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Sustaining Support for a Vibrant Afghan Civil Society

RAHNUMA PROJECT LEARNING PAPER

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During the years 2012-16, Tawanmandi provided substantial amounts of financial and capacity building support to more than 100 civil society organization projects. This important 'challenge' fund, operated with support from development partners from five EU countries, is closing down this year – unfortunately without an explicit exit strategy.

This policy brief seeks to outline the status of donor funding available to Afghan CSOs beyond Tawanmandi; to highlight key learnings from the operation of Tawanmandi as well as other key CSO funding arrangements; and to provide a set of recommendations to Afghan CSOs and their development partners concerning future funding.

The brief draws on a desk review of recent reports and briefs related to the current state of funding available to Afghan civil society. It is supplemented by results from a focus group discussion with civil society organizations on their financial sustainability status by the end of Tawanmandi, and their recommendations for future donors funding to continue the work of civil society across the country.

A glance at support to civil society organizations in Afghanistan

There is general recognition and appreciation of the important role played by Afghan civil society organizations (CSOs) in the development of Afghanistan; in service delivery, in governance and rule of law.[1] CSOs are providing critical services for marginalized population groups and in hard to reach areas, with NGO programmes successful in improving the lives of people in a variety of sectors, such as mother and child and adult health, education, agriculture, and income generation.[2] There are now organizations capable of being more involved in civil society roles beyond service delivery; in assisting with reviewing progress in national development and obstacles to it, in advising on policies and the implications of them; setting of national benchmarks and monitoring their achievement; providing platforms for the expression and dissemination of the views of Afghan citizens, and producing shadow reports - to supplement official governmental reports.[3]

Today, CSOs are registered with two government entities in Afghanistan, Ministry of Economy and Ministry of Justice. The organizations are mainly registered as NGOs or Associations, respectively. However, there are also CSO/NGO networks and coalitions in operation and working under NGO registration, but not registered as per their title or network function. As of February 2017, there were 4,105 local and 437 international NGOs registered with the Ministry of Economy. Similarly, 2,550 Associations are registered with the Ministry of Justice.[4]

Notwithstanding a significant involvement of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) during the 1980s and 1990s, the post 9/11 international intervention in Afghanistan has substantially changed the working environment for NGOs. The unprecedented increase in development funding provided by the international community during the years 2002-14 has fueled significant growth of the NGO sector, primarily as a large proportion of development funding was provided for direct project implementation by UN agencies, international and national NGOs, and private contractors rather than being channeled through the Government of Afghanistan.[5]

The large number of refugees from bordering countries returning to Afghanistan, and the establishment of an internationally recognized government provided NGOs with new opportunities to rearticulate their role as humanitarian actors, both as service providers and as mission-driven

[1] EU Country Roadmap for Engaging with Civil Society in Afghanistan, 2015-17. https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/2015-9-6_-_eu_roadmap_for_engagement_with_civil_society_in_afghanistan_-_final.pdf
[2] Elizabeth Winter: Civil Society Development in Afghanistan, June 2010. http://www.lse.ac.uk/internationalDevelopment/research/NGPA/publications/winter_afghanistan_report_final.pdf
[3] BAAG: Synthesis of Afghan and International Civil Society Papers for The Brussels Conference on Afghanistan, Oct. 2016. http://www.acbar.org/upload/1479981412213.pdf
[4] ICNL, Civil Freedom Monitor, Afghanistan, http://www.icnl.org/research/monitor/afghanistan.html
[5] AICS: The State of the Enabling Environment for CSOs in Afghanistan, Sep. 2016. http://aicsafg.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Enabling-Environment-Report-September-28-2016.pdf

civil society organizations.[6] In early years, CSOs in Afghanistan were primarily active in delivering public services, especially in areas like health, education, water supply and agriculture, and in responding to the urgent humanitarian needs that existed in the country. However, since 2006, CSOs have started to become more active in policy advocacy and human rights promotion.[7] Particularly through networks and International NGOs, CSOs have been able to implement projects and programmes related to advocacy, human rights, independent media, anti-corruption, youth, women's rights, and electoral monitoring.[8]

According to the 2015 Civil Society Organization Sustainability Index for Afghanistan, donor engagement with, and support for longer-term partnerships with CSOs - in Kabul as well as in the provinces - and with their provision of resources for institutional development; CSOs have increasingly engaged in strategic planning, improving their organizational capacity, and internal systems. Increased competition for funding, because of the mushrooming of new CSOs and NGOs, has further driven CSOs to improve their organizational capacities, including strengthening internal management systems and constituency building efforts.[9]

