



Non-Governmental Public Action RESEARCH BRIEFING

Civil society in crisis:

State-building and civil-military relations in Afghanistan

- Civil society is critical to state-building in Afghanistan and thus the achievement of the west's and Afghanistan's security interests.
- The role envisaged for civil society is depoliticized and limited to service delivery,
- Foreign militaries are increasingly involved in development, blurring civil-military boundaries
- State-building and military developmental interventions undermine the independent spaces of civil society for political deliberation
- Civil society needs therefore to articulate more clearly its roles and objectives



Civil Society post-9/11

The pursuit of the west's security interests through force and soft power has accelerated and intensified the convergence of aid, security and foreign policy goals, operations and institutions. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Afghanistan, which is re-emerging as the front-line in America's 'War on Terror'. Internationally-backed reconstruction and state-building in Afghanistan have involved refashioning state-civil society relations through aid and military intervention in development.

The same forces of soft and hard power that made Afghanistan a rentier state in the past have in turn generated since 2001 a civil society that is heavily aid dependent and externally oriented. The numbers of NGOs spiralled following the US invasion of Afghanistan. By 2003, there were an estimated 2000 NGOs, a figure including many private construction sector agencies that paraded as NGOs. NGOs have assumed a salience in reconstruction that overshadows the roles of customary institutions such as shuras, jirgas, and ulema and have come to embody the very essence of civil society.

Civil society regulation and law

With the proliferation of NGOs post-9/11

the public perception of NGOs also deteriorated. To address this key civil society actors have sought to regularize and legitimise the position of NGOs through an NGO Code of Conduct in 2004 and influencing the content of a new NGO Act in 2005 that reduced the number of registered NGOs to around 1,100 in February 2007. Although the new

NGO Act was a considerable improvement on existing regulations, it also allowed for greater governmental control of NGOs and, as elsewhere in the

world, incorporated new counter-terrorism provisions.

Debate on the new NGO law revealed the unease felt by some Afghan ministers and bureaucrats towards NGOs, feeding into negative public perceptions. These tensions came to a crescendo in May 2006 when US military personnel shot into a crowd protesting at civilian fatalities in a car accident involving US troops. The protest quickly spiraled as crowds rampaged through the streets, attacking the offices of some international NGOs. The riots gave an added push to pressures to enhance the probity and legitimacy of NGOs.

The number of NGOs spiralled following the US invasion

NGPA Programme

The Economic and Social Research Council Non-Governmental Public Action research programme is a unique opportunity to further understand the impact of non-governmental public action in reducing poverty and exclusion, and in social transformation, from an international comparative and multi-disciplinary perspective.

Public action by and for disadvantaged people, undertaken by non-governmental organisations and others, is increasingly significant at local and international levels. The focus of the programme is not just on NGOs, but on a broader range of formal and informal non-governmental actors concerned with poverty reduction and social transformation. These might include advocacy networks, campaigns and coalitions, trades unions, peace groups, social forums, rights-based groups, social movements and business in the community initiatives.

Building systematically on research to date, this programme will develop theory, generate new empirical theory, and foster beneficial linkages between researchers and users.



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State-building and civil society

The flagship initiative to strengthen the Afghan state has been the National Solidarity Programme (NSP), which has involved the establishment of Community Development Councils (CDCs) for participatory development. The government hoped thereby to enhance its legitimacy by delivering benefits on the ground and so reduce support for the insurgency.

CDCs have both overlaid and contrasted with pre-existing governance structures and authorities such as shuras, mosques and mulahs, which draw on grassroots legitimacy and mediate local conflicts. In contrast, CDCs are intended to implement development projects and are supported from above. They are not about developing Afghan civil society as such.

The idea of the state being promoted through the NSP, Afghan constitution and National Development Strategy is profoundly neo-liberal. The functions of the state are envisaged to be limited to national security, law and order, and maintaining managerial oversight of private sector and civil society actors engaged in social service delivery.

lished a new sphere of association but one that has struggled to maintain its autonomy and define independently its own priorities, goals and roles.

Civil society groups dependent on aid have acquiesced to their depoliticised role. They have not debated, for example, how sub-contractual relations might jeopardise claims to be independent or how by implementing the government's development priorities they could be perceived as taking sides in the conflict.

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Civil-military relations

The military strategy of the 'War on Terror' in Afghanistan has in part relied on intensifying civil-military relations, provoking heated debate about the independence and neutrality of aid workers. The debate dates to November 2002, when the US first introduced provincial reconstruction teams (PRTs) comprising military personnel and civilian government experts carrying out development activities alongside civil society groups.

there is no specific evidence to suggest that the military's involvement in aid is not responsible for attacks on relief workers.

However, NGOs have been unable to make their case strongly, at least on the grounds of humanitarian principles. Their involvement in development projects alongside the government has undermined their claims to neutrality and impartiality. Many believe that NGOs have struggled to define themselves in a quickly evolving situation, and walked blindly into the role of sub-contractor to the state.

Conclusion

Aid funds have contributed to re-drawing the associational map in Afghanistan, lending power, authority and resources to new players in the form of local, bureaucratically amenable, NGOs and CDCs. Many Afghans associate these new players in Afghan civil society with the government. To a degree NGOs are a scapegoat for frustrations over development failures, deteriorating security, persistent corruption, and the complicity of external governments in accommodating criminal elements in key government positions.

However, the onus is increasingly on NGOs to better define their role in a situation



By comparison, other potential roles for civil society such as acting as a watch-dog on the state, holding government bureaucrats and politicians to account, promoting transparency and accountability, have been overlooked as security interests have trumped democratization goals in state-building. Some donors led by the US have supported initiatives to build civil society, creating 'modern' institutions deemed appropriate in a liberal democratic state. They have estab-

NGOs argued that military personnel involved in assistance activities blur the lines between civil and military actors leading to the erosion of humanitarian space and threats to the safety of NGO workers. As one interviewee commented: "Civil society with guns is not civil society". Predictably, donors, militaries and PRT personnel do not share NGO objections, arguing that the death of aid workers cannot be linked to PRTs or military interventions in development. Yet,

in which donors and the military will continue to determine strategy and policy.

The reluctance of NGOs to recognise that they too are actors in a deeply politicised drama points to the dangers of trying to maintain a guise of neutrality. Afghanistan demonstrates well the need for NGOs to reflect more deeply on their own positions in the highly charged situations in which they intervene, and where the illusion of neutrality may not be an option.