

POLICY BRIEF: COUNTRY NAME

Beyond Dividing Lines.

The reality of youth-led peacebuilding in
Afghanistan, Colombia, Libya and Sierra Leone.

United Network of Young Peacebuilders in collaboration with Afghans for Progressive Thinking, Fundación Escuelas de Paz, Together We Built It and Youth Participation in Peace and Development-Sierra Leone (YPPD-SL), conducted a research project through which comparatively analyzed youth-led civic engagement in Afghanistan, Libya, Sierra Leone and Colombia during January – October 2018 to contribute to an increasingly evidence-based approach to policies and programming related to peace and security. This policy brief is the findings and policy recommendations reflected from 47 conversations, 3 focus group discussions and 5 key informant interviews with Afghan youth, government officials and donor organizations, carried out by local researchers in Afghanistan: Kabul, Herat, Mazar, Badakhshan, Iran: Qom, Mashhad and Tehran.

Introduction

Post 2001, youth representation in Afghanistan has been a growing trend in society, politics, economy and culture. Along with the fact that youth in Afghanistan demographically makes a major population of this country of which about 63.7 percent of Afghans are under 25 years of age[1]. Considering the above fact, there is a crucial need to enable the environment for civic participation of youth by identifying their needs and recognizing their positive role in peacebuilding in Afghanistan.

The main aim of this peace of research is to contribute to an increasingly evidence-based approach to policies and programming related to peace and security by deepening the existing knowledge base on the positive roles of youth-led engagement related to peacebuilding in Afghanistan. In doing so, the project aims to both support advocacy for youth-inclusive peacebuilding and enhance locally-driven youth-led research outputs and capacities.

The key objectives/message of the project were:

Primary objective: Document and examine Afghan youth's roles in civic engagement related to peacebuilding, factors which enable and constrain such participation, the perceived impacts of such engagement as seen and identified by the youth leaders and the contextual factors which make these activities successful.

Secondary objective: Identifying implications from the evidence collected to inform policies and programming at national and international levels.

Tertiary objective: Build up the capacities of young peacebuilders themselves in Afghanistan in collecting evidence about their own work.

To achieve these objectives, the research primarily documented and examined Afghan youth's roles in civic engagement related to peacebuilding, analysed factors that enable and constrain such participation as well as the perceived impacts of such engagement, guided by specific research questions.

Context

Afghanistan is home for almost 36 million people[1] composed of Tajik, Pashtun, Hazara, Uzbek, Aimak, Turkman, Baloch, Pashayi, Nuristani and Pamiri ethnics. Human Development in Afghanistan is very low in which its HDI is ranked 168.[2] US invaded Afghanistan in 2001 and ousted Taliban from power. A new democratic system established since then. Post 2001, gradually a new wave of violence widespread across the country. Still various terrorist groups are active in the place. Notably, Afghan government control or influence of its districts reached the lowest level (55.5%) since SIGAR began tracking district control in November 2015.[3] Minority groups such as Shias and Sikhs are targeted by insurgent groups. At least 48 teenage students have died after a suicide bomber targeted an education center in a minority Shia area of western Kabul most recently.[4] Moreover, former Jihadi leaders are still owning power, have a huge influence in government appointments and have control over some provinces. In one of our Focus Group Discussions in Herat Province respondents report that there are active radical groups such Hizb-e At-Tahrir that radicalize youth in western zone of the country.

Youth-led civic engagement in Afghanistan

Despite major challenges like security and unemployment, a major part of Afghan youth are engaged in civic activities and have a high social and political participation in the society mostly in big major cities. They also shared about the other civic roles that they think youth are currently engaged in Afghanistan. Types of youth-led civic engagement in Afghanistan can be categorized such as advocacy, educational, art-based peace-building, and community development. Youth advocacy activities in Afghanistan indicates that Afghan youth believe in non-violent way of expressing them through civil

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activities such as forming social movements like "Jonbish-e Roshanyee", "Rastakhiz of Taghir (Resurrection of Change)" and Jonbish Guzar. These movements paved the way for Afghan youth to express non-violently their demands directly to Afghan Government rather than by old fashion tribal leaders as mediators. However some of these movements were suppressed by Afghan Government. Another form of movements was shown in "Marches for Peace" a group of people who mostly are youth who walked hundreds of miles from Helmad to Kabul demanding an end to 40 years of war and violence in Afghanistan. In form of education, there are several youth debate about issues such as women's rights, democracy and Islam; book reading circles; organising youth symposiums, round tables and cultural events and those in which youth collaborated with adults like the Model of the United Nations in Afghanistan. Several youths also exercise their political expression through murals, street paintings, and making critical lyrics as well as performing civic engagement through political parties which develop the community although only few of them are joining.

