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Afghan Civic Engagement Program (ACEP) - Counterpart

Value: \$79,120,000

Duration: December 2013 to December 2019

OVERVIEW

The key to a strong democracy is a robust media and civil society sector. On December 4, 2013, Counterpart International, together with its implementing partners, Internews Network, the International Center for Not-for-profit Law (ICNL) and the Aga Khan Foundation (AKF), was awarded \$70 million to implement the five-year USAID-funded Afghan Civic Engagement Program (ACEP) with the goal to enable Afghan citizens to influence policy, monitor government accountability, and serve as advocates for political reform through civil society development and media engagement. The program is achieving this through five program areas: (1) regular civil society organization (CSO) engagement with government; (2) increased CSO and media thematic expertise in democracy and governance; (3) expanded civic engagement; (4) improved access to independent news and public affairs information; and (5) increased CSO organizational capacity. On June 28, 2018, Counterpart and USAID agreed to a one-year project extension with an additional focus on expanding civic and voter education during the October 2018 parliamentary elections and the 2019 presidential election.

CURRENT ACTIVITIES:

- Working through 34 provincial CSO partners and seven regional CSO partners, conduct community civic and voter education sessions in 28 provinces to discuss peace-building and encourage voter registration and participation in elections.
- Supporting the Civil Society Election Coordination Group (CECG) to strengthen civil society engagement with electoral management bodies (EMBs), i.e., the Independent Elections Commission and the Independent Electoral Complaints Commission) following the parliamentary elections in October 2018 and ahead of the presidential elections scheduled in July 2019.
- Strengthening electoral integrity through grants to two Kabul-based CSO partners, which provide support to regional and provincial partners with content and message development and delivery.
- Supporting advocacy working groups focused on the National Budget, Family Law and on disability mainstreaming to advance laws and policies in respective areas and increase accountability and responsiveness to government and the public.
- Expanding ties of the Civil Society Joint Working Group (CSJWG) with regional and provincial-based CSO networks and coordination bodies and expand CSJWG representation through establishing regional hubs in Mazar-e-Sharif, Herat, Kandahar and Jalalabad.
- Providing guidance to the Men Supporting Women Rights advocacy group to advance gender-sensitive improvements in the Cybercrime Law and identify other laws and policies that require review and strengthening from a women's rights perspective.
- Supporting the Emerging Civil Society Leaders (ECSLs) Alumni Network through an inclusive capacity development package that includes trainings, peer to peer learning, coordination meetings and in-country study tours, and award five youth activism grants to ECSLs through a competitive process. The network consists of 136 ECSLs (53 women, 83 men), four from each province.
- Strengthening women's political participation through four small grants for women-led/focused grassroots CSOs.
- Contributing to areas such as national budget monitoring, exposing corrupt practices, improved access to information through two government service delivery grants.



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- Facilitating citizens' access to elections-related news and information through radio and web and enable citizen activists and journalist's engagement in the electoral process through multimedia skills development.
- Holding CSOs-Government Coordination Working Group (CG-CWG) meetings, facilitated by International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL), involving civil society networks and the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) and Ministry of Economy (MoEc) to review relevant laws and policies and develop recommendations to strengthen the civil society enabling environment.
- Encouraging CSOs to apply for the CSO certification program implemented by the AKF partner [REDACTED]; process certification assessment cases and refer CSOs to donors for capacity development.

MAJOR ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Counterpart:

- Between PY1 and second half of PY6, up to 35 provincial CSO partners on a yearly basis conducted 13,707 civic education and community sessions in 28 provinces, attended by a total of 420,156 participants (207,977 women, and 212,179 men), and 1,867 community dialogue sessions in 26 provinces, with a total of 54,281 participants (27,649 women, 26,632 men).
- Community dialogues have resulted in a commitment from the Ministry of Public Health to build a 30-bed hospital in Tagab village of Daikundi Province in 2016; the installation of electricity power lines and street lighting in Sultan Wesh Baba village, Laghman Province in August 2016; a community's contribution of \$400,000 to purchase land to build a women's high school in Gor-e-Mar village, Balkh Province in September 2017; the reopening of a boys school and a community's agreement to open a girls school in a village in Paktika Province in May 2017; the construction of a wall around the only girls school in Faryab Provinces' Qurghan district in December 2017, and provincial government support to upgrade a seven-kilometer road in Hasanak-e Mir Aabad village, Faryab Province in October 2018, etc.
- Reached 511,265 Afghans (248,394 women, 262,871 men) of which approximately 60% were youth, through civic education, community, district, provincial level and dialogue and conference sessions, women and ulama Dialogue and awareness raising activities.
- Trained 64,678 individuals (34,704 men, 29,974 women, including 29,126 boys, 25,851 girls) on institutional development, civic engagement, project cycle management, policy dialogue and partnerships, Access to information law, financial sustainability, Gender, women empowerment, elections, journalism, community mobilization, Counter-Trafficking in Persons, communications, leadership, good governance, peace building, etc.
- The CECG has developed into an inclusive platform for elections focused CSOs to discuss and address a range of challenges with EMBs. With support from Counterpart and in coordination with the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), the CECG held eight meetings since 2017. Ahead of the parliamentary elections, civil society's level of communication with the EMBs strengthened, CECG members created partnerships to implement election observation projects and they increased coordination with elections-focused donors.
- The CSJWG, a network of more than 500 formal and informal Afghan CSOs, reached an important milestone with the opening of two regional hubs in Mazar-e-Sharif and Kandahar in January and March, respectively, resulting in the expansion of the network's membership by 160 CSOs from ten northern and southern provinces. The new CSJWG hubs will further mobilize civil society in provinces and will expand CSO reach beyond Kabul. In addition, the increased integration enables Afghan civil society to



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prioritize issues and contribute to informed and strategic civil society engagement with the government ahead of major national and international events.

- Counterpart supported CS-JWG to present position papers at national and international donor conferences (London Conference on Afghanistan in 2014 and the Brussels Conference on Afghanistan in 2016, Geneva Conference on Afghanistan in 2018) and supported the network's expansion into seven regional hubs to bridge the rural-urban gap.
- On January 10, 2018, the CSOs-Advocacy Group on the National Budget submitted recommendations on the National Budget Law of 1397 (March 21, 2018 – March 20, 2019) to the Parliamentary Budget Commission. Out of the 17 recommendations, six were approved by the Commission and were included in the National Budget Law of 1397, and one was partially considered. Several of the group's recommendations were also adopted by the government into the 1398 National Budget in December 2018.
- The [REDACTED] advocacy group developed several recommendations to amend the Cybercrime Law from a women's rights perspective. The group obtained the government's commitment to build further awareness on amending the law and implement the recommendations.
- Between 2014 and 2017, ACEP enrolled 34 male and female youth each year in its ECSL program. There are now 136 members (83 men, 53 women) of the ECSL Alumni Network, which ACEP continues to support through trainings, networking events and study tours to increase their collective and individual roles in elections, peace efforts and civil society development. There are four ECSLs from each of Afghanistan's 34 provinces of which 40 (25 men, 15 women) are from urban areas of Kabul, Herat, Kandahar, Balkh and Nangarhar and the others are from rural areas.
- The ECSL program has produced globally-minded and politically-active leaders, including one ECSL who became the first-ever youth to speak at the United Nations Security Council in September 2018 as Afghanistan's first-ever United Nations Youth Representative, and another who became a recipient of the One Young World Scholarship Program in September 2018. Six ECSLs, including two women, participated in the parliamentary elections: Mr. Gul Ahmad Kamin of Kandahar Province and Ms. Farzana Elham Kochai, representing the minority Kuchi nomads, were successfully elected to Parliament.
- On December 17, ACEP Kabul-based partner [REDACTED], in collaboration with [REDACTED], convened a broad range of civil society actors (102 participants, 80 men, 22 women) for a conference on peace building and reconciliation, [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] presented a booklet to the High Peace Council (HPC) outlining civil society's expectations in the peace process and recommendations for the HPC as it engages in its peace-building work in coordination with the government.