However, CSOs have at the same time been widely criticized for being donor dependent, having a short-term project approach and being overly Kabul centric. The public image of CSOs/NGOs is not always positive, partly because of perceptions of 'empty projects', ineffectiveness, duplication of activities, and uncoordinated efforts. The National Unity Government (NUG) expects CSOs to follow its common framework for financial reporting and public disclosure - and the CSOs themselves recognise a need to strengthen transparency and accountability mechanisms.[10] CSOs also suffer from a public perception that all donor-funded organizations pay salaries above those offered by the government, resulting in criticism of NGO activity in some government circles and in the media. Incidences of substandard or overpriced work by NGOs have further contributed to the sometimes-negative attitudes of NGOs within the country.[11]

Tawanmandi – an important channel of support to civil society

The Tawanmandi programme was established in 2011, with a stated purpose of supporting "*an inclusive civil society that is able to engage effectively on issues of access to justice, anti-corruption, human rights, media, and peace-building and conflict resolution, with due attention to disability, gender, youth, and out of-Kabul civil society as cross-cutting themes.*" It was a multi-donor, so-called "challenge fund"[12] designed to improve governance in Afghanistan through greater accountability and responsiveness to citizens.[13] The donors were DFID and the development aid agencies of Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland.

Since 2009, Afghan civil society has been lobbying donors on the benefits of establishing a long-term funding mechanism, containing elements of both core and programme funding: A multi-donor funding scheme with greater accountability, inclusiveness and programme support; to help CSOs engage effectively in key 'sectors' seen to be essential for Afghanistan's development.

The establishment of Tawanmandi was a useful method to enhance donor collaboration in the support to civil society development. The initiative by DFID, Switzerland and other Nordic donors was welcomed by key stakeholders, considering it as a possible step forward in the use of donor

[6] Asian Development Bank: Overview of Civil Society Organizations Afghanistan, June 2009. https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/28962/csb-afg.pdf
[7] EU (2015)
[8] Altai Consulting, Signposting Success, https://www.internews.org/sites/default/files/resources/AltaiConsulting-Signposting_Success_FinalReport.pdf
[9] https://www.usaid.gov/afghanistan/civil-society-sustainability
[10] EU (2015)
[11] ADB (2009)
[12] As defined by UK's Overseas Development Institute, "challenge funds are seen as an innovative and versatile financing mechanism for channeling public funds for development. (..) A competitive mechanism to allocate financial support to innovative projects. (..) A financing mechanism to allocate (donor) funds for specific purposes using competition among organizations as the lead principle". See: https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/9086.pdf, p.5.
[13] British Council: Strengthening Civil Society in Afghanistan (Tawanmandi), Final Report, 29 January 2016.

funds to support CSOs as catalysts for indigenous development and for improved CSO support co-ordination.[14]

From 2012 to 2016, Tawanmandi disbursed almost USD 40 million in grants to 107 projects across 31 (out of 34) provinces in Afghanistan. A pilot, first, and second round granted USD 24 million to almost 100 projects, or around USD 240,000 per project. It is estimated that 500,000 direct project beneficiaries were reached – against a target of 350,000 – and an estimated average of 14 new jobs created under each new project.

USD 15 million was evenly distributed among 10 selected Sector Based Core Partners (SBCPs); with each grant to be spent over three years. The purpose of these partnerships with well-established and leading CSOs was to strengthen sector-based and issue-based advocacy, as well as supporting the SBCPs to foster improved networking, coalitions and greater CSO collaboration within specific sectors or across different themes. Using this approach, Tawanmandi supported eight sectors; Access to Justice, Anti-Corruption, Disability, Gender, Human Rights, Media, Peace Building and Youth – as well as CSO networking through support to two umbrella organizations. The grants provided to SBCPs contained 50% of funding directed to programme activities; 30% for the SBCPs' organizational development; and 20% for organizational administration costs, (e.g. staff salaries, office rent, and utilities).[15]

Tawanmandi has been an important step by development partners to support CSOs, through its combination of funding for projects, core organizational costs and capacity building, and through its sector-based approach. CSOs consulted for this paper also stated the significance of Tawanmandi's launch date – in 2012 – given the serious funding shortages CSOs were experiencing at that time. A number of CSOs have received core funding through Tawanmandi, which has contributed to a strengthening of their strategic focus as well as improving their reach at the provincial level. As we are getting closer to the end of the programme, there is clearly a need to evaluate Tawanmandi's achievements, and to understand how these findings might inform the design of future civil society programming in Afghanistan.

Identified Challenges

Despite the positive impact of the significant investment in civil society's development efforts, the sector continues to face ongoing challenges. These relate to issues of accountability, sustainability, maintaining long-term programming and local engagement beyond central and easy-to-reach provinces. The challenges highlighted under the sub-headings below are gathered from a review of key documents (as listed in footnotes) as well as a focus group discussion organized by ASI with SBCPs and civil society network organizations. The set of challenges identified in this paper are identified repeatedly in existing policy documents and research papers as well as expressed by a majority of CSOs that Rahnuma has been engaged with.

