many opportunities, values and institutions which can be used to promote Afghan society. Civil society per se is not a western concept as many of its ideals and principles are to be found within Islam and within the Afghan culture. Illiteracy and lack of information again play a huge role in the misperception that civil society is an ideal that is being forced on Afghanistan by the west. Participants have offered a wealth of traditions and customs that can be utilized by development practitioners, either local or international, to promote citizen participation in and acceptance of development activities. For instance, they discussed aashar as a way to engage citizens. The Civil Society Assessment has shown that 33% of CSOs that participated in the survey already use aashar as a method of achieving their goals. The roundtable discussions once again made it clear that in order to be able to promote civil society, CSOs, local and international, should ground their activities in local customs and norms that will be conducive of civil society development.

Media, and especially radio, can relieve some of the misperceptions that permeate the public’s opinion of civil society and democracy. CSOs should build strong relations with the media through increased contact and dialogue, strategic partnerships and sharing of information. Improved relations will benefit both CSOs and media as the former has a message to get out and the latter needs material.

Modern CSOs, when working together with traditional organizations, can play a key role in the development of Afghanistan’s civil society sector and the country as a whole. Utilizing the positive aspects of traditional Afghan culture can help CSOs overcome constraints that hinder the development
of the sector. There are many opportunities for CSOs to incorporate Afghan traditions into their programs and strategies.

The specific roles for CSOs, as suggested by the participants, include:

• Sharing information, education and guidance
• Encouraging partnership and participation
• Building capacity
• Reaching out to the most remote rural areas
• Working with women, children and youth
• Increasing economic opportunities
• Utilizing cultural opportunities
• Working for national reconciliation
• Providing services
• Working as monitors and observers of government and ensuring its accountability to the people.

Both the roundtable and Civil Society Assessment participants expressed strong commitment to actively engage in the process of nation-building.

The feedback gathered through these roundtables to discuss the Civil Society Assessment has and will guide Counterpart in tailoring I-PACS activities within the context of Afghanistan and the desires of its people. The Civil Society Assessment and annotated Roundtable Discussion Report will be utilized in planning the I-PACS activities for next year.

Some examples of the impact that the roundtable discussions have had on current program implementation are:

• Following recommendations from a number of roundtables, Counterpart began working with youth and changed the Gender Advisor's title to Gender and Youth Advisor and expanded her responsibilities to include youth oriented programs and capacity building efforts.
• Grants have been awarded to organizations working with youth in the promotion of civil society and in the elimination of violence against women.
• As a result of recommendations made by roundtable participants, research and study will be conducted on the power structures that present barriers to women organizing at all levels of Afghan society. This document, “Engendering Civil Society”, will be translated into local languages and disseminated across the country.

The Civil Society Assessment and Annotated Roundtables Discussion Report will be printed in booklet form and widely disseminated throughout the country. It is anticipated that this documentation of civil society will assist the CSO community in developing and implementing projects that will lead to a healthy civil society in Afghanistan and will guide donors in funding them.

The Civil Society Sector Assessment revealed that traditional civil society groups, such as shuras/jirgas, enjoy relatively higher credibility compared with the newer CSOs. In accordance with this finding, the roundtables called for civil society organizations to engage shuras/jirgas as significant players in the development of a vibrant civil society and healthy democratic state and for reaching out to remote communities.
Contrary to the findings of the Assessment, which showed that 67% of CSOs reported that the security situation does not pose a constraint to their effectiveness, roundtable participants viewed lack of security as one of the biggest challenges to the development of a civil society. The participants indicated that the worsening security situation will negatively impact CSOs, and particularly NGOs, ability to deliver services to the people. Furthermore, the disparity in the information provided may be tied to the context within which the security situation was being discussed.

Recommendations:

1. Like the survey and focus groups participants, the roundtable discussants believe that NGOs have a negative image in Afghan society. In response to this claim, it is recommended that NGOs proactively take advantage of existing media to inform the public of the issues they address, and their approaches and methods of achieving their objectives, as well as to report how they spend their resources. International and local organizations that strive to build the capacity of local NGOs should impart them with skills and knowledge necessary to successfully engage the media.

2. As part of the above recommendation to promote a more positive image of NGOs, it is recommended that NGOs, as well as other CSOs, engage their constituents in identifying priority issues, planning and implementing project activities, and assessing their effectiveness. By engaging constituents at every step of the way, CSOs will not only ensure that they respond to actual constituent needs, but will also demonstrate to the government that they act on behalf of and with their constituents. Local and international capacity building organizations should equip local NGOs and CSOs with the skills and knowledge that will enable them to engage their target population groups and their communities in the development process not only as beneficiaries, but as participants and stakeholders.

3. The roundtables provide a very enlightening description of the cultural traditions, customs and norms that are inherent to Afghan society. It is recommended that international NGOs make themselves aware of them and design programs and approaches that will be grounded in the Afghan culture so as to be most effective in reaching out to its people. For instance, international NGOs can use the tradition of uzor in their peace building and reconciliation projects, or imbed the tradition of aashar in their community development projects.