Internews:

- One hundred female interns completed three-month placements in a total of 32 media outlets across ten provinces under Internews' Young Journalists Internship Program. More than 30 have been offered employment, with 22 employed in the media sector as of October 2018.
- In April 2018, Internews held the annual National Media Conference under the theme "*Security, Rights, and Professionalism*" in conjunction with the Afghanistan National Journalists Union in Kabul. The conference resulted in a resolution to set up a joint coordination committee to review Access to Information Law violations in coordination with the Oversight Commission for Access to Information (OCAI).
- As a result of OCAI's work, the 2014 AIL was replaced with a much-improved version in May 2018.



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After being approved by the Afghan government, the Centre for Law and Democracy on September 28, 2018, scored the new AIL at 138 out of a maximum of 150 points in its globally recognized Right to Information (RTI) ranking, placing it in “the best in the world” category.

- The 2018 Innovation Labs (iLabs), organized by Internews, seeded technological solutions to problems, such as an election monitoring app, which ACEP grantee Free and Fair Elections Forum of Afghanistan piloted during the 2018 parliamentary elections.
- As part of its media outreach and support for civic and voter education, Internews continued to contribute to the media engagement around the elections and related issues. Through the weekly magazine-style radio program *Negah-e-Naw*, Salam Watandar produced and aired a total of 750 original episodes (20,563 minutes) across its network of 67 radio stations in the 34 provinces and covering a variety of issues. ██████████ conducted 75 Multimedia Skills training sessions for a total of 1025 CSO (627 women, 398 men) representatives and civic activists out of which 11 trainings sessions were for elections engagement with 143 CSO representatives and civic activists (79 women, 64 men) in Kabul and its hubs in Herat, Nangarhar, Kandahar and Balkh provinces. Pajhwok produced and published a total of 450 feature stories, 403 press releases, and 37 investigative reports. Pajhwok meanwhile continued with its coverage of developments regarding the results of the parliamentary elections, complaints of candidates, preparations for the presidential elections, and related issues regarding the peace process, with a total of 160 stories were produced and published from 34 provinces.

ICNL:

- To improve an enabling environment for CSOs, ICNL provided technical assistance to MoEc, MoJ, Ministry of Finance (MoF) and MoLSAMD, and Independent Directorate of Local Governance (IDLG) and other government authorities and CSOs to develop and revise policy documents relating to CSOs’ legal framework in Afghanistan. The technical assistance included topics such as establishment and registration procedures of CSOs, internal governance of CSOs, sources of income and financial sustainability, accountability to different authorities, reporting procedures and revision of reporting forms, dissolution and consequences of dissolution, and steps to avoid unexpected termination of CSOs.
- ICNL developed and released seven publications including (1) Registration Brochure for Associations in June 2015; (2) Guidelines on Legal Framework Affecting CSOs Funding Sources in September 2015; (3) Operational Guidelines for Associations in October 2015; (4) Registration Brochure for NGOs in September 2017; (5) Reporting Guidelines for NGOs in October 2017; (6) Operational Guidelines for Associations September 2019; and (7) Guidelines for the MoU for Cooperation between IDLG and CSOs and Civil Society Networks at the Subnational Level, in August 2019.
- During PY1 and PY2, ICNL conducted seven regional workshops on draft initiatives in the centers of seven regions of Afghanistan. ICNL met with representatives of 450 CSOs in these regions. The main purpose of these workshops were: (1) to discuss and introduce three initiatives: The Law on Volunteers, The Law on Foundations and The Mechanism on Tax Incentives; (2) to receive inputs and ideas from the CSOs in the field; and (3) to receive their support for approval of these initiatives. As a result, government authorities agreed to receive the draft initiatives and started reviewing them for approval.
- ICNL held seven regional consultation sessions in centers of 7 regions of Afghanistan during PY1 and PY2 in order to identify challenges CSOs face and receive recommendations to these challenges. Generally, findings of these consultation sessions showed government interference into internal affairs of CSOs, unexpected termination by MoJ and MoEc, lack of sufficient programs to support financial sustainability of CSOs, corruption within line ministries which restricted operations of CSOs, lack of government cooperation, burdensome reporting procedures and forms, double standards regarding



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registration procedures for CSOs, etc. The findings of these consultation sessions were shared with the MoEc and MoJ during the CSOs-Government National Conference held in March 2015 in Kabul. ICNL has held three additional consultation sessions in PY6 and will hold two more by the end of PY6 to identify more challenging issues and restrictions that CSOs face in the field. As a follow up step, ICNL will compile the identified challenges and recommendations and submit to government authorities in Kabul.

