THE STEADY MARCH OF PROGRESS

Best Practices, Tools, and Techniques to Engage Civil Society in Afghanistan
“State-building is impossible without civil society. Business, civil society, and government form a triangle of stability. Like government, civil society is responsible for fighting corruption, creating transparency, and contributing in the reconstruction and development of the country.”

- President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani, October 5, 2014

“We are certain that Afghanistan will never go back to the past because there are thousands of likeminded youth who are hopeful and work fearlessly to make their country with their own hands. They have hope that the international community will not abandon them halfway.”

- Ramiz Bakhtiar, Afghanistan’s Youth Representative to the United Nations, September 18, 2018
Since 2001, the size and scope of Afghanistan’s civil society has expanded to include more than 5,000 registered civil society organizations (CSOs) and nearly 3,000 associations – all actively engaged in a wide range of social, political, and economic issues. Afghanistan’s civil society wields tremendous potential to mitigate grievances, mobilize communities for localized socio-economic development, and promote responsive governance. Counterpart International has worked with CSOs, civic activists, communities, and key government allies across Afghanistan for 14 years to establish the foundation for a democratic, prosperous, and stable future. In that time, Counterpart has seen a steady maturation of the civil society sector, including an improved enabling environment for CSOs, more effective CSO-led advocacy and government oversight, and increased public trust due to improved service provision by CSOs and the corresponding positive media coverage of these efforts. Notably, the emergence of women and youth as civic leaders has brought new energy and ideas to the sector. Counterpart maintains that Afghan civil society is an essential element in the emergent peace process and the march towards the country’s democratic future. To this end, the sector requires continued domestic and international support to protect fundamental freedoms and rights, engage citizens in the political process, and deliver socioeconomic services in hard to reach places.

This paper highlights Counterpart’s diverse work strengthening civil society, focusing on ten key areas. It also details lessons learned and corresponding recommendations for continued support for Afghan civil society. As international funding for Afghanistan recedes, we believe that well-placed domestic and international investments in Afghan civil society will enhance the country’s self-reliance and bring about a more stable, democratic, and prosperous future for the Afghan people.

COUNTERPART’S WORK EMPHASIZES:

1. **Securing Peace:** Realizing the value of skill-building in prolonged conflicts, our training equips CSOs to lead collaborative dialogue sessions, utilize civic tools for peaceful change, and build resiliency to crises. Counterpart has worked with youth activists and conflict mitigation experts to develop a Peacebuilding and Political Activism Training for Youth. This inclusive training informs participants about the important role that young men and women can play in participatory governance, as well as conflict mitigation and peacebuilding at the community level. Following this training, beneficiaries of Counterpart-implemented activities have assumed leadership roles on the national and international stages. At the 2018 UN Geneva Conference on Afghanistan, for example, our CSO partners led a session focus-
ing on challenges and opportunities for government and civil society engagement. The session reached consensus on the premise that civil society should strive for higher standards of transparency and accountability and that government should more fully involve civil society in the country's peace process, political reforms, and development agenda. Further demonstrating the broad reach of our program, one third of the delegates chosen to represent Afghan civil society at the 2018 conference were Counterpart partners.

2. **Strengthening Youth Initiatives:** Given that youth comprise approximately 65% of the population of Afghanistan, they wield immense capacity to shape the future of their communities. Counterpart’s Emerging Civil Society Leaders (ECSL) program gives participating youth access to a leadership development training series, exposure to international best practices through a learning exchange program, and small grants to apply newly learned skills. To date, the program has nearly 150 graduates (40% women), most of whom are actively involved in the ECSL alumni network. Six ECSL alumni ran for Parliament in the 2018 elections and two were elected. Program alumni also serve on regional high peace councils and have gone on to coordinate local peacebuilding efforts – from developing radio programs on reconciliation to hosting public debates in universities. By enabling youth to cultivate leadership and core inter-personal skills, ECSL members are well positioned to foster organic change from the ground-up in a way that is responsive to the needs of their communities. In a 2018 survey of ECSL alumni, 87% of those surveyed indicated that they became more active in their communities, and 70% stated they became a member and/or volunteer with a CSO following their participation in Counterpart’s training program. Continuing investments in youth leadership and civic skills will ensure continued growth, innovation, and vibrancy of the civil society sector.

