

POLICY BRIEF: BEYOND DIVIDING LINES

Youth-led Civic Engagement for Peace in Afghanistan

- While Afghanistan is recovering from four decades of violent conflict, many Afghan youths are active in civic engagement through social movements, educational means, and art-based peacebuilding.
- Young people's inner-drive to contribute to a more peaceful and secure society, and the support and opportunities provided by NGOs are among the main factors motivating youth to participate in civic engagement.
- Widespread poverty and unemployment, as well as negative community perceptions are barriers for Afghan youth to meaningfully participate in civic engagement.
- Governmental actors and other stakeholders should ensure meaningful participation of youth from diverse backgrounds at decision-making levels and in governmental institutions. They should furthermore support the improvement of educational opportunities for youth to facilitate their way out of poverty and unemployment.

Introduction

Four decades of nearly uninterrupted violent conflict and instability have deeply affected young people's lives in Afghanistan. Systems of patronage have traditionally excluded young Afghans from meaningful civic and political participation, despite their important stakes in the peace and statebuilding process.

However, many young people in Afghanistan are creating alternative spaces for participation, through advocacy, education, traditional and social media, and arts-based initiatives. They are driven by an inner motivation to change situations that affect them personally and their communities. The struggle for livelihoods and negative community perceptions about youth are frequently expressed as factors limiting

young people's motivation, time, level of education and mobility to engage.

The key objective of this policy brief is to propose a number of recommendations to stakeholders in Afghanistan to facilitate young people's engagement in peacebuilding by increasing motivators and breaking down barriers.

Context

Afghanistan is home to almost 36 million people. Pashtun make up the largest ethnic group followed by Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek, Aimak, Turmen, Baloch peoples, among other groups. Young people are the majority in Afghanistan, with approximately 63.7 percent of Afghans under 25 years of age.

In 2001, a United States-led coalition ousted the Taliban from power in Afghanistan, after which a new government and constitution was estab-

lished. Major challenges remain that limit the current government's ability to ensure inclusive and accountable decision making processes, and lasting stability in Afghanistan.

Since early 2018, there has been an upsurge in violence attacks by the Taliban and other insurgent groups. Last year saw the highest number of civilians killed by suicide attacks and aerial operations, since records have been kept on Afghanistan.

There are positive developments too. In August 2018, the Afghan President and Chief Executive Officer jointly welcomed the creation of the National Youth Parliament of Afghanistan as a positive step forward for democracy. Thirty-one of the youth parliamentarians ran for a seat in the following national parliamentary elections, of whom fourteen were successful.

Youth-led civic engagement in Afghanistan

Types of youth-led civic engagement

Many young Afghans are engaged in civic activities, especially those who reside in major cities and who are enrolled in formal education. Types of youth-led civic engagement in Afghanistan can be categorised into advocacy work, educational activities, art-based peace-building, and community development work.

While advocacy activities were the ones most mentioned by respondents, it is important to note that these were youth-led activities in the context of civil society organisations and other informal groups, and not in the framework of traditional party politics. Thinking beyond ethnic divisions and in terms of broader societal interests is of particular importance to respondents, in order to overcome the ethnic and tribal identity-based politics of the older generation of leaders.

After the 2014 presidential election, several youth-led movements emerged in Afghanistan in protest of young people's exclusion and marginalisation from policymaking and the deteriorating economic and security conditions. Examples include: *Jonbish-e-Tabasum* Movement, *Jonbish-e Roshanayee* ("Enlightenment Movement") and *Jonbish Rastakhiz-e Taghir* ("Resurrection of Change Movement"). In June 2018, a group led by the 27-year student Mohammad Iqbal Khyber marched for hundreds of kilometres from Helmad to Kabul, demanding an end to 40 years of war and violence in Afghanistan.

While these social movements enable Afghan youth to express their grievances and demands towards the government in a non-violent manner, the organic nature and lack of effective organisation restrict the impact and sustainability of these movements.

*"Peace cannot be kept by force,
it can only be achieved by understanding"*
Young woman from Badakhshan, Afghanistan

Youth-led civic engagement in Afghanistan takes on educational forms too, including debate clubs to sharpen critical analysis and public speaking skills of young Afghans on specific topics, such as women's rights and sustainable development goals. Youth organise book reading circles, youth symposiums, round tables and events that encourage collaboration between generations, such as the Model United Nations in Afghanistan. Most of these initiatives are organised by students associations at secondary and university level, and thus primarily reach youth with access to formal education.

