Is open government possible without civic space?

Sayed Ikram Afzali, Executive Director | @SIAfzali

The Open Government Partnership (OGP) Summit was held from 29-31 May in Ottawa at a time when civic space is shrinking around the world. Similarly, civic space is under constant threat in Afghanistan. Afghanistan joined the OPG in 2016 and whilst this was a welcome step nonetheless open government is not possible without protecting & expanding civic space.

**Why is civic space important?**

A recent paper by the OGP defines civic space as “the ability of people to freely organize, participate, and communicate about policy.” Civic space is also defined in the same report as “the capacity for citizens to participate in the different stages of the policymaking process.” Therefore, civic space is not only a matter of human rights, it also allows creativity and innovation in governance reform. As CIVICUS, a global alliance of civil society organizations puts it: “A robust and protected civic space forms the cornerstone of accountable, responsive democratic governance and stable society.”
How deep is the problem?

A recent CIVICUS report indicates that the number of countries with open civic space is in decline. Another report by International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL) indicates that since 2010, over 50 countries have adopted laws limiting civic space. With the deteriorating security situation and the very restrictive attitude of the government towards CSO's, the civic space is shrinking in Afghanistan also. A 2018 report by Afghanistan Institute for Civil Society indicated that civic space has been in decline there for the past number of years. This is particularly true for organizations such as Integrity Watch which advocates for governance reform and which regularly holds the government to account over its failure to adequately fight corruption. Read more...

President Obama appreciates efforts of Integrity Watch and other leading organizations

On the sidelines of the Open Government Partnership Global Summit in Ottawa, Integrity Watch Afghanistan's Executive Director, Sayed Ikram Afzali, and a handful of leading civil society leaders met with President Obama. The civil society leaders shared the stories of empowering communities and using new technologies for smarter and better government.

Integrity Watch’s Executive Director shared the story of community-based monitoring from Afghanistan. Integrity Watch’s community-based monitoring started in 2006 with people monitoring infrastructure projects in their communities. During the last decade, the community monitoring program has expanded to schools, open trials, health clinics, and mining across the country working with more than 3000 volunteers in more than a dozen provinces.
President Obama said in a statement following the roundtable that he was inspired by these stories and he believes it will create a better world for all human beings. He stated:

“On Friday, I had a chance to meet with some inspiring young leaders from around the world who were in Ottawa last week for the Open Government Partnership Global Summit. From Kyrgyzstan to Argentina, we’re seeing a new generation taking the reins to empower others and harness new technologies for smarter, better government. It’s inspiring—the kind of thing that will create a better world for all of us.

Here is the full statement by Obama Foundation: [President Obama Talks Accountability, Leadership, and Change with Global Leaders in Ottawa](#)

People enter into a dialogue with Judges in Nangarhar
The Anti-Corruption and Governance Committee of the Civil Society Joint Working Group (CSJWG) and Mining Watch Afghanistan (MWA) held a joint meeting on 20th April 2019 at Integrity Watch Afghanistan and discussed the creation of a mining ombudsperson. The group emphasized that the mining ombudsperson should be created in accordance with international best standards such as those approved by the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) or the International Ombudsperson Association (IOA) to enable it to oversee maladministration and violations of human rights in the sector.

The Afghan Ministry of Mines and Petroleum (MOMP) has proposed the establishment of an ombudsperson in the draft mining regulation but the group is adamant that the proposal does not meet global standards for the establishment of such an institution. The main deficiencies which were indicated by the participants included the lack of financial and administrative independence of the ombudsperson, the recruitment process, and the scope of work being limited to small scale minerals mining. Read more...

Civil Society Organizations demand proper representation of the people in the selection of the new Commissioners to the Independent Anti-Corruption Commission
Civil Society Organizations (CSO’s) are urging the Government to ensure a transparent selection process for new Commissioners for the yet to be established Independent Anti-Corruption Commission. In a joint statement by Integrity Watch Afghanistan and Transparency Afghanistan, two civil society organizations committed to tackling anti-corruption in Afghanistan, also demanded that the process be kept clear of any political interference.