- During PY4, ICNL conducted 7 regional workshops for CSOs and government entities on CSO Laws and Regulations for Government Regulators and CSOs in the centers of 7 regions of Afghanistan. The workshops were attended by 356 (152 women, 204 men) participants. Topics covered included: establishment and registrations of CSOs, civil society revenue and income sources, supervision of CSOs, dissolution of CSOs, consequences of dissolution, CSOs' tax related issues, tax exemption and exemption of custom charges. In addition, new amendment and progress on civil society laws and regulation were discussed
- In order to support its implementation of the AIL, ICNL conducted 6 seminars on AIL in 6 regions of Afghanistan. Although the AIL has been in force since late 2014, there were numerous challenges regarding its implementation. One of the more significant was that many CSOs remained unaware of the AIL's content, and procedures for requesting and receiving information. Internews provided relevant information about the Law to media through its partner [REDACTED] but not CSOs. Therefore, ICNL successfully reached out to 268 (112 women, 156 men) representatives of CSOs through these seminars.
- After recommendations of both government and civil society representatives during CSOs-Government National Conference in March 2015, ICNL established the CSOs-Government Coordination Working Group (CG-CWG) as a non-registered advocacy and consultative group based in Kabul. The CG-CWG was comprised of representatives from MoEc, MoJ MoLSAMD, MoF, Ministry of Women Affairs, civil society regional networks, UNAMA, UNDP, coordination bodies, international and local NGOs. Since December 2015, ICNL has held 21 meetings for CG-CWG and plans to hold three more meetings by the end of PY6. The CG-CWG aimed to create a legal-based enabling environment for CSOs and made a common understanding of challenges and restrictions faced by CSOs in Afghanistan. Therefore, it focused on strengthening and transforming the relationship between CSOs and government. Under ICNL leadership, the CG-CWG has achieved the following between PY2 and July 2019:
 1. Development and submission of a draft initiative on private giving (Tax Incentive Mechanism) to MoF, a draft foundation law to MoJ, and a draft regulation on volunteers to MoLSAMD. The three initiatives are under government review.
 2. Reviewed and submitted 109 challenges CSOs faced in the field to MoJ and MoEc and advocated to resolve these challenges.
 3. Provided technical amendments to the NGOs Law, Income Tax Law, Labor Code, Law on Associations, reporting and registration procedures of NGOs and associations, and challenges CSOs face at the sub-national level. The laws are under the review by MoJ and Parliament.
 4. Advocated for positive changes in Law on Associations in Parliament in May 2017. Subsequently, most of the recommendations were accepted by Parliament and the law was endorsed by the President Ashraf Ghani on December 6, 2017.
 5. Advocated for tax exemption and reporting of associations to MoF. As a result, associations were officially exempted from tax and reporting to the MoF.
 6. Developed and signed an MoU on cooperation between IDLG and CSOs and Civil Society Networks at the Sub-National Level in July 2019. The MoU replaces the unsigned CSOs-Government Cooperation Sub-National Mechanism, which ICNL developed in coordination with CG-CWG and submitted to IDLG in October 2017. The MoU:
 - promotes and strengthens cooperation between IDLG, CSOs and civil society networks at the central and sub-national levels;



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- facilitates participation of CSOs and civil society networks in provincial planning processes, provincial budgeting, citizen assemblies, (budget) hearing sessions, and social accountability campaigns in accordance with the relevant laws, regulations, procedures and guidelines of IDLG;
- facilitates collaboration between the parties in order to share information according to AIL and in receiving complaints and challenges; and
- recognizes the needs of the people and reports the activities of the parties to the people in the provinces.