Furthermore, youth express their political opinions and views through art-based peacebuilding, by creating murals and street paintings or writing music with critical lyrics.

Boosters

The growing civic space in Afghanistan since the fall of the Taliban regime and adoption of the 2004 constitutional framework has created a more enabling environment for youth-led civic engagement. But violence and insecurity persist. The primary motivation for respondents to engage in civic engagement is related to the inner-drive youth feel to address peace, security and social justice issues that affect them personally and their communities.

Afghan youth have a desire to work for, in and with the community in a safe environment with like-minded people. They seek a sense of belonging and recognition from the community, where they can exercise solidarity and empathy. Youth in Afghanistan also expressed the need to reach out to more people and to be part of wider social networks.

The second most reported motivator for Afghan youth are the opportunities and technical support provided by civil society organisations, that can increase their personal prospects for self-development and employment. Youth spoke of trainings, scholarships, exchange opportunities, and materials made available, and overall the support of the international community through NGOs as enabling factors.

Increased access to quality education, social media and international media are the other drivers that lead to youth into civic engagement.

Barriers

The main and most frequently mentioned factor limiting youth-led civic engagement were issues of poverty and unemployment. Youth struggle to survive, which limits their motivation, time, level of education and mobility to engage. The rising unemployment rate and deteriorating security situation has also led Afghan youth to leave the country in pursuit of better opportuni-

ties, posing challenges for the leadership and sustainability of civic groups and social movements.

Another limiting factor are negative community perceptions. Youth expressed they were often not taken seriously by elders, and that adults not only mistrusted them but often censored and discouraged young people from expressing their ideas. This emerges partly from the traditional norms that rule Afghan society. Activities and expressions of young people that challenge or are not part of that system of norms are discouraged and even rejected.

In relation to traditional beliefs it was also mentioned that prejudices related to certain minorities affect youth engagement in Afghanistan. For example, youth referred to systematic prejudices in Afghan governance against certain ethnic minorities, which is exacerbated by the ethnic quota system. Moreover, young women face even more constraints to engage in civic engagement due to prevailing social norms, lack of financial independence, and threats of insurgent groups targeting young women specifically.

"My request from the government is to unite the youth from various tribes and ethnic groups. If the government want a long lasting peace then it will need the mobilisation of all sects of people"

Young man from Herat, Afghanistan

Despite the increase of youth in government positions, respondents feel that this has only exhibited a symbolic role. Corruption and lack of government policies to address young people's marginalisation remain in the way of meaningful youth participation.

Finally, young people's security is frequently endangered by suicide attacks, bombing of civil

gatherings, and insurgence attacks on big cities. Many youth suffer from a sense of uncertainty, trauma and unhealed wounds with insufficient psychological support services in place.

Policy Recommendations

1. Governmental actors, civil society organisations and youth groups should collaborate to transform systems of patronage, ethnic divisions, and gendered barriers in local and national governance in Afghanistan.
2. Governmental actors and civil society should work jointly to sustain the positive momentum of the growing numbers of Afghan youth in government roles. In doing so, it is crucial that young people's roles extend beyond being the implementers of the administration's policies to having the ability to truly influence democratic processes.
3. Governmental actors and donor organisations should support young Afghans' meaningful economic inclusion by developing conflict-sensitive, inclusive and youth-centred employment programmes.
4. Governmental actors should work on educational reform, and improve access to quality higher education for young Afghans. Curricula reform should be geared at improving citizenship competences, and promoting values of peaceful co-existence, tolerance and openness.
5. The international community and local CSOs should support youth-led civic engagement through funding and technical advice to strengthen the impact and sustainability of these initiatives. Increased coordination among youth-led groups is crucial to effectively shape national policies and programming.
6. Governmental actors, CSOs and youth groups must partner up to develop national

strategies for the implementation of UN Security Council resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace, Security. Young people's participation in the peace talks and negotiations with the Taliban and other insurgents groups should be supported, as called for by UN Security Council resolution 2419.

7. Governmental actors and CSOs should establish mechanisms and educational programmes to support the active participation and positive cohesion of young refugees and migrants from Afghanistan in host communities. Governmental actors, CSOs and youth groups should collaborate to work towards long-term peace and security in Afghanistan, so that these youth may return to Afghanistan.

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Project description

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