



COUNTERPART

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Ulema: Religious Leaders with a Civic Voice Working with Counterpart toward Positive Civil Society Development in Afghanistan

In a country where the role of Islam is directly connected to both the name and practice of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, the Ulema (religious scholars) have a great deal of respect and influence among the population and within civil society.

Ulema opinions and interventions in social affairs carry a considerable weight, and they hold a key position in social discourse. Ulema can engender a positive popular perception of government and civil society which can promote a positive role for all citizens of Afghanistan.

The Ulema are a vital component of Afghan communities from the village level through urban centers. This is particularly important when considering that there are over 30,000 villages in the country, and that each has on average four to five mosques, with some larger population centers home to congregation

mosques. An Alem (singular form of Ulema) runs each of these mosques with varying level of religious knowledge and is an opinion-maker among believers and those who listen to his publicly expressed opinions.

Knowing the significance of Ulema influence in Afghan society, Counterpart Afghanistan began a project in 2008 to engage Ulema as prominent agents of change who are instrumental in the formation of public opinion throughout Afghanistan.

Counterpart Afghanistan organized eight roundtable discussions with Ulema participating from the capital Kabul, and three provinces around the country in the western province of Herat, Balkh to the north, and Nangarhar to the east of the capital. In these four areas, 68 participants took part, including 58 Ulema and nine women.

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An Alim at the Radio Roundtable Discussion

Afghan Youth representatives meet Parliamentarians to identify ways of increasing mutual understanding and overcoming challenges

On 30th March 2009, the Counterpart I-PACS Communications and outreach Manager, Kiomars Qahir, facilitated a meeting at Counterpart's Kabul office with 15 youth representatives of four civil society organizations (CSOs): Young Leadership Forum, Seeds of Peace, Support to Afghan Youth Organization, and Afghan Youth Cultural Organization who met with MPs Azita Rafat, Dr. Nemaat,

Shukria Barakzai and Shinkai Karokhel, all of whom are members of Parliament's Gender and Youth caucus.

The purpose of the Forum is to link CSOs with the committees of the upper and lower houses of Parliament that work on gender and civil society issues, to share information about civil society's achievements and challenges, and to identify ways of increasing mutual understanding between the two sectors. *(Continued on page 2)*

Counterpart Armenia provide Intermediate Advocacy Training to Counterpart Afghanistan I-PACS and Partner's Staff

Over the years Counterpart International Afghanistan provided several advocacy trainings to I-PACS partner organizations ISOs, CSSCs and CSOs. Advocacy is a new concept in Afghanistan and to build the capacity of its staff and partner organizations, Counterpart decided to contact one of its regional offices in either Azerbaijan or Armenia, that had experience in conducting advocacy programs to provide advanced advocacy trainings. Later it was decided to request the Armenian office's Chief of Party, Alex Sardar, whose civic advocacy support program was matching the Afghanistan to come and conduct the training. *(Continued on page 3)*



Advocacy training to the Counterpart I-PACS staff - Kabul

Ulema: Religious Leaders with a Civic Voice...

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The purpose of the roundtables was to promote discourse among Ulema and seek their opinions on the misperceptions and skepticism held by the general public about civil society. Through encouragement of positive dialogue, Counterpart succeeded in working with the participating Ulema to establish a clear perception of what civil society is, how it can help in the development of Afghanistan, and – through the direct engagement of Ulema at the community level – how the citizens of this country could become involved in the issues that matter to their communities.

The common findings in these roundtable discussions were that Ulema viewed civil society as a public space where people with different opinions can live together in peace and security. Civic engagement is an opportunity to ensure the spiritual and physical rights of all citizens, and a means by which all citizens have open access to resources without intractable obstacles or discriminatory practices. Participants also said that civil society is based on the principle that males and females enjoy equal rights according to Islamic values and teachings.

