

To stabilise Afghanistan, give a stronger voice to civil society

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Nearly nine years after the deployment of NATO-led international forces in Afghanistan, there is little doubt: bringing peace, stability and economic development to the country demands not just military action but an equally sustained focus on building strong and resilient civilian institutions.

While international military operations against the Taliban insurgency as well as Western efforts to train the Afghan National Army and the police force - and attempts at reconciliation and integration of militants - are regularly in the headlines, the struggle to build civilian capacity has traditionally captured less public attention.

This has to change: Afghanistan's long-term stability and growth depends on the strength of its civilian institutions and the active involvement of Afghan people in the development of their country.

In other words, creating a framework for stability requires a successful mix of 'soft' civilian power with the 'hard' boots-on-the-ground and firing power of the military. Insecurity in Afghanistan cannot be addressed by military means alone.

This is especially important if, as agreed by NATO foreign ministers in Tallin on 23 April, foreign troops are gradually removed from a lead role in some Afghan provinces by end-2010 and authority is progressively transferred to Afghans.

EU foreign ministers agreed last October to concentrate efforts on strengthening Afghan state capacity and institutions in order to promote good governance, human rights and an efficient public administration, especially at the sub-national level. The aim, said EU ministers, was to "enable the Afghan government to assume full responsibility, while the international community gradually takes a more supportive role."

NATO's emphasis on a "comprehensive approach" to stabilise Afghanistan, recognising the need to pull together military and civilian efforts, is also a step in the right direction. As NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen recognised in a recent speech, "The military mission cannot succeed until the civilian aspects - better governance, improved development, and a rising economy - also succeed."

This is good news. However, the focus on stronger civilian engagement puts the spotlight not only on Afghan state institutions but also on civil society groups and organisations - including community groups, women's associations, faith-based organizations and religious networks, business leaders, media, professional associations as well as traditional *shuras* or *jirgas* - which are working tirelessly and often with little funds or support for their country's political, social and economic development.

Their task is not easy. Although Afghan civil society groups have sharply increased in number in recent years, become much more visible and acquired a degree of political influence, they often face an uphill struggle for survival and recognition. Some are the targets of vested interests and power-holders who oppose the quest for change.

Good governance and stability in Afghanistan requires the active participation of empowered and confident civil society actors - including reform-minded independent politicians - who can speak their mind on vital issues concerning the country's governance deficit, discuss issues of legitimacy and accountability and, more generally, work for an improved political system. With

much-awaited Afghan parliamentary elections set to take place by the end of the year, the role of civil society organisations as drivers for change and democracy, accountability and clean government becomes even more important.

Afghanistan's reconstruction demands more aid and investments in the country's still-fragile economy. With 80% of Afghans living and working in rural areas, investment in agriculture and rural development is crucial to improve livelihoods, eradicate poverty and stimulate economic recovery. The drive to rid the country of poppy production is important, but building the national economy also demands stronger involvement of local entrepreneurs, both male and female, and the creation of an economic climate which is conducive to private investments, both local and foreign.

Significantly, the number of female entrepreneurs in Afghanistan is on the way up: women make up an estimated 85% of all active micro-credit borrowers in Afghanistan, with many using their loans to start businesses (beauty parlours, tailoring shops, and bakeries being the most striking examples).

Last, but not least, post-war reconstruction in Afghanistan requires increased attention and support for the development of Afghanistan's media outlets, educational facilities and, more generally, the wider cultural sector. Despite war and destruction, Afghanistan has a vibrant culture which can contribute to the building of a more cohesive society, help heal past wounds and bring diverse communities together.

Afghanistan's media is already playing a key role in promoting the free exchange of information and ideas that are fundamental to the country's democratisation: in different ways, the Afghan media is not only a check on politicians and on corruption, it is also introducing new societal concepts, fostering critical thinking and working for enhanced women's rights as well as merit-based competition and civic participation.

The international community has taken an important step forward in recognising the role of Afghan civil society in tackling both the country's urgent challenges but also ensuring the country's long-term development and reconstruction. Strengthening Afghan civil society will demand sustained efforts to engage with such groups and action to improve the legal environment under which they operate.

International donors and especially the EU, which prides itself on its civilian, or, 'soft' skills, can take a stronger lead in this by moving beyond a classical government-based approach and promoting - even more vigorously - the emergence of independent and courageous civil society organisations that are actively engaged in an often uphill battle to rebuild Afghanistan.

The role of civil society in Afghanistan's development will be the focus of an all-day conference on Tuesday 4 May organised by the EPC and the US Mission to the EU.

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