Spotlight

The need for a conflict of interest management system to fight corruption in Afghanistan

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Managing conflict of Interest is critical in a country such as Afghanistan where state institutions have been weakened by corruption, nepotism and cronyism. There are modern definitions and historical perspectives of conflict of interest existing which we can learn from to address this issue in our society. Conflict of interest is defined by the OECD as "A conflict between the public duty and private interests of public officials, in which public officials have private-capacity interests which could improperly influence the performance of their official duties and responsibilities." Similarly, there are many references in Islamic traditions of governance which address the issue. A seventh-century letter by
Ali ibn Abi Talib (the fourth Caliph of Islam) to Malik al-Ashtar who was governor of Egypt at the time, stated the following:

*Make a rule of your conduct never to give even a small piece of land to any of your relations. That will prevent them from causing harm to the interests of others and save you from courting the disapprobation of both God and man. Deal justice squarely, regardless of whether one is a relation or not. If any of your relations or companions violates the law, mete out the punishment prescribed by law, however painful it might be to you personally, for it will be all to the good of the state. If at any time people suspect, that you have been unjust to them in any respect, disclose your mind to them and remove their suspicions. In this way, your mind will get attuned to the sense of justice and people will begin to love you. It will also fulfill your wish that you should enjoy their confidence.*

However, despite such modern understanding globally and rich traditions locally, the issue of conflict of interest is relatively unknown or properly understood in Afghanistan. Many Afghan officials who manage the bureaucracy do not seem to fully understand or accept that conflict of interest can lead to corruption and injustice. This is understandable in the context of Afghanistan which is more a collectivist society where interests of a smaller group are often preferred over the interests of larger society and where sharing and reciprocity within a smaller group or clan is largely the norm. Accordingly state institutions operating on the basis of the rule of law have remained underdeveloped. However, state institutions, which are supposed to be impersonal, cannot function in a fair and sustainable manner based on the norms of a collectivist society. Therefore, conflict of interest regulations and a management system are needed to prevent corruption, misuse, and injustice. Keep reading...

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Civil society advocates use social audit to improve the quality of public services
Provincial Integrity Networks conducted social audits in Balkh and Kabul to evaluate the provision of public service delivery. Considering healthcare services and traffic management vital issues in day to day life of citizens of Kabul and Balkh, the networks audited the status of health and traffic in both cities respectively.

Kabul Provincial Integrity Network’s findings from its audit of Jomhuriat Public Hospital, the largest of its kind in Kabul indicates that the hospital lacks a standard X-Ray room, lacks enough technical staff in the operating theatre and found that oxygen tanks are not used in a standard manner. Other findings highlighted that staff did not have sufficient educational documentation or the required written evidence of their working experience. It was also found that appropriate medicines were not provided to the patients. Instead they had to purchase these themselves. This raises the question of transparency and misuse of hospital assets by the hospital management.

Similarly, the network’s initial findings from the social audit of Balkh traffic show officials’ failure to discharge their duties & responsibilities to drivers such as the provision of smooth traffic movements. In cases of traffic incidents, the officials are extorting the drivers instead of implementing the law. Also, Mazar-e-Sharif city in Balkh Province lacks an overall traffic management strategy. This has resulted in mistrust and the loss faith by the public in the officials’ capacity and management of the city’s traffic. Continue reading...
Volunteers work with officials to improve quality of infrastructure project in war-torn eastern Afghanistan

Faridullah Ayazi is a young volunteer representing his community in monitoring the construction of the Nahri Shahi canal project in east Jalalabad City. During his routine monitoring of this important infrastructural project Faridullah found
low quality work in the canal construction work including not using standard stonemasonry techniques in the construction of the walls of the canals.

Trained by Integrity Watch, Faridullah was aware of the role and importance of public infrastructure projects in the lives of ordinary Afghans. Using his training and his experience, he discovered that something was wrong with the stonemasonry work being carried out in as part of the construction of the canal. He raised his objection to this with the site engineer and asked that he take action. Because the issue was so serious as it could reduce the life of the canal and seriously affect the project as a whole, he also shared the findings with Integrity Watch and local government officials in Nangarhar.

As a consequence, representatives from the Economic Directorate in Nangarhar province visited the site and discussed the issue with the construction company after satisfying themselves that the problems identified by Faridullah were indeed very serious. The company promised to solve the issue and improve quality of the work. Later visits by the volunteer found that the company kept its word. There is now better stonemasonry work being used in the canal construction.