Another interesting finding in these roundtable discussions was Ulema's diverse opinions on gender equity and equality, and the role of such equality in Afghan civil society. Some participants believe that gender means that men and women should work together for the good of society whereas others believed that the concept of gender refers to the equal rights of men and women. Most of the Ulema agreed on women working in a professional setting but only if observing the Islamic laws such as wearing proper Hijab (head scarf). They also expressed a variety of opinions regarding the concept of "democracy." According to some Ulema, western democracy promotes individualism in which individuals can

sit together to determine legislation whereas Islam forbids this practice as according to the Holy Qur'an these decisions are made by a religious council. Some chose instead to advocate for an Islamic model of democracy which promoted a faith-based state in which both men and women have the right to choose.

The major lesson learned from Counterpart's Afghanistan roundtable discussions is that though Ulema have different opinions regarding issues such as civil society, democracy, gender, government, and political parties, their views are still highly respected and widely attended to by the general public. Not including them in any development process would leave a void in the process and could create serious obstacles to direct civic engagement by international NGOs and domestic organizations interested in promoting inclusive civic interaction in any Islamic Republic, including Afghanistan.

The Afghan government, international donors, and domestic civil society organizations would benefit from designing inclusive programs where religious leaders, such as this country's Ulema, learn through open dialogue about the mutually-agreeable goals of internationally-sponsored development activities in Afghanistan, and recognize the contribution all participants in the civic space can play in ensuring that a diverse set of voices is heard. The Ulema and Mullahs of Afghanistan have demonstrated that they are open to such dialogue, discussion, and debate, and Counterpart International is encouraging the promotion of inclusive and environmentally sensitive dialogue on all aspects of democratic values, civil society engagement, and the importance of civic education, respect for the rights of women, participation in the political life of Afghanistan, and taking part in a positive manner in elections and the electoral process.

Counterpart, ICNL Facilitate Roundtable Discussion on Civil Society

On 28th March 2009, Counterpart Afghanistan and ICNL conducted the first of its two planned roundtable discussions on civil society issues. The two-hour live roundtable discussion introduced the concept of civil society, highlighted NGO-related legal issues, and explored the role of civil society organizations in the current and future development of Afghanistan.

The program was facilitated by Counterpart's Legal Advisor, Aemal Sanjeeda, and featured H.E. Mohammad Halim Fidai, the Governor of Wardak Province, who is a vocal and knowledgeable advocate of civil society development in Afghanistan. The roundtable event was broadcast via Radio Television of Afghanistan (RTA). RTA reaches an audience

of six million potential listeners through its nation-wide coverage in 34 provinces.

The purpose of program was to increase the general population's understanding of civil society and clarify many of the issues and misperceptions that currently exist on this topic in the country.

Counterpart received a positive response to its discussion on civil society, and received a number of calls during the program. Counterpart will continue public dialogue of this type to enhance public perception of civil society and to highlight the positive nature and productive role of civil society organizations in Afghanistan.

Afghan Youth representatives meet Parliamentarians to ...*(Continued from page 1)*

Representatives of participating youth organizations discussed youth unemployment, lack of opportunity for youth participation in policymaking processes, and limited access to education in Afghanistan.

MP Azita Rafat, chair of the youth caucus in Parliament, took note of the issues raised and promised to bring them up at the next parliamentary caucus meeting. Participants asked for the opportunity to attend the next caucus meeting to discuss their concerns with MPs directly. MP Rafat expressed willingness to consider their request and extend an invitation

to the next caucus meeting. Participants were also encouraged to meet with presidential nominees during the run-up to the August 20 presidential election to discuss youth-related issues while advocating for their concerns to be included in the presidential electoral platforms.

The CSO representatives will also be responsible for determining a follow up mechanism for coordinating their interaction with the parliament. Counterpart will continue to monitor forum activities, and provide technical assistance as needed in the future.