An assessment of the suitability and effectiveness of development partners' support to CSOs needs to be linked to a clear understanding of the role of civil society in development. Several of the documents consulted during the desk review provide useful analysis and discussion of civil society in the Afghan context, the history of 'modern' civil society, and of the key roles to be played by its actors.[16] Drawing on these and other sources, Rahnuma has outlined our definition of civil society; our understanding of civil society in the Afghan context; and a list of what we see being some important roles of CSOs (see Annex 1: Civil Society in the Afghan Context – Definitions and Key Roles).

The preparation and implementation of development interventions in Afghanistan have been hampered by the very challenging and constantly evolving situation in the provinces, particularly in terms of insecurity, instability, high number of IDPs and returnees, etc. These challenges also include limited coordination between local government and CSOs as well as high expectations of local government and communities from organizations implementing projects. Due to increased

[14] Winter (2010)
[15] British Council (2016)
[16] ADB (2009); Winter (2010); EU (2015); ACBAR (2015)

insecurity and threats to the international community, few donors have any remaining presence at the provincial level, and CSO partners must have a Kabul presence to engage with donors. This alone represents a massive obstacle for the contribution and participation of CSOs at the provincial level. This obstacle is further exacerbated by the aforementioned insecurity and other challenges experienced at the provincial level, requiring CSOs to revise and change plans; postponing or changing project activities, including locations, strategies, and budgets. Responsiveness to these changing circumstances not only require CSOs to adapt their plans, but also donors to assess and respond to CSO requests for adjustments of project agreements quickly and efficiently.

With reduced funding for Afghan civil society, the sector is likely to gradually weaken. This will limit development partner opportunities to solicit civil society opinions and documentation of Government of Afghanistan policy implementation, and the quantity and quality of service delivery.

Insufficient focus on programme preparation and coordination

Donor support is often perceived to reflect their own policies and interests rather than resulting from a broader assessment or consultation of need within Afghanistan. CSOs have seen discrepancies between identified needs in local communities and the funding priorities set by development partners, resulting in some important needs not being addressed, while there is duplication of effort in other areas. From the CSO perspective, the donors' civil society support strategies are developed with little consultation of and priority setting with CSOs themselves. In these instances, the justification and reasoning for decisions by development partners on their provision of CSO funding for particular sectors and issues is unclear and not transparent. A notable exception for this approach is the EU Country Roadmap for Engagement with Civil Society, were a thorough contextual analysis informed the selection of priorities for support. Coordination challenges between donors can limit access to funding to a few established organizations. To win projects, some CSOs accept unrealistic funding levels, resulting in projects with limited impact, or sustainability. The need for regular collaboration and coordination among CSOs, donors and line ministries, has also been underscored by the Ministry of Economy.

Adding sufficient focus and effort in project preparation and consultation processes however also pose a challenge to Afghan CSOs. While the core idea of partnering with and supporting local CSOs is that they are expected be closer to the people they are supporting than the international organizations, this is not always the case due to various factors; geography (urban/rural), culture, ethnicity, etc. Kabul based staff might also have insufficient knowledge of rural communities and understanding of traditional and cultural practices and sensitivities. Afghan CSOs have a responsibility to develop an understanding of the needs and aspirations of communities that they aim to help and represent, so that programmes and projects are built according to detailed context and problem analysis. Some CSOs admit, however, that the pressure to meet deadlines for the submission of project proposals to donors, as well as insufficient staff experience (particularly at the provincial level) in conducting participatory needs assessment and stakeholder analysis negatively impact project design, leading to unrealistic timelines and implementation strategies.

Linkages between CSO programmes and government's national priority programmes (NPPs) could often be stronger. However, due to limited openness and facilitation of government to consult with civil society during the design of these national programmes, CSOs also tend to develop projects that are independent of NPPs. The Citizen's Charter is a good example of a government led initiative, which could benefit from government and civil society coordination, but is unfortunately silent on the role of civil society in its implementation. The precursor of the Citizen's Charter was the National Solidarity Programme (NSP), where international and Afghan NGOs played a key role as facilitating partners – implementing rural development programming in partnership with government. This challenge is to some extent a result of the fact that collaboration and trust between government and CSOs remains relatively weak, and coordination efforts are not sufficiently backed and supported over the longer-term. Generally, coordination is created and facilitated by international actors (such as UNAMA) or when there are national or international events related to Afghanistan. There have been efforts to improve coordination within CSOs; for example, the Civil Society Joint Working Group is an important attempt at facilitating information

exchange and coordination, but it is also criticized by some CSOs for not being sufficiently inclusive of civil society, often relying on a smaller number of individuals to continue the forum.