Currently there are 21 public infrastructure projects under construction in Nangarhar including schools, public parks, a social center and the Bacha Khan Mausoleum. A total of 23 local monitors such as Faridullah have taken upon themselves to ensure that the peoples’ money which is being spent on such projects is not being wasted.

Coordinated students action improve school environment in Kabul
With more than 1200 students of both genders, Oryakhil School in Paghaman faced lots of issues. Encouraged by Integrity Watch’s Integrity Groups, the students contributed to the school renovation by painting classrooms and by providing books for students without textbooks. They launched a book collecting campaign to encourage parents to donate books to the school.

In addition to these initiatives, female students gave money from their Eid gifts to their schools for the painting of three classrooms, which in turn encouraged the boys to do the same. The girls didn’t stop there. They prepared a green zone area in the school where games can be played. They also sewed curtains for their classrooms. The students also bought a water pump and 150 meters of waterpipe to access water for drinking and they planted greenery within their school.
Rahmana Ali, a 10th class student and a member of the Integrity Group, felt a sense of obligation and achievement when she contributed from her own money towards the painting of her classroom. She said, “Now, I feel it is my own home when I study in the classroom.”

Encouraged by the actions of the students, Abdul Aqa principle of the school procured a truck of pea gravel to be used in the walkways around the school.

The Integrity Groups are facilitated by Integrity Watch and are platforms for students to be able to solve issues in their school. Currently, there 30 integrity Groups in Kabul.
2018 at the offices of Integrity Watch Afghanistan. The panel concluded that there is a need for joint advocacy to expedite the amendment process of the Commission’s Law and to encourage the government to introduce an open and competitive selection procedure for the appointment of the third round of its commissioners. The five current commissioners’ tenure will be completed in about two months.

The Executive Director of Integrity Watch, Sayed Ikram Afzali, who opened the dialogue stressed the importance of the involvement of independent agencies in the process so as to ensure the integrity of state and build trust between the people and the government. He said, “The Canadian election result was out in the evening of the election but our election results have taken months to come out and we are not sure if the stakeholders will accept its result when it is out.” The reason Afghanistan is so different from Canada is because Canada has independent and efficient working institutions that the citizens and politicians alike can trust, he added.

A panel composed of the Afghanistan Justice Organization, the Afghan Lawyers Union, the Afghanistan Independent Bar Association, the Afghanistan Legal Research and Development Organization and the Independent Commission Overseeing Implementation of the Constitution discussed whether the Commission had acted independently, had fulfilled its mandate, the reasons for the differences in interpretation of the Commission’s jurisdiction between the Commission itself and the Supreme Court and the five-year delay in achieving the amendment of the Commission’s law.

The event concluded that the civil society organisations and the legal entities should lobby for the amendment of the rules of the Commission to ensure there is independent selection of its commissioners and to work with the government to ensure the independence of the commission.

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Theatre of the Oppressed persuades public to participate in open trials in Kapisa
Mashouq Safi, Integrity Watch

Considered as a useful tool for awareness-raising, Integrity Watch uses Theatre of the Oppressed to engage people in monitoring the delivery of public services. It has conducted more than fifty theatres in different sectors such as health, trials, and schools in Kapisa province. Involving participants in solution-finding, more than 1700 male and female have participated in the theatres which depict everyday business conduct of public services such as the delivery of health services, education, and the provision of justice.

Mohammad Azim, a participant in one of the theatres, was not aware of the fact that everyone can participate in the open trials. Mohammad says, as a result of the theatre, he now knows that as per Article 128 of the Constitution, all citizens are entitled to see open trials. “Now I am able to see how a trial is conducted and see if the justice is served,” added Mia Jan, another participant. Using the theatre as a tool to fight corruption, participants come up with creative solutions. One resident of Kapisa who took part in the play believes that if people stop facilitating bribes, then corruption will not prevail.

Used by Augusto Boal for the first time in Brazil in the 1960s, Theatre of the Oppressed has been used since then as a vehicle for change. It encompasses complex social issues by involving participants to partake in the plays which offer solutions to the social problems faced by them.