Boosters of Youth-led Civic Engagement in Afghanistan

Civil freedoms and rights legal support In post 2001 has opened new chapter for youth to allow them playing a role in the society. Youth who had been youth leaders are now increasingly present in the public sphere, running for MP positions and present in governmental institutions. Of particular importance the fact that these youth appear to think beyond ethnicity line and in broader and common societal interests. (An indication of the changing perception of youth towards a more positive image is that the new government shows more interest in youth issues and increasingly support youth activities). A different yet important perceived impact is related to the creation of job opportunities for young people by young people which is of vital importance in contexts of high unemployment as in the case of the laundry company started by Sharbat. The primary reason behind youth engagement in peace activates is the current war; as the Afghan youth react to war for having security. The second reason that engages youth in peace activities is because the system allows them, as they enjoy freedom of expression.

Third, high level of education, access to social media and access to global media are the other forces that lead to youth into civic engagement. Fourth, the Afghan society is much politicized, compared to neighboring countries which leads to civic engagement and political acts, specifically from youths.

Barriers of Youth-led Civic Engagement in Afghanistan

There are at least five barriers which hampered the civic engagement of youth in Afghanistan. It consisted of security, political system, governance, unemployment, and trauma or unhealed wounds. Security concerns consist of youth safety from suicide attacks, bombing civil gatherings, and insurgence action on big cities. These issues have discouraged youth in civic engagement and the government still cannot assure the security of civil gatherings and protests. Furthermore, the security aspect is not limited to the physical security but has stretched to psychology or mental security as each of component de-motivate youth to take part in civic activities in their community.

Meanwhile, the political sphere in Afghanistan is hugely influenced by ethnic quota system and it created another barriers for youth civic activities. Not every youth has access to government and be appointed based on meritocracy and talents. In such a context, only those who has a strong connection with tribal leaders can be appointed in decision making levels of Afghan government. Furthermore, civic activities of youth can easily be labeled ethnic or racial moves hence it is possibly suppressed.

An the governance issue, the Deputy Minister of Youth Affairs and Labor Ministry of Afghanistan has not shown their interest in supporting youth as other government institution ignored youth's advocacy works. Meaningful participation of youth in government has not improved since they only exhibited a symbolic role. The corruption in the government and lack of civil freedoms have discouraged youth in civic engagement.

For example, the family member of Jihadi warlords controlled the government and appointed unskilled youth inside the government. This problem of

corruption and governance were also exacerbated with the unemployment. Unemployment comes as the top issues which undermine motivation and activism of youth. It resulted to the drug addiction and depression of youth in Afghanistan. It has created brain drain among Afghan youth as Afghan society also lost its best talents due to migration for seeking better life and working opportunities in neighbouring countries or to Europe.

Finally, there are number of youths who have suffered from trauma and unhealed wounds. Several youths recounted their story when they had to hide with her father fearing her life as a young women during Taliban regime, or losing one of close friends on the recent attack in Intercontinental Hotel, Kabul committed by insurgent group. Trauma and unhealed wounds causes widespread of hatred among youth. For example, the clashes between Hazara and Pashtun students in Kabul University erupted and killed some students. This happened in an academic environment that people mostly did not expect. Thus, the unhealed wound created barriers for youth civic engagement as their psychological and mental health are not assured by people and government.

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Policy Recommendations

1. Afghan government should assure inclusiveness and presence of youth in decision making levels and government institutions from all backgrounds, ethnic groups and gender.
2. Considering the fact that youth can play crucial role in ensuring security and long lasting peace, Afghan government should mobilize youth and use from their potential for peace and security in the country.
3. Afghan government should reform education system that is updated, responsible and promote humility, tolerance and openness.
4. Youth still suffer from corruption and dysfunction bureaucratic system in government institutions

not allowing to join easily the system and be appointed in civil services positions.

5. There are institutional barriers by formerly warlords who are blocking youth and their values and undermine them to be appointed in government and be present in other decision making levels. Afghan government should insure role of law and provide equal opportunities for all of its citizen specifically youth.
6. Such as Helmand Peace March is an example of youth engagement in building peace and youth-led anti-war movements calling for peace and negotiation, Afghan government should support such movements and insure youth presence in peace processes and formal peace talks with the Taliban.
7. Insurgent groups use the card of religion to radicalize the youth based on the findings of this research, youth reported activity of groups like Hizb-e Atahrir that radicalize youth, and largely recruitment of insurgent from youth. Afghan government should adopt a counter-violent extremism strategy nationally to address these challenges and need to develop a new narrative that is widely accepted to eliminate the misconceptions and the dangerous interpretation from religion that insurgents use.
8. More important, Afghan government should take urgent and important steps toward creating more jobs opportunities for youth.
9. Finally, Afghan government should pay attention to the Afghan youth migrants, provide them education opportunities in host countries and in long term ensure peace and security in the country so that they can come back in Afghanistan.

This policy brief