Many CSOs have adopted working with a human rights based approach. This entails that the goal of development cooperation will seek to realize human rights; that the process of development cooperation should be guided by human rights standards and principles; and that there should be a focus on rights-holders and duty-bearers and their capacities to claim and fulfil obligations. In this context, Afghan CSOs operate with conflicting roles, when implementing gap-filling projects to deliver public services and at the same time playing a role in monitoring and advocating for improvement of these services (even if not by the same CSO). An evaluation of DFID's programme in Afghanistan found that the role of CSOs was more that of project implementer than a defender of public accountability. Some Afghan CSOs would like to see an increased collaboration with government, receiving public funds to increase and improve service delivery to citizens, but seem to forget that this will compromise their role as independent representatives of the voice of citizens and specific interest groups.

Shrinking funds for CSOs

According to the Afghanistan Institute for Civil Society (AICS), one of the major challenges faced by civil society is insufficient availability of programmatic and core funding for their work. It is clear that the contraction of donor funding over the past years has increased the competition among CSOs for financial resources.[17] The CSO position paper for the 2016 Brussels Conference on Afghanistan noted that "*international financial support to CSOs has seen a sharp decline; aid budgets have been shrinking and more commitments are made to on-budget support*"[18] Data on the total amounts of foreign funding committed to the CSO sector has not been available to the writers of this Policy Note, in part due to inconsistent collection and sharing of information among donor agencies and government entities. In 2009, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) estimated the provision of direct donor funding for NGO activities to constitute USD 410-450 million (or 10-13% of total donor funding) on an annual basis.[19] There seems to be no information available on the overall level of CSO funding today. According to AICS' 2016 survey on the CSO environment, however, access to funding emerged as their biggest concern, next to the security situation. 90% of CSOs across provinces found it difficult to access funding.[20] Unfortunately, while there is greater emphasis on transparency and accountability from international donors, there is no data collection mechanism to evaluate the amount of funding provided by them to CSOs. Moreover, there is equally no concrete data or report on disbursement of funding to CSOs across the country.

Requests for proposals (RFPs) seem to be uncoordinated by donors, which runs the risk of duplication of effort. In other instances, CSOs are forced to phase out engagements and interventions that would require support beyond the horizon of current project funding. It has continuously been a challenge for CSOs to get insights into and to understand mechanisms of aid management and coordination among donors. The review of the referenced reports, as well as the views shared by CSO representatives (as part of focus group discussions) show that coordination mechanisms related to CSO funding are very limited.

An overall challenge for the international development partners in Afghanistan is the shift in priorities of donor governments, reducing aid commitments to Afghanistan. As a result of the reduction in funding, the number of staff at embassies, missions and delegations is also decreasing – reducing their ability to administer CSO grants and to maintain a regular dialogue with these organizations. The security situation also continues to increase project implementation risks, and to increase transaction costs.

[17] AICS (2016)
[18] Collaboration for Transformation. The Civil Society of Afghanistan Position Paper for the Brussels Conference on Afghanistan, 4-5 October 2016. http://www.baag.org.uk/sites/www.baag.org.uk/files/resources/attachments/BCA%20report%206Dec16%20final.pdf
[19] ADB (2009)
[20] AICS (2016)

Project award processes

Many Afghan CSOs see the selection processes for eligible CSO partners, their project proposals and the contract award processes as non-transparent and marred with inconsistency and biased decision-making. Development partners' accountability mechanisms in these processes are seen to go upwards - to the ultimate donors - rather than downwards – to the applicants, or their beneficiaries.[21]

Tawanmandi project and programme award process was by the CSOs seen as unnecessarily long and complicated. CSOs that decided to apply for funding were required to provide substantial documentation and reporting on past performances. While a significant amount of time and effort was required to prepare documentation (such as policies, strategies, reports, accounts, etc.), it was not clear how much consideration these documents/policies received, particularly when applicant organisations did not receive detailed feedback on their funding applications. This was probably partly a result of the large number of applicants and limited funding available. If organizations met the administrative criteria but still fails to receive funding, then that may discourage CSOs in maintaining these documents in future.

A contributing factor to the decision not to extend Tawanmandi was the allegations of corruption that the programme's Technical Management Unit (TMU) was exposed to, mainly in 2014.[22] The allegations against national staff were investigated both internally by the TMU (British Council at that time) and externally by the donors and found to be unsubstantiated. This has, however, not prevented these damaging rumours to persist.[23]

Calls for CSO proposals are mainly providing funding for short-term projects (of 6-12 months' duration), which has the benefit (mainly to the donor) that outputs are to be delivered quickly and can therefore be reported quickly. The downside of this approach is that the CSOs 'learn' to focus on directly deliverable outputs, instead of assessing whether their interventions will have a longer-term result or impact. While many CSOs in their vision and mission statements are aiming at social change, they hardly ever get to implement projects that allow time to reflect over whether the intervention strategies are contributing to this change to happen. The short-term projects also force the organizations to hire staff on a project basis (since they cannot guarantee continuous employment), and this fuels a rapid staff turnover – which again requires resources constantly and repeatedly spent on inductions, trainings and capacity building.

