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## Providing Space for Positive Youth Engagement

### Summary

- Afghanistan's youth bulge, estimated at 21 million people under 25 years old, are a potential catalyst for shifting the current political and conflict dynamics in Afghanistan. Donor governments seeking positive change in Afghanistan can approach those under the age of 30 as the most likely source of such change.
- International financing and political capital may be strategically focused to develop youth as a positive political, economic and social force. It is important that the international community concentrate development funding over the next 10 years on youth-oriented programming—particularly as it relates to education, enterprise and agricultural development, and civic engagement.
- Young Afghan advocates need support from the international community to ensure that they have the requisite space and skills to meaningfully participate in future electoral processes and in local and national peace negotiations or reintegration programs.

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### Background

Nearly 70 percent of Afghanistan's estimated 30.5 million people are under the age of 25—making it one of the youngest populations on Earth.<sup>1</sup> The lives of Afghan youth have been defined by protracted periods of local, national or regional conflict. Despite the injection of billions of dollars in foreign assistance since 2001, youth throughout Afghanistan continue to express deep frustration and resentment at the pace and scale of their participation. The majority of the nation's young generation has been prevented from accessing many of the economic windfalls of the last 10 years, with disproportionate levels of the wartime economy ending up in the hands of a small circle of elite actors with little commitment to local reinvestment<sup>2</sup>—and often with ties to past atrocities and violence.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, traditional values and practices have deprived many youth from the access and opportunity to participate in decision-making processes at almost every level of Afghan society. Further frustrating youth efforts to play positive roles in communities is the popular perception that youth are the foot-soldiers of the nation's insurgencies. As such, there is an urgent need to provide support for Afghanistan's youth to act as positive change agents for peace and improved governance.

By supporting youth-oriented policies and programs that are culturally relevant and focused on Afghanistan's long-term peace, programs may benefit from tapping into the creative potential of Afghan youth. The generational shifts in attitudes and behaviors needed to prevent continued

cycles of violence in Afghanistan are most likely to be effective if they are rooted in the foundation of the nation's current youth population. Youth associated with USIP projects have said that they desire more technical tools and interpersonal skills required to prevent the continued violence in the country, giving them the capacity to substantively engage in democratic processes and nurture the rule of law.<sup>4</sup> Such skills will also allow them to confront—through legal means—the entrenched political and cultural interests that have historically devalued the public participation of youth. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many young Afghans continue to be frustrated by political representation that does not adequately work to address the most pressing issues for the majority of the country, and in which all actors, including high-ranking government officials, are not held equally accountable under existing Afghan law.<sup>5</sup>

Professional nongovernmental organizations attract the attention of most international largesse and often overshadow the nascent civil society of youth advocates and volunteers who are actively working toward an alternative path for positive change in the country. Rather than funneling their frustrations through armed opposition groups or allowing themselves to be co-opted by what they feel are corrupt and profit-oriented NGOs, youth in various parts of the country are finding innovative means of advocacy and community engagement. From volunteer education campaigns to online advocacy, from marching in the streets to protest for women's rights or against perceived abuses of Afghan religious faith, youth are learning to mobilize and bring voice to their frustrations.<sup>6</sup>

The pending drawdown of international military and civilian aid will have deep impacts on the Afghan economy, particularly urban youth who are most likely to be negatively affected by any economic contraction.<sup>7</sup> Over the last 11 years, the aid economy has provided many youth with access to moderate economic resources through jobs and auxiliary services. With the looming financial impact on the population the international community has the opportunity to ensure adequate space and opportunities for youth to channel their energy into positive outlets and limit inducements for joining any armed opposition groups or criminal networks.<sup>8</sup> The Tokyo Conference took a good first step in acknowledging the importance of job creation and targeted initiatives toward youth. The single reference, however, did not clearly articulate how the Afghan government or donors were going to ensure requisite money and resources would be focused on supporting Afghanistan's most likely source of positive change—its youth.<sup>9</sup>

## Youth Legal Education

Young men and women complain that a lack of understanding of due process and basic legal protections against illegal government actions leaves them feeling vulnerable and susceptible to abuse by state actors. Similarly, youth are limited in their ability to engage in traditional, non-state forums for dispute resolution because of cultural restrictions, and they have voiced a desire to shift those forums so that they are more reflective of youth's changing social values and more representative of the legal protections offered through statutory and Islamic law.

