

## **Civil society's role in Reconciliation and Conflict Resolution**

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Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for inviting me here today to speak about civil society's role in reconciliation and conflict resolution.

In this speech I hope to show that there is potential for civil society to play a constructive role in reconciliation and the settlement of conflicts in Afghanistan. The role of civil society in this process can be significant but in order for it to be effective it must be matched by commitment from the Afghan government and the international community.

### **History of Conflict in Afghanistan**

Years of violent conflict and warfare have severely impaired the social fabric of society in Afghanistan. Strong community relationships that existed previously have been weakened and the capacity of community institutions to resolve local disputes and conflicts has been significantly reduced.

Traditionally, in the absence or because of the limited capacity of the central government to maintain effective judicial structures and systems, Afghans have relied on community conflict resolution structures such as *Jirgas* and *Shuras* to resolve their conflicts. A number of surveys have indicated that between 60 – 80 percent of conflicts, whether over land, water or family disputes, are resolved through local *Jirgas*.

### **Traditional and Modern Conflict Resolution Mechanism**

Traditional *Shuras* are semi-formal and unorganized structures comprised of elders and influential people, usually representing different clans and families.

Traditional and local mechanisms for conflict resolution however do not employ proactive measures in order to resolve conflicts; they are instead reactive. The focus of these organisations is on immediate problem solving. Traditional structures generally exclude women and young people from the decision-making process, which can further aggravate socio-cultural tensions and preserve established inequalities.

New *Shura* structures that have been formed over the last 15 years or so are essentially creations of aid groups, the UN and the Afghan government and are predominantly used

to channel money to communities and manage the delivery of aid projects hence they are used as a means not an end in themselves. They have some legitimacy and can be relatively representative but it also depends from one area to another.

The structures of the dispute resolution through *Shuras* differ from village to village, between districts and provinces. Similarly, the motives and nature of involvement of Shura members differs from village to district to province and national levels.

The various traditional structures do not have one clear-cut formula for resolving conflicts but instead use a variety of methods e.g. *Urf*, *Pushtoonwali*, *Sharia*, local customs as well as the country's formal legal code etc. The main purpose is to reach an agreement rather than to dogmatically uphold particular norm or law including that of *Sharia*.

Traditional *Shuras* are effective because they are trusted, relatively quick to reach decisions, do not need paperwork, are not perceived to be corrupt or as abusive as the courts and police are.

### **The Role of Religious civil society**

An important and recurrent security and conflict issue for Afghanistan has been the resistance by Islamists and traditionalists, which can pose serious challenges to the objectives of the Afghan government and the international community.

Religious leaders play a crucial role in local level conflict resolution across the country. In many instances the village mullah is present to give religious approval of the *Shura's* decisions. If the *Shura* has no mullah involved in the process, the chances are that the 'losing' party may refer the case to a mullah in order to obtain a more favourable decision.

Religious Civil Society has however come under increasing pressure from Taliban and often feels alienated by government interventions. Relations between the government and religious leaders have been exacerbated by government forces rounding up independent religious leaders and students. This pushes more mullahs to retreat to their villages or to support the Taliban. They also feel that they have been used by the government to legitimize the latter's policies.

### **Women's role in conflict resolution**

The issue of women's rights in Afghan society has been at the centre of the struggle between modernization and tradition. The real rate of progress in this area will depend on the pace of economic revival and modernization. Afghanistan is a traditional country,

and any pressure for increasing women's rights must be perceived to be working with, not against local traditions. If we enforce rights aggressively, the backlash from Islamists and traditionalists could instead lead to the further marginalization of women. Besides, their mere presence in the Jirgas or Provincial Councils or Parliament doesn't guarantee women empowerment.

There are a number of particular issues that limit the presence of Afghan women in conflict resolution processes. For example issues related to growing liberalism trend like Human rights, gender and democracy are projected in a way that doesn't clearly resonate with the Afghan way of life particularly in the rural areas. Women themselves are reluctant to participate in the local *Shuras*; some women believe it is not appropriate for Afghan woman to sit in these *Shuras*; and sometimes women themselves limit their own progress.

Despite that the role of women is limited in the mainstream *Shura* decisions, in many conflict cases women (especially elderly ones) take parallel initiatives and are an important part of conflict resolutions.

### **NGOs effort in Peacebuilding and Conflict Resolution**

Over the last couple of years, especially after 2001, there are limited numbers of NGOs who support and implement Social peacebuilding and conflict resolution programmes in Afghanistan. These organizations, including CPAU believe that building peace and promoting social justice requires building social parallel to the economic infrastructures. It also requires sustained efforts for developing and strengthening local mechanisms for dealing with violence. Through their sustained coaching and capacity buildings, CPAU and like-minded NGOs equip community institutions with new skills, techniques and attitude for conflict resolution, mediation and peacebuilding at the village and district levels.

**Peace Education:** Whilst CPAU's and some other NGOs Social Peacebuilding Programmes target the *Shuras* and adult population, Peace Education targets Afghan children. CPAU had developed Peace Education Curriculum from Grades 1 to 12. A new generation better equipped to resolve their own conflicts in the future will be more sustainable and independent and can contribute to Afghanistan's future stability. Annually CPAU provides around 30,000 school children with Peace Education.

### **Impact**

We are often asked question 'what is the impact of peacebuilding?' The response has often been anecdotal – that it 'helps' communities, that it 'builds capacity'. Well here are some harder facts as well;

- CPAU's district level peace councils/ *Shuras* deal with a large number of conflicts, in one district alone they dealt with 250 conflict resolution cases in a year;
- Corporal punishment once endemic in the schools where we support peace education in Wardak and Ghazni has been significantly reduced creating a better and more supportive learning environment for 30,000 children;
- Further one of the districts, Farza, where CPAU operates in rural Kabul was voted 'the most secure district in Afghanistan' in 2007 and the community ascribed part of that success to the Peace *Shura's* activities.

## **Recommendations**

There are 4 recommendations that we believe will address the myriad conflicts in Afghanistan and strengthen stability and security in the long-term:

- **Religious Civil Society:**

The relationship between state and religion, and the role of religion in public sphere, remains undefined seven years after Bonn. The relationship between the "modern" and the "traditional", often equated with the secular and the religious, is at the heart of the conflict today. If not adequately defined and addressed, the government and international community may lose further integrity and this further worsening the conflict.

- **The Modernization Drive:**

Currently we see different drives by the Afghan Government and International Community to modernize the traditional structures. However, the issue of legitimacy and non-interference in the affairs of traditional *Shuras* is very important. If the *Shura* members feel that something is imposed on them, they will withdraw from decision making processes undermining the legitimacy of the decisions being taken. The involvement of outside forces in traditional institutions' affairs alters their nature and the international community must be aware of the negative, as well as positive impacts they can have on the civil society specially the local *Shuras*.

- **Peace Building in the Community:**

Building peace and promoting social justice in Afghanistan not only requires building political and economic infrastructure but also concerted and sustained efforts for developing and strengthening local mechanisms for dealing with violence. It requires people oriented and participatory approaches in order to enable the community members to analyse the root causes of their problems and find solutions to address them effectively.

- **Peace Education:**

To lobby and support the Ministry of Education for the adoption of an agreed and unified peace education course as part of the National Curriculum, thus ensuring consistent delivery of peace education in schools throughout Afghanistan. To start to address this issue CPAU has developed a Peace Education curriculum and other resources for schools.

Thank you.