Can we win the fight against corruption?

Sayed Ikram Afzali, Executive Director

The Afghan state’s real fight for survival is not in the battlefields, the real fight is against the menace of corruption – the incubator of insurgency, crime, and terrorism. Corruption is impairing the Afghan institutions from within. Although the government has made some efforts to fight corruption, there is a long way to go to address the existential threat that corruption poses.

The Afghan government’s efforts in the fight against corruption include the establishment of the Anti-Corruption Justice Center (ACJC) where after more than a year, only 12 cases have been concluded resulting in final conviction of 33 individuals. The government has also taken some preventive steps such as creating oversight on procurement and improving access to information in some institutions. Although the government did not have a clear strategy to fight corruption for the last three years, it has recently produced one just before the Senior Officials Meeting taking place on October 05, 2017.

Although the National Strategy for Combating Corruption presents yet another set of important commitments, it suffers from a weak implementation mechanism. The government has failed to fulfil its most important anti-corruption commitment of establishing an independent anti-corruption commission that it promised three years ago in the London Conference on Afghanistan. The proposed implementation mechanism has ignored international standards such as the Jakarta Declaration, the United National Convention Against Corruption, and the Kuala Lumpur Statement on Anti-Corruption Strategies.

The new anti-corruption strategy is ambiguous in terms of coordinating anti-corruption efforts that would contribute to failure of coordination and would create accountability gaps. There is no independent mechanism to oversee prosecution of corruption cases which leaves the ACJC vulnerable to political interference while it has not been able to achieve much in prosecuting corrupt individuals.
Nevertheless, it is not enough to prosecute a few foot-soldiers of corruption anyway. The corrupt networks will not run out of foot-soldiers and even Generals as there are too many General in Afghanistan. The government must take on the corrupt networks that have captured key institutions such as the parliament, the judiciary, the economy, the security sector,... just name it.

Fighting such corrupt networks require strong political will that must be demonstrated in creating and strengthening independent institutions including an independent anti-corruption commission. The anti-corruption strategy also indicates that the government will establish an ombudsman under the President’s office. The ombudsman is expected to work closely with the Attorney General. However, it is critical for the success of the ombudsman to ensure its independence. In addition, it should be accessible and accountable to the public. We would like to see the new ombudsman as the Afghan version of SIGAR (the US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction).

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There is no doubt that the Afghan government has to take the leading role in the fight against corruption although one can only hope that the politics around the up-coming parliamentary elections and the not-too-distant presidential elections will not deviate its focus. However, this is not a fight that the Afghan government can win alone. The civil society has to play its role to mobilize the public against corruption and to hold the government accountable against its commitments. The international community’s role is particularly important to expose corruption mafia, to dismantle their networks, and to bring our money back from the secrecy jurisdictions.

However, as the fighting and insecurity is increasing every day, we no longer have the luxury of time. We need to truly recognize the intensity of the problem. Shortsightedness of prioritizing “stability” over fighting corruption mafia will fail us all. It would be a disrespect to the blood and treasure invested in the last one and a half decade both by the international community and the Afghan people if we allow the corruption mafia to be the biggest beneficiaries of our investments and the Afghan people to be the victims of the “war on terror.” We must prepare to take the risk of fighting the corruption mafia led by the corrupt political elite. We must coordinate our efforts to defeat the enemy within if we are to win the fight in the battlefields.
Civil society organizations discuss Afghan Government’s anti-corruption commitments under Open Government Partnership

Obaidullah Abdi, Advocacy Assistant

On 21st September 2017, Integrity Watch Afghanistan hosted an online consultation workshop in collaboration with Transparency International and Open Government Partnership Support Unit. This online meeting was held to raise awareness of Open Government Partnership-Afghanistan Multi-Stake Forum (MFS) members. Ten delegates from civil society and government attended and three possible commitments were discussed in the meeting.

Jose Maria Marin from Transparency International Head Quarter presented successful examples of anti-corruption commitments made in several OGP countries including beneficial ownership in Nigeria, implementation of newly adopted right to information act in Sri Lanka and participatory budgeting in the Philippines. He proposed potential priority areas of anti-corruption commitment. He suggested that Afghanistan’s anti-corruption commitments in London Anti-Corruption Summit 2016 and pledges under Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework (ANPDF) should be an important source of inspiration.

Shreya Basu from OGP Support Unit presented an overview of Open Government Partnership and the initiative’s evolution. She stressed the collaborative role of civil society and government in the OGP process in several countries. She commented that Afghanistan has not been successful in implementing most of its earlier commitments largely due to commitments not being implementable or not being adequately specific. Therefore, she emphasized that both government and civil society should come up with realistic and specific commitments under OGP National Action Plan.