Counterpart Armenia provide Intermediate Advocacy Training...*(Continued from page 1)*

Alex Sardar visited Afghanistan in October 2008 and met with I – PACS senior management to assess the present capacity and assess their training needs. Finally it was decided that there should be a three day intermediate advocacy training accompanied by a two day training of trainers from March 15 to March 19, 2009. The trainings were attended by Counterpart's senior program staff and partner organizations' staff working with I-PACS. A total of 22 participants (including eight females) from Counterpart, I-PACS Intermediary Service Organizations and Civil Society Support Centers participated in the training. The trainings addressed both basic and more advanced advocacy concepts, definitions and mechanisms such as definition of advocacy, identification of

sources and uses of power, identifying a relevant community issue, and the advocacy campaign process. The training equipped Counterpart's program staff with analytical skills to judge the quality and efficacy of proposed advocacy interventions in the Afghan context.

Counterpart intends to reward advocacy grants later on this year under the advocacy re-granting program to its I-PACS partners to be implemented later in 2009. As a result of the training and ToT modules, Counterpart and partner organizations will establish a pool of "advocacy resource persons" who will deliver basic advocacy trainings to I-PACS target CSOs in order to equip them with necessary knowledge and skills to design and implement advocacy campaigns throughout Afghanistan.

Working With Civil Society Partners to Enhance Sustainability: I-PACS training focuses on creating sustainable CSOs throughout Afghanistan

An assessed lack of organizational capacity prevents many small Afghan civil society organizations (CSOs) from acquiring sustainable donor funding to ensure independent long-term operation. Securing funds is not an easy task for



Afghan Capacity Building Organization staff

grassroots CSOs as many face difficulties competing with larger, more established organizations. Despite the significant challenges, however, some CSOs are showing substantial progress in Afghanistan.

The Afghan Capacity Building Organization (ACBO) is a not-for-profit organization established in Kabul in 2005 by a group of enthusiastic civic activists who were dedicated and determined to carry out development work with direct community participation. Based on its vision and mission, ACBO was selected as a Counterpart target CSO in December 2005, thanks to generous funding from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). One of the core objectives of the Counterpart Initiative to Promote Afghan Civil Society (I-PACS) is to build the capacity of its nine partner organizations in ten regions of the country. These civil society groups include two Intermediary Service Organizations (ISOs) and seven Civil Society Support Centers (CSSCs) with a focus on creating a sustainable infrastructure to support the development of CSOs throughout Afghanistan. Counterpart's two ISOs provide capacity building assistance to a network of seven Afghan CSSCs, located in ten regions throughout Afghanistan. The ISOs and the CSSCs are providing direct training, development support, and technical assistance to 205 grassroots CSOs.

Prior to I-PACS-sponsored training, ACBO submitted seven project proposals to various donor organizations, but failed to

secure any funding due to a lack of internal capacity and insufficient experience with the community needs assessment process and project proposal development. After becoming an I-PACS partner CSO, ACBO staff had the opportunity to participate in various trainings offered by Counterpart, particularly on community problem solving and project design and proposal writing. These trainings helped the organization and its staff to learn how to bring together a diverse group of community members to identify issues and then propose solutions to priority concerns. In addition, the training familiarized ACBO's staff with the concept of the project cycle and the basics of project proposal development and follow-up assessment.

ACBO staff found the training program practical, useful, and well-suited to their needs. The program enabled ACBO staff to conceptualize and design tools for addressing community needs and priorities. Thereafter, ACBO developed various project proposals and successfully secured more than USD \$200,000.00 in funding for eight discrete projects. These projects were:

- Three projects from Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) for establishing Community Based Schools in Parwan and Kabul providing basic computer and English language courses to 1,050 girls from age 7 to 25;
- A women's rights, literacy and vocational training project from UNIFEM;
- A general administration, office management and basic accounting trainings project from the Swedish Committee, and;
- One project from Euro International Afghanistan and two from ACSF in Kabul, Parwan, Logar and Ghazni provinces.

Baryalai Rashidi, director of ACBO appreciating Counterpart training supports said, "I see ACBO as one of the leading civil society organizations in the near future helping the poor people of Afghanistan."

The knowledge and skills developed with direct Counterpart support allowed ACBO to provide vital services to communities around the country while helping to ensure the long-term sustainability of this partner CSO.