Findings from the desk review and CSOs consulted indicate an insufficient focus by donors on sustainability and exit strategies, beyond currently funded programming. For example, while one of the main reasons for establishing Tawanmandi was to empower CSOs through a sustainability plan beyond this programme, the communication gap between the parties has increased over time. It also created a sense of confusion among Tawanmandi partners not knowing what is planned when the fund's term is completed. CSO partners continue to wait for direct communications on the programme's exit strategy.

Funding core costs and capacity building

The question of whether to accept inclusion of budget lines to cover organizational core costs and capacity building activities as part of CSO project funding is approached in very different ways by different donors. Funding for core organizational costs (management and administrative costs) has been available to a varying degree, depending on the policy of the donor.

Under Tawanmandi, the programme provided a range of generic trainings – seen to be of priority to the partners and the programme's objectives – in which a total of 810 participants took part. SBCPs were offered funding for additional capacity development, up to 30% of the total grant, to help them address their specific capacity development needs, thus devolving ownership of their

[21] Focal group discussion with CSO representatives, held on 9 March 2017.
[22] The Rahnuma team has in several meetings with CSOs heard these allegations being repeated.
[23] British Council (2016)

own organizational development. Also, the SBCPs were allowed to include up to 20% of total budget to cover core costs.

The intention was that SBCPs would utilise this opportunity to develop specific sectoral or thematic expertise.[24] Tawanmandi however concluded that they over-estimated the ability of the SBCPs' senior management to critically reflect upon their organizational and sectoral development needs without external support. Rahnuma's capacity building efforts, starting from early 2016, had a focus on the sector 'lead' roles by the SBCPs. The project's ability, however, to create sufficient interest in and to develop new approaches to enhance the sector facilitation role has been rather limited; primarily, it seems, because of insufficient buy-in by the CSOs. This confirms past experiences on the difficulties with enhancing sector coordination, peer learning, building of CSO coalitions and networks.[25]

Some donors have a policy of only providing funding for direct project activities, while others are willing to support organizational core costs. This situation bears the risk that one of the two is under- or over-budgeted. Both situations decrease the effectiveness of providing sustainable project outcomes. CSOs find it important that core funding and support to capacity building is delicately balanced with funding for implementation of project activities, aimed at providing development benefits to key target groups. The administrative delays in Tawanmandi concerning assessment of SBCP financial reports and new work plans and funds requests created gaps in the funding flow of up to 6 months. The effect of this is that staff might continue to work, with the expectation that their salary will be paid at a later stage, but with little prospect of being able to accomplish work plans, since there is no funding. This tips the balance between core and activity costs so that cost effectiveness is reduced.

Balancing support to large and small CSOs

Since 2013, most development partners have focused on funding fewer, larger, and longer-term projects with key CSO partners. The main large-scale attempts at making funding available to smaller, out-of-Kabul based CSOs have been through Tawanmandi and Counterpart International (with CPI providing capacity support to these smaller CSOs through long-term partnerships with a network of 28 province-based and 4 regional CSOs). However, more often, donors avoid funding smaller and provincial level CSOs due to insecurity in the provinces, and past experience where some CSOs failed to implement projects, or provided falsified, or otherwise insufficient activity reports.

Another challenge as seen by Afghan CSOs is that donors prefer awarding funding contracts to INGOs, which have better access to experienced proposal writers, budget developers and experts. This may overshadow the potential growth of national CSOs. AICS refers to figures published by Ministry of Economy from 2015, which indicate that the balance of funding to INGOs and Afghan NGOs was 71% and 29%, respectively. Some INGOs are self-implementing and employ a high number of Afghan staff, while others use the donor funding to contract or partner with local CSOs to carry out actual project implementation – due to the security and movement restrictions that international organizations may have. Mid-level and newly established CSOs are at a bigger risk of reduced funding at this moment. These CSOs have provincial presence, networks and local expertise; however, as they are not physically present in Kabul and other bigger cities such as Mazar and Herat, and as their English communication skills might not be strong, they have limited access to funding announcements.

The EU has reported criticism by CSOs based in the provinces, of the Kabul-based civil society community: Some civil society actors find that collaboration among CSOs is very centered in Kabul and that a small number of organizations benefit from existing opportunities and lead this work, while CSOs at the provincial level are side-lined. Youth groups and trade unions have severely criticised the Kabul-based civil society community for dominating, or otherwise blocking CSOs at the provincial and district levels from participation in national networks.

[24] British Council (2016), p. 91.
[25] This challenge is the subject of a separate 'learning paper' by the Rahnuma Project.