Integrity Watch has, for the first time, introduced the theatre in Afghanistan and has since 2018 conducted different plays in difference provinces including, Herat, Kabul, Kapisa, Nangarhar, Bamiyan, Parwan, and Balkh.
Recently established Integrity Group in Ferdausi Boy’s School in Balkh, addressed the lack of chairs faced by the students there. The student-body repaired chairs for their fellow students in the primary classes who would otherwise have had to sit on the bare floor.

The group shared the lack of the chairs issue with the school management and proposed the solution of repairing the damaged chairs. After a few follow up meetings and action the students set to work. As part of the proposal, Najibullah a member of the group and a welder himself on a part-time basis, along with other members, repaired more than sixty chairs for reuse.

Najibullah, who teaches in the same school, expressed his feelings as ‘satisfactory’ after repairing the chairs. He said, “There are times that instead of looking for help from outside, you need to look in for solution.” “I can’t see my fellow students sit on dirt while I have a chair to use,” he added.

Empowered by Integrity Watch, Integrity Groups are associations of students in schools trained to take creative initiatives to find ways out to the issues in their schools. The groups help increase awareness about their school and the problems they face which are mostly neglected by the officials. The groups engage the school management in issues such as cleaning the schools, providing drinking water, and the availability of toilets for the students. After a year of monitoring, Integrity Watch established the groups to promote a culture of school ownership by the students. The groups are a platform for students to demonstrate leadership skills by taking initiatives in their schools and hopefully for their country in the future.
The UN emphasizes the role of civil society to promote access to information in Afghanistan

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In an event celebrating International Access to Information Day, UNAMA praised the role played by civil society and specifically by Integrity Watch in Afghanistan in promoting and strengthening access to information in Afghanistan. Organized by the newly established Access to Information Commission, the event was attended by senior government officials, civil society activists, academia and the international community.

Speaking to the participants, Toby Lanzer, Deputy Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General called the establishment of the Access to Information Law of Afghanistan a “remarkable achievement” and thanked Integrity Watch for its dedication and for working with the various stakeholders to draft what he called “the best” access to information law in the world.

In his follow up remarks, Mr. Lanzer reminded the audience that to have “the best” law in the world does not translate into the changes we are looking for. “A law is only good enough if it is implemented”, he added. Mr. Lanzer encouraged civil society, media and citizens to utilize the law and to pressure the government to fully complete its implementation.

Referencing one of the UN’s Sustainable Development Goal (SDG’s) of “Leaving no one behind”, Mr. Lanzer called access to information a crucial component of realizing all SDGs by 2030. He further added that the UN and EU will stand with civil society in supporting and promoting access to information.

In 2018, Afghanistan’s access to information law was ranked as the “best” in the world by Access Info Europe (AIE) and the Centre for Law and Democracy.
(CLD) soon after it was published. As detailed by the law, an Independent Access to Information Commission was established to oversee the implementation of the law and facilitate access to information for all citizens. Integrity Watch considers proper access to information to be a crucial weapon in the fight against corruption and in promoting integrity in public institutions. It is consequently working closely with the Commission on ways to inform citizens how they should use this law as a way to find out the government has been doing or not doing and generally to make government transparent and accountable.

Volunteer's monitoring ensures school design in properly implemented in Balkh

Mohammad Haroon, a local volunteer representing his community in Balkh, flagged up the construction of toilets in the wrong place in Zabiullah Shaheed School. The construction company, which is funded by the Afghan Government, agreed to reconstruct the toilets so as to be in accordance with the planning map.

Located in the middle of school and in front of the Masjid, the toilets were not constructed in accordance with the original design. Haroon raised both his concern and the concern of his community about the location of the toilets. The building company agreed to build the toilets in accordance with the map after it was approved by the Education Directorate of.

A proactive volunteer that Haroon is, besides successfully pursuing the construction company to reconstruct the toilets according to the design, he also shared concerns about the use of low-quality construction materials, the lack of attention to the required safety features, and also issues with the school construction map. These issues which were documented using a mechanism provided by Integrity Watch, were shared with the site engineer so that corrective action could be taken.

Community engagement is a useful tool to make positive changes in society by having oversight of public services. Integrity Watch’s Community Based Monitoring of Infrastructures (CBM-I) Program is a flagship community engagement tool run by volunteers such as Haroon selected by his own community to represent them. Currently, there are 17 volunteers monitoring a infrastructure project each, including schools, roads, community centers, a health facility and a science center in Sultan Razia School for Girls.