Counterpart ISO partner AWEC expands ...*(Continued from page 4)*

One of the core activities of AWEC is to support women through mobilizing the community for elimination of violence against women. This aim is being achieved through estab-

lishment of women's shuras that closely work with the community to improve women's status in their family and community at large.

The I-PACS and STEP staff support some extremely poor Afghan families in Kabul

Every year the harsh winter hits Afghanistan and millions of its population, who are homeless and suffer from lack of warmth, clothing, shelter, and a hot meal. During the past few years, Afghanistan has witnessed a considerable in-



Akbar and his family

crease in the number of people living in devastating conditions due to the returnees' influx from neighboring countries.

Counterpart took the initiative to raise the issue in-house in Kabul, and to help those in need in Kabul, the I-PACS and Counterpart Support to Electoral Process (STEP) staff held a series of meeting and promised to financially support some disadvantaged Afghan families. Staff voluntarily took on different responsibilities, including identifying needy families, and providing food items to these citizens in need. In two weeks time, Counterpart staff were able to raise \$5800 dollars donations from staff and interested donors. The winter 2009 aid package that was delivered to 40 families in Kabul included blankets, flour, oil, sugar, tea, rice and other food items.

Akbar, who lost his left leg stepping over a roadside mine, planted during the Afghan civil war, while coming from Bamyán to Kabul to meet his relatives, is a father of nine children. He is earning his living through cleaning one of the Mosques in Kabul city. Akbar thanked Counterpart by saying, "I am extremely happy seeing this much food for my family, at least I will be able to relax for a couple of months". He also said that being disabled, it is very difficult to earn living for the family and children.

Counterpart and ICNL raise awareness among students and young people on the importance of Law and Gender issues

On 25th March 2009, 400 Kabul high school students participated in a televised competition facilitated by Counterpart I-PACS partner the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL). The program focused on civil society, gender and legal issues. 80 girls and 320 boys participated in the competition, with 20 students (10 male and 10 female) competing on stage for the honor of first place.

The aim of the competition was to raise awareness among students and young people of civil society, the importance of law, and gender issues.

Prior to the competition, each participating student received a questions and answers booklet, printed by Counterpart, with 50 questions and answers relating to civil society, law and gender issues. At the conclusion of the competition, the audience indicated, through a short survey conducted by

Radio and Television Afghanistan that they had learned a great deal from viewing the event.

To increase the impact of the event, Radio Television of Afghanistan (RTA) broadcast the program to a national audience, reaching all 34 provinces in the country. The program was aired on Friday, 30th January 2009 and was re-broadcast on Saturday, 31st January 2009. In addition, 400 copies of the 50 questions and answers booklet were distributed among the participants. Taken together, these activities are anticipated to increase the nationwide educational impact of the competition among students and youth, and should enhance understanding of the importance and meaning of civil society, law in society, and gender issues.

Counterpart ISO partner AWEC expands work into Eastern Provinces of Afghanistan

Since its inception in 1991, the Afghan Women's Education Center (AWEC) has worked in support of vulnerable women and children through programs and projects that aim to change women's living condition and promote child welfare. In addition, AWEC is committed to advocate and lobby for women and child's rights and to support marginalized women nationwide.

Through mid-2008, AWEC had two regional offices in north of the country (Balkh and Faryab) and two offices in south of the country in Paktia and Wardak, with a main office in Kabul. In December 2008 AWEC strategically moved to the east of

Afghanistan by establishing a regional office in Nangarhar to cover the eastern provinces (Laghman, Nuristan, and Kunar). This new regional office is supported by the Interfaith Organization for Development Co-operation (ICCO) and recently The Asia Foundation also contributed to the stability of the regional office by awarding AWEC a one year grant.

Through its projects for women AWEC undertake activities including awareness rising for women's rights, training workshops on different topics including vocational trainings, capacity building, psycho-social wellness trainings, health education, literacy, peace education etc.

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