CSO eligibility and project cycle management

CSOs consulted have raised the issue that calls for proposals are often very complicated. It is difficult for many CSOs to comply with conditions and eligibility criteria, making it very hard for small CSOs based in provinces to apply and compete. Some of the CSOs believe that demanding technical proposals with good quality and English language is one of the major constraints that limit mid and small level CSOs from provinces to access the funding opportunities. On the other hand, some donors have complained of the quality of submitted applications; some were seen to be copy-paste, with the context situation and learnings from past interventions not systematically assessed or analyzed.

Development partners have their own formats and templates for project proposals, budgets, progress and financial reports; necessitating CSOs to operate simultaneously with multiple different systems (depending on their success with accessing funding from several donors). This also brings with it a tendency for CSOs to keep separate accounts for each donor-supported project, which weakens accountability systems to donors (e.g. on core costs) as well as to their own boards, members and beneficiaries, since some have difficulty in presenting overall organizational financial reports.

Some cases of misuse of funds, corruption and fraud in donor-funded CSO projects have prompted donors to develop increasingly detailed eligibility criteria to limit financial risk. Tawanmandi has followed this trend by adopting rigorous standards of transparency and accountability in grants procedures and processes, including due diligence and reporting requirements that most CSOs were unaccustomed to, and which some of the development partners in the programme did not entirely support.[26] The argument was that the civil society sector is still nascent and that too rigorous standards would go against the core purpose of the programme. Development partners and CSO support agencies have seen the challenge with ensuring legitimacy and sufficient capacity of the CSOs as an opportunity to develop a common approach by offering certification systems; AICS being the most elaborate programme to offer these services in a systematic manner.

CSOs consulted for this paper believe that reporting expectations are too high, and that demands from donor agencies significantly increase the workloads of organizations. The experience is that the donors themselves often underestimate the resources required for them to administer their compliance systems. The CSOs mentioned weak, delayed or no feedback by donors on their reporting. This added a lot of difficulty in execution of project activities, payments of staff salary and project related costs.

It is seldom that donors provide feedback on submitted proposals, making it difficult for CSOs to know how to improve their project proposals. The workshops arranged by ACBAR and EU in December 2015 and February 2017, with participation of key donors and CSO coordinating bodies, was a useful attempt at facilitating dialogue and exchange of information between the two parties (were the EU also listed common reasons for proposals to be found ineligible). ACBAR's website - providing 'donor information' - is also helpful, but requires submission of up-to-date information from the development partners.[27]

In general, development partners are less accessible (and dialogue less frequent) than in the past, primarily because of security issues. The opportunities for continuous dialogue with CSOs have therefore diminished and this increases the need to impose formal standards across the board. The need for regular dialogue and negotiations between the CSO grantees and the development partner is, however, an important part of a partnership, and one that facilitates a common understanding of the context, of what is realistic for a project to achieve, and how results can be monitored and reported.

[26] British Council (2016)
[27] http://www.acbar.org/page/13.jsp?title=Donor-Information

A different approach, used by some donors to reduce the administrative burden related to calling for proposals and to assess these and capacities of applications, is to rely on partnership relations with CSOs, built over the long-term. This type of close relation bears several advantages in terms of a close knowledge and understanding of each other, a chance to negotiate terms and conditions, to try out new ideas and approaches, etc., without risk of severing relationships. The downside, however, is that the Afghan CSOs tend to monopolize access to the donor partner and blocks access to funding to other CSOs, which might have developed greater legitimacy or new effective project approaches. In other words, the approach leads to insufficient competition among the CSOs.

Weak documentation of results

As mentioned at the start of this paper, development interventions by CSOs are implemented in a very challenging environment, with security threats, changing power structures and often weak presence of government at the local level – alongside widespread poverty, internal displacement of people, rapidly growing cities, and other recognized problems. This requires that the work of CSOs be guided by humanitarian principles and by coordinated and agreed standards. Efforts by development actors in this field appear to have been fairly strong; more so in humanitarian than in long-term development work. Efforts are weaker, however, when it comes to broader assessment and comparison of the results of long-term development work. The worsened security situation has made it increasingly difficult for donors to ascertain output delivery or to evaluate results and impact of CSO supported projects. This again makes it harder to document cost effectiveness and to learn from experiences. A healthy competition between the CSOs, in terms of increasing quality and innovative ideas, is not properly incentivized because the development partners often have a short time horizon and therefore mainly have a focus on short-term project outputs, but do not invest sufficient resources in reviewing and evaluating the outcomes of the supported projects. The EU Roadmap points to the need for investment in drawing out lessons learnt and knowledge about what worked or did not work. Some method and system of cross-evaluation of CSO project results is required, also to facilitate further development of civil society capacity.

Rahnuma is a CSO capacity building project, funded as part of Tawanmandi and focusing on the five Sector Based Core Partners (AWEC, CSHRN, DQG, IWA and SDO). It is implemented by Adam Smith International. As part of the work, ASI is producing three ‘learning papers´, to contribute to lessons learning and strategic thinking in the area of organizational capacity building for Afghan CSOs. ASI hope to be able to assist DFID and other donors to make well-informed decisions about their support to civil society, and to gather lessons learned from Tawanmandi that can be applied by donors in future Afghan CSO programming.