The civil society and government participants worked on a tentative set of anti-corruption commitments. To address government’s previous unfulfilled commitments, representatives of the civil society proposed the development of a mechanism for tracking and reporting the implementation of Afghanistan’s commitments in major international platforms.

Integrity Watch held the first consultation conference on Open Government Partnership in April 2017 fol-
owed by a workshop for Provincial Integrity Networks in seven provinces including Kapisa, Nangarhar, Paktia, Bamyan, Balkh, Kunduz and Herat. In addition, other civil society organizations held awareness and consultation events on OGP including ACBAR, AWN and AYESO. Civil society organizations have been actively participating in the OGP process since Afghanistan joined the initiative in December 2016.

Communities in Kapisa province tie peace to fighting corruption

_Wahidullah Azizi, Communications Specialist_

Thursday, September 21: Integrity Watch Afghanistan celebrated the International Peace Day in Kapisa province in an event that brought together local communities and officials to discuss the nexus between peace and fighting corruption.

Participants expressed their concerns over growing insecurity which is diminishing hopes of Afghans for a peaceful society in the near future. Many of the participants believed that corruption and bad governance are major factors contributing to the vicious cycle of poverty and injustices in the society which then contribute to insecurity and violence. “If we do not fight it[corruption], it will kill us”, one participant said. “Peace is the first and final wish of Afghan people.” Raz Muhammad, another participant told the audience. “But it is only possible when we have justice and when we eliminate corruption,” he added. Ali Ahmad Mashal Afrooz, Provincial Coordinator of Integrity Watch in Kapisa province reminded the participants that their commitment to fight corruption was critical. “Without an independent civil society voice, fighting the menace of corruption will be difficult and reaching peace will be equally unattainable” Mr. Afrooz added.
The participants expressed their interest to support the efforts to fight corruption through community engagement programs like Integrity Watch’s Community Based-Monitoring of Trials that is running in Kapisa since 2011. The program is also going on in nine provinces, including Balkh, Herat, Kapisa, Parwan, Paktia, Kunduz, Bamiyan and Kabul. In 2017, under Community-Based of Trials program, 500 cases and 731 trail sessions were monitored by local volunteers across Afghanistan.

Community-based monitoring expands in Paktia province

Bilal Popalzai, Training Specialist

Integrity Watch trained 45 male and female volunteers of Paktia in a three-day workshop in Gardiz city, the provincial capital of the volatile southeastern province. Besides topics such as right of access to information, principles of the fight against corruption, and dispute resolution, the trainers presented community-based monitoring approaches and tools to the participants. The trained volunteers are now equipped with the necessary knowledge and tools to monitor trials, schools and infrastructure projects in their communities.

Paktia province is one of the insecure provinces where service delivery and development projects face tremendous challenges. Weak rule of law, lack of sufficient attention from Kabul and weak oversight mechanisms, lack of transparency and accountability culture, violating the principle of meritocracy in recruitments and other governance issues have increased the mistrust between the government and the
Integrity Watch started to reach out to communities and officials to address this issue through community-based monitoring.

This year Integrity Watch has trained more than 400 volunteers in nine provinces under the “Empowering New Generation of Integrity Volunteers” project. The project aims to scale up community based monitoring program that started back in 2008. Under this project, 248 schools, more than 500 cases, and 129 infrastructure projects have been monitored by local volunteers.

Integrity Watch uses mobile cinema show to mobilize local communities in Kabul

Yalda Ramen, Provincial Coordinator—Mohammad Yusuf Ayubi has contributed to the story

Integrity Watch provincial team conducted cinema show for more than 600 participants in the capital city of Kabul. The show was conducted in twenty public schools; the messages of which reached thousands of men and women indirectly.

Communities, where the cinema show was conducted, expressed their satisfaction from the show that will help them identify gaps in the delivery of public services in their communities.

Gul Mohammad Ehsani, a student of Psychology described the mobile cinema show an “effective tool” to engage people in their local issues that affect them, such as taking care of the public schools. He mentioned that this awareness raising effort has already resulted in community action such as rehabilitation and painting of Rukhshana School for Girls after 40 years.

Mobile cinema show is an effective way to mobilize local communities. Integrity Watch uses the show to enable local residents to fight corruption, monitor proper implementation of projects in their localities and enable communities to improve quality of education in public schools. Also, it provides a platform for learning and experience sharing.

“Erada” is an in-house production of Integrity Watch that was produced in 2014. The movie has been displayed in hundreds of communities around the country to raise public awareness about community-based monitoring and their fight against corruption. The movie has been also watched by more than three-hundred thousand people online. Watch the full movie from here.
The mobile cinema show was conducted in more than 40 schools in Kabul.