3. **Mobilizing Communities for Stability and Development:** In response to urgent community infrastructure and public service needs in rural Afghanistan, Counterpart worked with CSOs to convene communities to discuss, prioritize, develop, and execute local stabilization and development projects. This rural outreach and focus on community-driven development helped our partner CSOs build constituencies and contributed to a sense of local ownership and momentum, as demonstrated by the hundreds of projects that were subsequently implemented without international funding. Having worked at the community level, we have applied context-driven “do no harm” principles which enabled us to navigate sensitive social norms and power structures. Counterpart’s Inclusive Social Accountability developmental framework further allows us to be responsive to the needs of each community we work with, while accounting for the social, cultural, and economic factors that can drive exclusionary practices. Our current work focuses on good governance and includes facilitating inclusive planning and budgeting, hosting responsive governance working groups, awarding advocacy initiatives to improve social service provision, and creating economic opportunities that meet the needs of the entire community, including marginalized groups.

4. **Forging Connections Between the Capital and the Countryside:** Historically, Afghanistan’s Kabul-based government has struggled to connect and govern the entirety of the country. Due to insecurity, treacherous terrain, and societal divisions, Afghan civil society faces a similar challenge. From the beginning of our work in Afghanistan, Counterpart aimed to build relationships and natural networks among
CSOs throughout the country. Adapting a methodology that had been successful for our civil society strengthening work in Central Asia, Counterpart created a cascading system of CSO capacity building services, community mobilization, advocacy, and grantmaking. In our current regional clustering model, Counterpart cascades capacity development to regional CSOs who then transfer skills and coordinate activities amongst their networks of local CSOs; these networks are “clustered” around shared development, advocacy, and governance issues. This networked systems approach has been effective when conducting research, sharing information or learning products, and ensuring that local policy issues are elevated to the national level. Additionally, these networks can be activated to transfer ideas and messaging on peacebuilding – supporting peaceful political transitions and non-violent civic engagement throughout the country.

5. Developing CSO Financial Self-Reliance: With decreasing international funding available to Afghan CSOs, Counterpart is working with CSO partners to transfer marketable skills and develop new strategies to achieve financial sustainability. We are working with corporate and government partners to build up a domestic funding base and strengthen the enabling environment for CSO viability through tax and legislative changes. These changes are intended to encourage social contracting, social enterprises, and community funds. Counterpart has worked with 13 partner CSOs through a pilot initiative to develop sustainable business plans and most have since initiated income generating activities. The Afghan Women Education Center in Kabul, for instance, started a printing press to produce materials at a reduced cost for other CSOs. In addition, the Coordination of Rehabilitation and Development Services in Herat began growing and selling saffron to provide employment to local women and used the revenue to offset declining international donor funding.

6. Improving Access to Information: Afghan media plays a critical role in the country’s democratic process. Counterpart has worked with key media stakeholders to achieve significant gains in improving access to information, particularly in rural areas, and developing the capacity of the media to provide higher quality content. Our partner Internews also supports citizen engagement around public policy, expanding community radio programs, and producing content on the importance of civic engagement, elections, and peace negotiations. In addition, we have provided opportunities for civil society leaders to leverage social media for social movements. In 2014, Counterpart organized Civic Engagement through Social Media, the country’s first conference on using social media for social good. Following the conference, the Social Media for Social Change Fellowship was established to identify, train, and empower civic voices in online advocacy. In 2018, Counterpart organized Security, Rights, and Professionalism, a national media conference co-organized by the Afghanistan National Journalists Union. The conference resulted in a resolution to set up a joint coordination committee to review Access to Information Law (AIL) violations. The committee also redrafted the AIL and lobbied for its eventual approval by Parliament.

7. Strengthening Legal Framework for Fundamental Freedoms and Rights: Counterpart-supported advocacy efforts in Afghanistan focus on fundamental freedoms (access to information and the right to assemble), good governance (budget transparency, social service provision), and human rights. By building strategic relationships, cultivating international best practices, and mobilizing domestic civil
society, Counterpart and our partner, the International Center for Not-for-profit Law (ICNL), were able to secure passage of the first Afghan NGO Law, signed by the President in 2005. Additionally, we helped create the framework and legal process for government contracting of social service delivery by CSOs. Counterpart and Internews’ efforts were critical in passing the initial and subsequently improved Access to Information Law. The Afghanistan Institute for Civil Society (AICS), launched in 2015 through a partnership between Counterpart and the Aga Khan Foundation, has emerged as a formidable think tank and advocacy organization. AICS conducts regular civil society and governance research and develops policy briefs that form the basis for community-led advocacy campaigns. They have also initiated an evaluation and accreditation service for CSOs to raise the standards for accountability and performance in the sector. The expanded involvement of Afghan academia, think tanks, and CSOs in the policymaking process will only serve to strengthen the country’s democratic foundation.