- In terms of CSO certification efforts to boost CSOs in their journey towards self-reliance, [REDACTED] has assessed 66 CSOs, of which 37 CSOs have been certified and 30 deferred. A further 23 Afghan CSOs are currently in the assessment pipeline as of July 2019. [REDACTED] certification improves the CSOs' capacity and ability to secure more funding for donors and expand their work and coverage. [REDACTED] is now expanding its certification model to cover Grassroots CSOs and Community District Councils.
- Since 2016, [REDACTED] has published 3 (2016, 2017, 2018) annual State of the Enabling Environment for CSOs in Afghanistan (SEECA) research and shared with CSOs, government ministries, universities and thinktanks in Kabul and the provinces.
- [REDACTED] has released seven policy briefs on CSOs' Image and Credibility in Public, Insecurity as an Obstructing Factor for CSOs development in Afghanistan, Civic Space in Afghanistan, Coordination among CSOs in Afghanistan, Coordination and Cooperation between CSOs and the Government of Afghanistan, CSOs' Institutional Capacity in Afghanistan, and Financial Sustainability of CSOs in Afghanistan and "CSOs' Advocacy in Afghanistan."
- On July 30, 2019, [REDACTED] completed the first ever civil society research report on the "State of Corporate Social Responsibility in Afghanistan." The research explores the current stats and anticipated future of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in Afghanistan, discusses its religious and cultural context and offers recommendations to civil society, the private sector, government and donors on how to improve state of CSR in Afghanistan.

Organized and hosted:

- 2014 Civic Engagement Social Media Conference. (120 men, 80 women)
- 2015 Partnering for Public Good Summit on June 10, 2015 (98 men, 52 women).
- 2016 Partnering for Public Good Summit on August 10, 2016 (83 men, 23 women)
- 2016 Women CSO Leaders' Summit in Kabul. (130 women-led CSOs and female advocates)
- National Conference for Persons with Disabilities on October 26, 2016. The event provided policy input regarding the Afghanistan National Disability Action Plan, a 5-year strategy launched by the Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs, Martyrs and Disabled (MoLSAMD) in 2017. (378 men, 52 women)
- Second Framework for Cooperation Conference in May 7-8, 2018, during which representatives of government, civil society and media developed recommendations for engagement and cooperation in addressing common issues. The MoEc is using the findings to develop a civil society roadmap, expected to be completed by the end of 2018. (190 men, 40 women)
- CSJWG General Assembly on March 7, 2018, where participants elected 31 members (19 women) to the CSJWG Secretariat, resulting in 17 new members and more inclusiveness. The first of seven planned CSJWG regional hubs was established in Mazar-e-Sharif on January 24, 2019, with 85 civil society representatives from the Northern Region in attendance.



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- Public hearing on the National Budget on May 22, 2018. (66 men, 24 women)
- First-ever National Civil Society Week event in Herat on June 26-28, 2018. (44 women, 133 men)
- Civil society thematic roundtables in Badakhshan (November 8, 2017), Mazar-e-Sharif, Balkh Province (January 10, 2018) and Kabul (March 29, 2018).
- ECSL exposure visits to Kazakhstan, Bulgaria, and Bosnia-Herzegovina in 2014 and 2015 and to Colombo, Sri Lanka in 2016 and 2017 for 136 ECSLs.
- 2015, 2016, 2017, and 2018 Annual Media Conference for 823 (278 women) journalists and government representatives.
- 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, and 2018 Media Moot Law Court Competition for 199 students (36 women) from 11 universities.
- 2016, 2017, and 2018 Media Law and Policy Summer Schools for 80 (including 25 women) law and journalism students and lecturers and new media activists.
- 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017 and 2018 iLabs, where a total of 1,484 technologists and CSO representatives (including 394 women) developed solutions to promoting government transparency, accountability, and tackling corruption; election monitoring, tracking violence against journalists, and collecting data on street children.
- 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, and 2018 Annual Afghan Youth Voice Festival which provided a platform for 2,563 young Afghans (including 748 women) to improve their communication skills, self-confidence advocacy activities by expressing themselves through art and new media.