Disbarment of Government affiliates, public vetting of candidates for the positions, ensuring a competitive and transparent selection process where independent institutions and anti-corruption CSO’s should work together to manage an effective competitive process with transparency in the final selection by the President, were among some of the demands requested by the mentioned civil society organizations.

The President approved the Anti-Corruption Law in 2019 under which a Commission will be established. However, this new Law does not provide that this establishment will be in accordance with international standards such as UNCAC which the government committed to five years ago during the London Conference on Afghanistan. Sayed Ikram Afzali, Executive Director of Integrity Watch expressed concerns that civil society has not been properly engaged, they have not been properly consulted on matters relating to anti-corruption and in particular in relation to the establishment of the new anti-corruption body. Accordingly, Mr. Afzali called on the government to reconsider its exclusion of civil society participation and to commit to an apolitical selection process.
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Not publishing information on infrastructure projects, the lack of cooperation with local monitors, awarding contracts to local influencers and to those with vested interests compromises the quality of construction projects. Local monitors who represent their communities often face improper treatment and sometimes even receive threats as a result of raising objections to any misconduct.

Abdul Hanan Rahnaward, Provincial Coordinator for Parwan emphasized the importance of timely disclosure of information on public infrastructure projects in Parwan. This can prevent abuses including low-quality work. “Of the projects covered by local monitors supported by Integrity Watch, an improvement of up to 70% has been seen,” said Mr. Rahnaward. There is however a long way to go. It has often been a pattern that inspectors who are supposed to properly inspect & ensure the quality of construction projects are instead involved in corruption.

There is a need to do more in order to make information about infrastructure projects public. Lack of awareness and involvement by local communities is one the main reasons why there is such poor-quality infrastructural work in the Province. With more community engagement and project, ownership quality can be improved. Also, the Government should involve civil society in all implementation stages of the construction process.
Local monitors facilitated by Integrity Watch Afghanistan are changing the situation for the better. Currently, there are 10 volunteers in the Province who monitor public projects including a road, a kindergarten school, a health facility, a Directorate of Drugs Control building and a residential township for teachers. 

*The story has been prepared based on interviews with Abdul Hanan Rahnaward, Integrity Watch’s Provincial Coordinator for Parwan.*

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**The Credibility of the Afghan National Budget is under question**

Integrity Watch held a Press Conference on the National Launch of the Budget Credibility Report on May 12, 2019. According to this report, Afghanistan has been placed in the third category with the average absolute deviation of 41-60% in the National Budget. The research for this assessment of the Budget Credibility Project was conducted in 23 countries and in collaboration with 24 Civil Society Organisations (CSO’s). The major issue which was analyzed in Afghanistan’s case for this project was the continuous shortfalls in the execution of Development Budget for the years 1393-97.

Budget credibility describes the ability of governments to accurately and consistently meet their expenditure and revenue targets in accordance with what it plans at the start of the fiscal year. This research also focused on the explanations which are provided by the government if it deviates from the plans. This research found that there were consistent changes in the National Budget figures for the entirety of the fiscal year. In contrast the explanation provided by the Government for these deviations from the planned budget was limited and general in nature.
Sayed Ikram Afzali, the Executive Director of Integrity Watch Afghanistan who was present at the Press Conference said: “The continuous deviations and changes from the planned budget together with the failure to provide any comprehensive justification or adequate explanation for these changes raises questions about the credibility of the budget process.” He further added: “For the sake of accountability, the government needs to provide more detailed information and a comprehensive explanation for the changes that were made in the National Budget.”

The National Budget is a document where the government makes promises regarding revenue and expenditure targets, gives details on the implementation of different development projects and services, and details what are their macroeconomic goals. When the government fails to keep such promises and then fails to communicate the reasons for this then this obstructs the accountability of Government to the people. Therefore, for the sake of accountability, the government must provide a more comprehensive explanation and justification together with detailed information on the changes which were made in the National Budget components.”