In 2012, USIP began an initiative to support youth volunteers, aiming to build young citizen's awareness of their rights and the rights and responsibilities of the state as provided by the Afghan Constitution. The project hopes that peer-to-peer education will encourage the population and government to be equally accountable to the rule of law, and foster greater demands for democratic reform and participation from Afghan youth. The program leverages existing networks of self-financed, volunteer groups running free education campaigns in remote areas of the country. The volunteer groups rely on dues-paying members for programmatic expenses and provide educational services that the government and NGOs are currently unable to provide. USIP is helping

them create a mobile civic and legal education campaign that builds a foundational knowledge of individual rights and understandings of due process in Afghanistan.

Working with scholars and legal professionals, USIP and its partners have created a training curriculum that includes sections on the organization and role of the Afghan government, individual rights, family law, women's rights, criminal law and procedure (including protections against illegal state actions and due process within an Islamic framework), principles of peace and reconciliation, and non-violent advocacy. In addition to weekly classes, volunteers meet monthly to share lessons learned from their work, receive additional legal training, and document relevant legal issues they are encountering in their communities. Over the course of the year-long initiative, the volunteers will also be trained in creating public media campaigns so that their work can reach an even wider audience.

A simplified promotion of civic awareness and information on citizens' rights can shift the demand side of justice and governance in Afghanistan. Empowering people with a pragmatic knowledge of their rights has the potential to improve the way that justice is dispensed at a local level—both by state and non-state actors—and potentially reduce conflicts over perceived or real abuses of individuals' rights within different justice fora.<sup>10</sup> If citizens are aware of their rights, they can then begin to place pressure on a justice system that is perceived as the most corrupt state institution in the nation to provide adequate services in line with its legal mandate.<sup>11</sup>

USIP programming currently focuses on youth legal awareness, but it has also identified other key areas where youth need support to realize their social, political and economic potential.

## Elections and Political Participation

A united youth front constitutes the largest potential voter demographic in forthcoming elections—most importantly the 2014 presidential elections. Providing youth the opportunity to develop a political voice will be critically important in the intervening period before 2014 elections. Youth have expressed deep frustrations with past elections, becoming increasingly disillusioned with a democratic process that they see as complicit in legitimating the dominance of past warlords and powerbrokers associated with periods of acute violence and chaos in Afghanistan's history. The forthcoming elections are a pivotal opportunity to redefine and reinvigorate the citizen-state relationship in Afghanistan. Upcoming elections will likely determine levels of democratic participation in Afghanistan for the next generation. A flawed process that is not perceived by today's youth as representing or responding to their interests will lead to a generation that risks being further alienated from the state and the democratic electoral process.

It is critical that Afghan and international leaders recognize youth as an important voting constituency and begin targeting programming on civic awareness, voter education and electoral reforms toward them now—and not in the few months directly preceding elections. Similarly, it is important that youth throughout Afghanistan believe in the legitimacy of the next wave of elected officials, or there is a real threat that the current disillusionment becomes political apathy and disinterest—or worse, violent opposition against state institutions. There is still time for youth groups, volunteers, and young political advocates to become active participants in the electoral process, and be given a role in ensuring the transparency and legitimacy of elections. Whether as elections observers, volunteer electoral educators, polling workers, or members of the Independent Elections Commission—carving out space for the substantive participation of Afghan youth in the next round of elections may go a long way to combating youth disenchantment within democratic processes and foster a generation of nonviolent, political action.

Some politicians and powerbrokers already recognize the value of such youth mobilization and have used it to support their own objectives, which are not necessarily attuned to that of

the majority. Unless opportunities and direction are provided in the immediate future, it is not unreasonable to believe that the enthusiasm of the youth population may be co-opted by current elite political brokers or, worse yet, left completely unrecognized.