The way forward – CSO funding beyond Tawanmandi

Recommendations for development partners:

These recommendations have been compiled from the focus group discussion led by the report author, and supported by the Rahnuma team.

1. Development partners should share their ideas and plans for civil society support through the established CSO networks or other relevant fora of established CSOs, to reduce risks of intervention overlaps and duplication, and so that there is an increased potential for alignment and harmonization of CSO interventions.
2. Donors should at least coordinate the announcement of calls for proposals and make sure that reference to these are advertised on a single website, known and accessible to all Afghan CSOs – building on what is presently the case with information provided through ACBAR's website.
3. Development partners to reconsider the possibility of setting up a follow-up pool or 'challenge' fund, similar to Tawanmandi, building on an evaluation of this programme; the overall aim should be to make civil society funding more predictable, stable and long-term. The purpose should also be to facilitate some level of healthy competition between the CSOs, so that funding is primarily provided to organizations with good track record and with areas of key competencies.
4. Given the need for continuous dialogue with and feedback to CSO partners, consider models of outsourcing the management awarding and granting contracts, negotiating project contents and budgets, reporting and monitoring to a third-party entity with in-depth experience and knowledge from similar work in Afghanistan. Preferably, with field offices in key provinces, to open up space for mid-level and newly established CSOs to benefit.
5. Development partners, who have a pronounced interest in supporting civil society, to release annual reporting with information about the CSOs supported and the amounts made available. ACBAR or another civil society interest organization (perhaps in coordination with Ministry of Economy) to provide a format for this type of reporting, so that it gives details concerning distribution of funding and projects over provinces, sectors and between International and Afghan NGOs. EU and ACBAR to continue arranging annual donor conferences, where issues related to the relations between development partners and CSOs are debated. This will also increase transparency about fulfilment of commitments made during international conferences on Afghanistan – e.g. the 2016 Brussels Conference.
6. Financial support to development projects to be provided primarily to projects of no less than 24 months duration (humanitarian projects could be of shorter duration), for realistic monitoring of longer-term results. This should be accompanied by a stronger conditionality from the development partner that the CSO develops and monitors indicators at results level (not only at outputs level).
7. Development partners to negotiate with CSO network alliances to work out standard project description and budget formats that can be applied to most calls for proposals – or at least form the core of these. This will allow more effective capacity building of CSOs in their development of project proposals. Budgets to have a set format, indicating definitions and recommended percentage limits for allocations on core costs and capacity building. Donors, who support the

same CSO, to accept 'basket funding' arrangements, so that the CSO needs to submit only one progress and accounts report to them all.

8. Development partners to strengthen accountability and transparency in their contract and grants award processes. Increase and improve mechanisms for systematic provision of feedback to applicants, so that they are able to improve their eligibility.
9. Development partners to collaborate on a mechanism to call for expression of interest to manage a contract to carry out CSO project evaluations across the country. This to be awarded to an independent service provider, who during a 2-3 year period is tasked to compare CSO project results in selected sectors.
10. Development partners to collaborate on establishing a national civil society capacity building institution to provide and arrange standardised organizational management and project cycle management trainings, coaching and mentoring – as well as other required forms of capacity building in technical areas. This institution will be financed mainly on a demand basis, so that CSOs requesting support will pay for services provided.

Recommendations for Afghan CSOs:

1. CSOs to strengthen their capacity (and related policies and guidelines) to carry out strong and consistent project preparations; situation, stakeholder, gap analysis, etc. Make sure that new interventions build on documentation, analysis and presentation of results from earlier interventions. Ensure that induction and capacity building of staff incorporates these elements as part of overall project cycle management. Improve capacity gaps of the organization by soliciting feedback from the target communities, peer organizations, and development partners, throughout project implementation.
2. CSOs, who perform service delivery functions to strengthen accountability mechanisms and performance assessments by users (community score cards or similar) and organizing third party evaluations.
3. CSOs with ambitions and competencies to play a leading role in a sector or focus area to encourage and engage in working in groups and consortia for the implementation of coordinated and joint projects and programmes – in accordance with organizational mandates and visions. This with the perspective to strategically leveraging each other's strengths, building on complimentary competencies; also increasing funding opportunities and broadening implementation throughout the country, and with a potential of increasing cost effectiveness.
4. Improve communication and outreach by using social media, website as well as regular sharing of lessons learned and success stories. Bringing examples from the groups especially from provinces and districts are critical to attract donors funding and create assurance that implementation of projects in provinces and districts are possible. CSOs to more consistently publish their annual reports and accounts, for public accountability reasons.
5. CSOs to systematically assess their financial sustainability status, in order to identify opportunities for increasing income, beyond donor funding.