8. **Coordinating Development Efforts:** Counterpart, both within our own consortium and among the wider development community in Afghanistan, has played a leading role in coordination and collaboration of activities. Counterpart was an early member of and technical leader in the Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief and Development (ACBAR), namely in the area of promoting CSO transparency and accountability, which has resulted in the adoption of a voluntary sector code of conduct. Counterpart has also assumed technical leadership of the Civil Society Joint Working Group (CSJWG), which coordinates local civil society advocacy and input on policy, serving as a primary interlocutor for civil society with the Afghan government. With 550 members, CSJWG supports 15 CSO forums advocating for issues including human rights, women’s empowerment, humanitarian relief, and civic engagement. This model is currently being expanded to establish regional working groups in Herat, Mazar e Sharif, Jalalabad, Kandahar and Bamyan.

9. **Ensuring Gender Equity and Mainstreaming:** Counterpart has been a pioneer in supporting women’s empowerment and gender mainstreaming work in Afghanistan. Working with civil society and members of the National Assembly, we sparked a movement for gender-based budgeting and gender analysis for draft legislation. Counterpart organized the First Women’s Council to advance the National Action Plan for Afghan Women in 2008. Our 2014 Summit for Women Leaders in Afghanistan brought together nearly 200 women across multiple sectors to exchange innovative ideas and build partnerships to creatively promote social reforms. In 2018, ACEP’s Men Supporting Women’s Rights Working Group reviewed the Cybercrime Law of Afghanistan and submitted recommendations incorporating a women’s rights perspective to the government, and the relevant ministries expressed a commitment to work towards incorporating the recommendations into the Law.

10. **Including Persons with Disabilities:** Counterpart convened dozens of leading Afghan disabled person organizations (DPOs) to create a national advocacy network, which has organized local and national policy dialogue events and has advocated for increased public budgets for disabled persons. By organizing conferences, public awareness initiatives, and roundtables with policymakers, Counterpart has supported dozens of activists in their campaigns to promote inclusion and equality. For example, our 2017 Disability Rights Conference resulted in the establishment of the “Independent National Authority on the Disabled,” which has set out to deliver timely and more equitable services that empower persons
with disability in social, economic, cultural, political, and civil aspects of life. We have found that DPOs are extremely effective advocates for their constituents. As a result, Counterpart employs DPO advocacy leaders as trainers and mentors to CSOs advocating for reforms across a variety of sectors.

LESSONS LEARNED & RECOMMENDATIONS

Counterpart has provided training, technical assistance, and/or grants to an estimated 1,500 Afghan CSOs since 2004. As a result of this work, civil society organizations now have the operational and financial capacity to manage donor funds, mobilize communities, develop advocacy skills, and work with the government to positively affect change at the national and sub-national levels. In order to sustain the gains achieved over the past decade, we recommend the following:

• **Continue developing the capacity of CSOs.** Despite the growth in numbers, capacity, and recognition of CSOs in Afghanistan, the sector continues to face significant challenges, including a lack of government support, lack of domestic financial resources, insecurity, and limited transparency and accountability. The international community should continue supporting capacity building programming and consider incentivizing cost-sharing, crowd-funding, and social entrepreneurial activities to mitigate donor dependency and ensure that initiatives are locally driven.

• **Utilize grants – awarded and monitored by local CSO network partners – to enhance and apply learning.** Counterpart’s experience is that training without grants and grants without prior capacity building are both limited in their impact. Building capacity through training and technical assistance, and then supporting applied learning and action through grants, has proven to be an effective model of achieving impact. In addition, supporting financial diversification strategies (e.g. social enterprise co-ops, establishing community funds, corporate social investment funds, and Afghan ISO re-granting organizations) will make Afghan CSOs more self-reliant and less dependent on international donor financing.