## Youth Peace Process Representation

While some attention has been focused on the need to include the voices of women in the broader political peace process between the Afghan state, International forces, and anti-government elements; little emphasis has been placed on the necessary role of youth in negotiations, reconciliation and reintegration. The main composition of the Afghan High Peace Council (HPC) reflects a gerontocracy that doesn't reflect the demographic composition of the country. While employees under 30 play support and administrative roles within the Afghan Peace and Reconciliation Program and the HPC, they are limited in their decision-making and leadership roles. While some groups have begun to organize and lobby for a voice in the process<sup>12</sup>, official recognition of their role and inclusion as active participants has remained limited.

If a political peace process is to succeed, the community members who are expected to uphold and respect it must have the requisite buy-in to the process and outcome. In order to do that, it is incumbent on the HPC and other bodies involved in official peacemaking activities to reflect the demographics of the country and have sufficient representation from the nation's youth and female constituencies.

## Notes

1. As of 2008 UNDP's National Joint Youth Programme estimated that 68 percent of population is under the age of 25. The CIA World Factbook estimates the total Afghan population to be around 30.5 million people.
2. [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/04/world/asia/karzai-family-moves-to-protect-its-privilege.html?\\_r=1&nl=todaysheadlines&emc=edit\\_th\\_20120604](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/04/world/asia/karzai-family-moves-to-protect-its-privilege.html?_r=1&nl=todaysheadlines&emc=edit_th_20120604); "Afghan Elite Borrowed Freely from Kabul Bank." <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/29/world/asia/29kabulbank.html>
3. [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/23/world/asia/key-afghans-tied-to-mass-killings-in-90s-civil-war.html?\\_r=1&ref=world](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/23/world/asia/key-afghans-tied-to-mass-killings-in-90s-civil-war.html?_r=1&ref=world)
4. One can see how such opportunities have benefitted women's participation, in which many of the most outspoken female members of the Wolesi Jirga who were elected as part of the quota system are actually below the age of 35, or were at the time of their initial term.
5. Sadly, it is difficult to speak beyond anecdotes, as the major national surveys that have been conducted in Afghanistan do not disaggregate their findings based upon age. In fact, the most recent Asia Foundation "Voter Behavior Survey" didn't even ask respondents their age in the demographic section of the questionnaire. Moving forward, quantitative national surveys should commit to disaggregating data along age-sets to begin crafting a more nuanced narrative of what the different segments of the Afghan population want and believe.
6. "Afghans march in Kabul to demand change for women." <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/apr/14/afghans-march-womens-justice-kabul>. Afghan Youth Peace Jirga Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/aypnjirga>.
7. 2012. World Bank "Transition in Afghanistan: Looking Beyond 2014." <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTAFGHANISTAN/Resources/Vol1Overview8Maypm.pdf>

## ABOUT THIS BRIEF

Tim Luccaro is USIP's program officer in Kabul, Afghanistan where he has worked on justice-related issues since 2010. The Peace Brief discusses USIP's work with Afghan youth volunteers to build greater community awareness of civic and legal rights. The author highlights the need for greater recognition of Afghan youth's role and participation in political and peace processes in Afghanistan.

8. 2006. World Bank, "World Development Report 2007: Development and the next generation". [http://www-wds.worldbank.org/external/default/WDSContentServer/WDSP/IB/2006/09/13/000112742\\_20060913111024/Rendered/PDF/359990WDR0complete.pdf](http://www-wds.worldbank.org/external/default/WDSContentServer/WDSP/IB/2006/09/13/000112742_20060913111024/Rendered/PDF/359990WDR0complete.pdf)
9. 2012. Tokyo Declaration. [http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/middle\\_e/afghanistan/tokyo\\_conference\\_2012/tokyo\\_declaration\\_en1.html](http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/middle_e/afghanistan/tokyo_conference_2012/tokyo_declaration_en1.html)
10. 2011. World Bank, "World Development Report 2011: Conflict, Security, and Development." The report demonstrates the importance of meeting citizens' demands for justice in order to prevent continued cycles of debilitating violence, <http://wdr2011.worldbank.org/fulltext/>.
11. See Asia Foundation, 2011 "Survey of the Afghan People."
12. In July 2012, youth organized a national jirga to express their views on the future of transition and the particular form they wish the peace process to take. July 5, 2012. BBC "Young Afghans gather for meeting in Kabul to demand peace," <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-18712329>; <http://unama.unmissions.org/Default.aspx?ctl=Details&tabid=1741&mid=1882&ItemID=17222>.



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