Annex 1: Civil Society in the Afghan Context – Definitions and Key Roles

Defining civil society

Civil society is defined and conceptualised differently at different times in different contexts and for different purposes. For the purposes of this Review it is agreed that civil society is "a socially and politically constructed concept that in each context, time, and place can include different organizations, institutions, and groups".[28] The United Nations adopts a broad definition, in which civil society is defined as a space which encapsulates different organizations and groupings operating outside of the state and marketplace. This would include in its broadest terms religious institutions, universities, private schools, run as charities, and so on. However, in providing examples the UN definition is narrowed to include: "social movements, volunteer organizations, indigenous peoples' organizations, mass-based membership organizations, non-governmental organizations, and community-based organizations, as well as communities and citizens acting individually and collectively".[29] This is still an all-encompassing definition which is important to narrow further for this Review.

Civil Society in the Afghan context

Civil society in Afghanistan is not new but it has shifted and evolved substantially since the 19th and 20th centuries.[30] Civil society in Afghanistan today can be divided into two broad categories: First, 'traditional'[31] bodies for 'local' governance and justice, such as shuras and jirgas,[32] and other ad-hoc bodies in which elders come together to make decisions or represent their communities' interests or needs to government bodies. Associations which are membership based and focus on different interest groups – such as trade associations – can also be included in this category. The second category refers to aspects of civil society that have developed post-2001, which includes the emergence of LNGOs and networks in large numbers,[33] who primarily rely on international funding; have taken a role in both service provision particularly under the auspices of large government programs, such as the National Solidarity Program (NSP) and the Basic Package of Health Services (BPHS); advocacy; and who are registered with the Ministry of Economy and Ministry of Justice; individual human rights and women's rights defenders and other activists are also included in this second category. Traditional civil society structures were not prioritized by the donor community in the post-2001 era who instead opted to focus resources on funding NGOs, given their capacity to implement services. For example, some LNGOs acted as facilitating partners under the NSP, which linked the national government with rural areas.[34] As service providers and advocates, LNGOs and INGOs became heavily involved in the conversation

[28] Nemat, Orzala Ashraf and Werner, Karin; The Role of Civil Society Promoting Good Governance in Afghanistan; July 2016
[29] UNDP Engagement with Civil Society, http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/ourwork/funding/partners/civil_society_organizations.html accessed on 1st June 2017
[30] Nemat, Orzala Ashraf and Werner, Karin; The Role of Civil Society Promoting Good Governance in Afghanistan; July 2016
[31] In using the term traditional the author does not wish to imply that these bodies have remained static, instead they adapt and change over time and place and in response to externally and internally changing contexts, needs and interests.
[32] The terms jirga and shura are often used interchangeably. This is inaccurate for many parts of Afghanistan where they describe distinctively different forums. A Jirga is usually an ad-hoc body that comes together to resolve a particular problem or resolve a dispute it can vary in size from 2 or 3 elders for a small village based dispute to hundred for a large inter-tribe dispute. Across Afghanistan other words may be used to describe similar bodies such as maraca or simply jalasa – The Dari word for meeting. Shuras tend to be more fixed bodies with a regular memberships and representatives from different communities who are formed around particular local governance issues.
[33] This is not to say that such organizations did not exist prior to the Taliban (for example, the revolutionary Association of Afghan Women (RAWA) which was formed in 1977, both the Afghan Development Association and Afghan Health and Development Services were established in 1990 and the Humanitarian Action for People of Afghanistan formed in 1991. However, they were very small in number and they have increased exponentially in the post-2001 era.
[34] Nemat, Orzala Ashraf and Werner, Karin; The Role of Civil Society Promoting Good Governance in Afghanistan; July 2016

surrounding Afghanistan's development through regular engagement with Government and the donor community.

Key Roles of Civil Society

Rahnuma builds its findings and recommendations on the following brief outline of our understanding of the most important roles of civil society in national development: CSOs should

a) provide access for poor people to basic services, mainly vulnerable and marginalized population groups that government is unable to reach – or that are being neglected by public service providers;
b) promote awareness of rights of citizens; in particular, poor and marginalised people/groups;
c) monitor whether authorities and development partners live up to their promises and adopted policies, and whether public services are provided of a required quantity and quality;
d) mobilise and organise local communities as well as marginalised population groups to actively participate in development initiatives and to be part of decision-making on these;
e) build strong coalitions and networks for increasing civil society's influence on the national and local development agenda; and
f) provide inspiration to and challenge public authorities through collaboration and advocacy to promote innovative methods and ways to focus on and reach particularly vulnerable population groups.[35]

[35] Inspired by Policy for Danish Support to Civil Society – see: http://um.dk/en/danida-en/partners/civil-society-organisations//~/media/UM/Danish-site/Documents/Danida/Samarbejde/Civil-org/Dokumenter/Strat/Civilsamfundspolitik_UK_web.pdf