• **Employ positive youth development and engage youth-led organizations to revitalize civic activism.** The youth voice in Afghanistan has been one of the loudest and most compelling of late, but youth leaders need support to translate their civic energy into long-term action and policy impacts. Too often, youth are under-utilized due to traditional power structures that favor elders. The international community could consider a two-pronged approach in which they support greater youth integration and opportunities in integrated governance programs, while also awarding funding to youth-led, youth-designed, and/or youth serving programs.

• **Link Afghan CSOs with local, regional, and international peers for shared learning and action.** Counterpart has had tremendous success organizing learning exchanges among Afghans and their peers in Central, South, and Southeast Asia, as well as Europe and the United States. Regular learning exchanges abroad have resulted in the establishment of new models and practices of government and civil society interaction, such as public councils, citizen monitoring of public services, increased accountability through certification, and greater transparency among civil society. In addition to exchanges, the international community could provide CSOs with opportunities for cross-sector networking, convening, dialogue, and shared learning – particularly outside of the capital and larger cities.
• **Partner local CSOs with international experts to create an enabling environment for CSOs.** While civil society is much more than the laws that govern it, it is important to have a strong policy and legislative base for the sector. For more than a decade, Counterpart and ICNL have worked together with Afghan CSOs to draft, advocate for, and enforce an enabling environment for civil society in Afghanistan. These joint efforts have resulted in three key legislative tools: the Law on NGOs, the Law on Associations, and the Access to Information Law. Importantly, because Afghan CSOs were involved in the drafting and advocacy for these laws, they include strong requirements around monitoring and reporting on their enforcement. Additional efforts to engage CSOs operating at the sub-national level are required to strengthen the enabling environment of CSOs outside of Kabul.

• **Support CSO-led peacebuilding.** A recent survey of our partners and grantees found that 95% were working on peacebuilding and violence prevention – indicating a growth in capacity of the peace and security sector. To further support these organic initiatives, the international development community should integrate violence prevention and mitigation elements into cross-sectoral program design. Activities could include creating curriculum development for in-school and out-of-school programs, promoting non-violent negotiation and dispute resolution tools, ensuring social inclusion and equitably shared benefits from public services and local development projects, and creating positive pathways for youth. In order to better understand what approaches and activities work, program implementers should employ complexity-aware monitoring and evaluation practices and be ready to learn and adapt quickly to move away from what is not working and invest in what does.

• **Ensure inclusion accounting for gender, religion, ethnicity, and other differences.** From embedding gender and social inclusion into our CSO capacity building efforts to holding the first ever National Women’s Conference in Afghanistan, we work with local stakeholders – including cultural thought leaders, religious scholars, and community leaders – to promote reform within a culturally appropriate paradigm. To sustain these efforts, informal segments of civil society – including tribal and religious networks – should be included in future civil society strengthening initiatives to ensure a broad systems-based approach.

• **Leverage new and traditional media.** The use of data-enabled smartphones as a communication platform and source of information presents a tremendous opportunity for networking, advocacy campaigns, virtual activity monitoring, learning, and more. Donors can facilitate and fund social enterprise investment fairs, rapid prototyping for new technologies, and social innovation labs to bring the private, civic, and public sectors together to develop new solutions to old problems. Counterpart’s Innovation for Change program is deploying an immensely popular Innovation Lab methodology, which includes rapid prototyping of innovative social solutions, pitch fests, and securing idea funding through local business. Testing these and other social maker activities in Afghanistan could have the potential to accelerate socio-economic development.
THE PATH FORWARD

As Afghanistan enters new rounds of peace talks and the international community re-evaluates its security footprint in country, now is the time to leverage our soft power tools to ensure a peaceful and stable future for Afghans. With the right training, networking support, and opportunities for establishing social partnerships with the public sector, Afghanistan’s civil society is well positioned to be a more prominent part of the country’s peaceful and prosperous future. Investing in the development of civil society is vital to stabilizing the country and safeguarding the investments of the international community that have supported the development of democratic structures, respect for human rights, equal access to education, economic integration, and private enterprise. Leveraging Counterpart’s 14+ years of experience working with the CSO sector, we are well positioned to help ensure that the right steps are taken to sustain the international community’s investments and support Afghan CSOs on their steady march towards self-reliance.